



**Zygmunt Bauman, Milena Yakimova**

## A postmodern grid of the worldmap?

*Interview with Zygmunt Bauman*

How can contemporary social theories be used to describe our dimensions of human existence? Bauman talks in this interview about the blurred distinctions between postmodernism, late modernity and reflexive modernity and how they apply to current processes of globalisation.

**Milena Yakimova:** Regarding humanities and social sciences the late 20<sup>th</sup> century can be viewed as a search for a revival of the subject thinking of social action, as an attempt to go beyond the postmodern deconstruction of the subject. Would you agree with such an observation? And is it worthy to invest intellectual efforts in such a theoretical strategy?

**Zygmunt Bauman:** Your analysis is correct, though I would not be so sure what would in the end prove to have been the "postmodern" accomplishment: the 'deconstruction' episode, or on the contrary re-composition and promotion of the 'subject' and re-focusing the sociological narrative on experience, emotion, "the sensual", the "identification" and other events and processes all anchored in the subject and eminently "subjective".

As always, sociological re-painting of the world's portrait follows, a step behind, the shifts in "doxa" (that is, the knowledge we think with, but not about), and proceeds a couple of steps behind the novel but disperse human experience that spills out of the received frames but is yet to settle in the new ones. The novel experience in question is a combination of ever more evident frailty of social bonds and the progressive individualization of life challenges, the tasks they posit and the responses they call for. It does not matter whether single men and women have become genuinely more autonomous, more "on their own", more determined by their own choices and actions as before; what does matter is that they are now charged with full responsibility for their false or ill-conceived steps, failures or defeats – and that they confront the kind of problems whose chance of resolution would not gain much from joining forces and acting in common. As Ulrich Beck memorably put it, each of us is now expected to seek biographical solutions to socially produced troubles.

In the result of that seminal shift, the audience of sociology has changed. Less and less does it consist of integrated, organized and administered institutions eager to be enlightened on the best technology of management, but more and more with the "individuals" (*de jure* even if not *de facto*), keenly seeking wisdom they can use when struggling, alone and on their own, using their own skills and wits, with their life tasks, with relating to other people, with tying together the otherwise absent bonds and holding the partnerships they desire to last or breaking free from commitments they find constraining. To be of any

use to its new potential audience, sociology needs to offer knowledge that chimes with their experience and corresponds to their problems and tasks. Hence the new emphasis on "the subjects", already cast in the centre of "the social".

**MY:** Contemporary social theory is now facing a great problem – how to think of subjects of collective action, not simply reducing them to a rational contract between enlightened individuals. Does this signal, so to say, a substantive collapse of collective actors, or it rather refers to certain state of social sciences and humanities?

**ZB:** To both, it seems, though the "state of social sciences" to which you refer follows in the footsteps of the "substantive collapse of collective actors" and still needs to catch up with the process and fully grasp its mechanism and momentum.

**MY:** There is a sort of struggle for how to call the social world we live in – reflexive modernity, late modernity, postmodernity, global age, etc. What kind of criterion can we elaborate in order to chose among them? And how can they claim to be valid if "everything solid melts into air"?

**ZB:** I've some time ago distanced myself from the "postmodern" grid of the world–map. A number of reasons contributed.

To start with, the concept of "postmodern" was but a stop–gap choice, a "career report" of a search – still on–going and remote from completion. That concept signalled that the social world had ceased to be like the one mapped using the "modernity" grid (notably, the paths and the traps changed places), but was singularly un–committal as to the features the world had acquired instead. "Postmodern" has done its preliminary, site–clearing job: it aroused vigilance and sent the exploration in the right direction. It could not do much more, and so it shortly outlived its usefulness; or, rather, it has worked itself out of the job... About the qualities of the present–day world we can say now more than it is *unlike* the old familiar one. We have, so to speak, matured to afford (to risk?) a *positive* theory of the novelty.

"Postmodern" was also flawed from the beginning: all disclaimers notwithstanding, it did suggest that modernity was over. Protestations did not help much, even as strong ones as Lyotard's ("one cannot be modern without being first postmodern") – let alone my insistence that "postmodernity is modernity minus its illusion". Nothing would help; if words mean anything, then a "postX" will always mean a state of affairs that has leaved the "X" behind.

In time, more flaws became clearer to me. "Postmodern" barred the much needed break or rupture, it prevented taking a distance to certain theorizing habits, cognitive frames, tacit assumptions sedimented in the wake of a century–long deployment of the "modernity grid". "Postmodern" thinking could not but adhere to the agenda set by the 'modern', limiting itself mostly to the re–arrangement of plus and minus signs. To let the theorizing, that is an effort to grasp the novelty of the present–day social condition, follow its own and that condition's logic all the way through to the construction of its own agenda, the umbilical cord had to be cut. Symbolically this meant the need to abandon the terminology that sapped the courage and the resolution to do so, as well as limited the freedom of thought necessary to have it done.

I had (and still have) reservations towards alternative names suggested for our contemporaneity. "Late modernity"? How would we know that it is "late"? The word "late", if legitimately used, assumes closure, the last stage (indeed – what else one would expect to come after "late"? Very late? Post-late?) – and so it suggests much more than we (as sociologists, who unlike the soothsayers and clairvoyants have no tools to predict the future and must limit ourselves to taking inventories of the current trends) are entitled responsibly to propose. "Reflexive"? I smelled a rat here. I suspected that in coining this term we are projecting our own, the professional thinkers', cognitive uncertainty upon the social world at large, or reforge our (quite real) professional puzzlement into (imaginary) popular prudence – whereas that world out there is marked, on the contrary, by the fading and wilting of the art of reflection (ours ist culture of forgetting and short-termism – of the two arch-enemies of reflection). I would perhaps embrace George Balandier's *surmodernité* or Paul Virilio/John Armitage's *hypermodernity*, were not these terms, like the term 'postmodern', too shell-like, too uncommittal to guide and target the theoretical effort.

I've tried to explain as clearly as I could why have I chosen the 'liquid' or 'fluid' as the metaphor of the present-day state of modernity – see particularly the foreword to my *Liquid Modernity*. I made a point there not to confuse "liquidity" or "fluidity" with "lightness" – an error firmly entrenched in our linguistic usages ("we associate 'lightness' or 'weightlessness' with mobility and inconstancy" – I wrote; but that association rests on an unwarranted extrapolation of travellers' experience[...]). What sets liquids apart from the solids is the looseness and frailty of their bonds, *not* their specific gravity.

One attribute that liquids possess and solids don't, an attribute that makes liquids an apt metaphor for our times, is the fluids' intrinsic inability to hold their shape for long on their own. The "flow", the defining characteristic of all liquids, means a continuous and irreversible change of mutual position of parts that due to the faintness of inter-molecular bonds can be triggered by even the weakest of stresses. Fluids, according to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, undergo for that reason "a continuous change in shape when subjected to stress". Used as a metaphor of the present phase of modernity, "liquid" makes salient the brittleness, breakability, ad-hoc modality of inter-human bonds. Another trait contributes to the metaphorical usefulness of liquids: their, so to speak, "time sensitivity" – again contrary to the solids, which could be described as contraptions to cancel the impact of time.

Many things "flow" in a liquid-modern setting – but in most cases this is a trivial, even banal observation. After all, to say that commodities or information "flow" is as pleonastic as the statements "winds blow" or "rivers flow". What is truly a novel feature of the social world and makes it sensible to call the current kind of modernity 'liquid' in opposition to the other, earlier forms of the modern world, is the continuous and irreparable fluidity of things which modernity in its initial shape was bent, on the contrary, on solidifying and fixing: of human locations in the social world and inter-human bonds – and particularly the latter, since their liquidity *conditions* (though not *determines* on its own) the fluidity of the first. It is the 'relationships' that are progressively elbowed out and replaced by the activity of "relating". If one still unpacks the meaning of the word "relationship" in the pristine, still dictionary-recorded, fashion, one can only use it, as Derrida, suggested, *sous rature*; or one ought at least to remember that it is, to use Ulrich Beck's terminology, a *zombie term*.

All modernity means incessant, obsessive modernization (there is no *state* of modernity, only a *process*; modernity would cease being modernity the moment that the process ground to a halt); and *all* modernization consists in "disembedding", "disencumbering", "melting the solids" etc; in other words, in dismantling the received structures or at least weakening their grip. From the start, modernity deprived the web of human relationships of its past holding force; "disembedded" and set loose, humans were expected to seek new beds and dig themselves in them using their own hands and spades, even if they chose to remain in the bed in which they germinated ("it is not enough to be a bourgeois", warned Jean-Paul Sartre; "one need to live one's life as a bourgeois"). So what is new here?

New is that the "disembedding" goes on unabated, while the prospects of "re-embedding" are nowhere in sight and unlikely to appear. In the incipient, "solid" variety of modernity, dis-embedding was a necessary stage on the road to the re-embedding; it had merely an instrumental value in transforming what used to be *given* into a *task* (much like the intermediary "disrobing" or "dismantling" stage in the three-partite Van Gennep/Victor Turner's scheme of the passage rites). Solids were not melted in order to stay molten, but in order to be recast in moulds up to the standard of better designed, rationally arranged society. If there ever was a "project of modernity", it was the search for the state of perfection, a state that puts paid to all further change, having first made changes un-called for and undesirable. All further change would be to the worse...

This is no more the case, though. Bonds are easily entered but even easier to abandon. Much is done (and more yet is wished to be done) to prevent them from developing any holding power. Long-term commitments with no option of termination on demand are decidedly out of fashion and not what a "rational chooser" would choose... Relationships, like love in Anthony Giddens' portrayal, are "confluent" – they last (or at least are expected to last) as long as *both* sides find them satisfactory. According to Judith Baker, author of best-selling "relationship" handbooks, most relationships are designed to last no more than five years – enough time to pass from infatuation through the attachment phase and land down in the "why am I here?" phase. With partnerships and other bonds in flux, the *Lebenswelt* is fluid. Or, to put it in a different idiom – the world, once the stolid and incorruptible, rule-following umpire, has become one of the players in a game that changes the rules as it goes – in an apparently whimsical and hard to predict fashion.

**MY:** The term "globalization" focuses a great part of contemporary theoretical and media debate. You consider it to be something that really happens to us. Others think that globalization is a mere construction. How would you summarize your arguments within that debate?

**ZB:** "It happens to us" – in the sense that unlike in a partly similar process of the nation-state building, no one, no institution nor an assembly of institutions is in an overall control over the process of "planetaryization" of inter-human dependency and its outcomes; and there is no shelter protecting places and their populations against the impact of the new dependency. Control is absent in the sense that the tools of action available today are much smaller in their size and reach than the global scale of dependency would require.

In the result, the "global space" has become a frontier-land of sorts (something like the "Wild West" of the Hollywood westerns); a kind of "extraterritorial territory" without binding laws and rules of conduct, a battleground of

undefined or shifting/drifting frontlines and floating coalitions. The difference between success and failure is made by the speed of movement, degree of surprise, daring of experimentation, disrespect for customary norms, ability to escape and wash hands of the consequences of action.

We are all affected in one way or another by what is happening in that "frontier-land", and in this sense "globalization" is our *fate* – quite real, painfully genuine reality which cannot be wished away. Though it does not mean that there is anything like "global society" (let alone global community), global law, global politics, global ethics or global culture. They all are imperatives of our times – but thus far loom far ahead as tasks that cry to be urgently undertaken but come nowhere near their targets. At the moment, power has taken divorce from politics: power has become extraterritorial and on the move, residing in speed rather than in any particular space, while politics stays put remaining, as before, strictly territorial.

**MY:** Most of the terms in which we are thinking of our contemporary social situation are negative. Is this unavoidable? And if so, how can our theoretical efforts refer to the new moral situation which you discuss in *Postmodern Ethics* and in *Life in Fragments*?

**ZB:** A spectre hovers over the planet: The spectre of xenophobia. Old and new, never extinguished or freshly unfrozen and warmed up tribal suspicions and animosities, have mixed and blended with the brand-new fear for safety distilled from old and new uncertainties and insecurities of liquid-modern existence. People worn-out and dead-tired by forever inconclusive tests of adequacy, and frightened to the raw by mysterious, inexplicable precariousness of their fortunes and by the global mists hiding from view their prospects, desperately seek the culprits of their trials and tribulations. They find them, unsurprisingly, under the nearest lamp-post – in the only spot obligingly illuminated by the forces of law and order: "It is the criminals who make us insecure, and it is the outsiders who cause crime"; and so "it is the rounding up, incarcerating and deporting the outsiders that will restore the lost or stolen security".

There is a summary of the most recent shifts in the European political landscape by Donald G. McNeil Jr. entitled "Politicians pander to fear of crime"<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, throughout the world ruled by democratically elected governments the "I'll be tough on crime" has turned to be the highest trump card that beats all others, but the winning hand is almost invariably a combination of "more prisons, more policemen, longer sentences" promises with "no immigration, no asylum rights, no naturalization" oath. As McNeil put it – "Politicians across Europe use the 'outsiders cause crime' stereotype to link ethnic hatred, which is unfashionable, to the more palatable fear for one's own safety".

Hannah Arendt observed that though for all the preceding generations "world-wide human community" was but a concept or an ideal (we may add: a philosophical postulate, humanists' dream, sometimes a war-cry, but hardly ever an organizing principle of political action), it "has become something of an urgent reality". And if it has – it is because of the impact of the West, that had saturated the rest of the world with the products of its technological development, but which also exported to the rest of the world "its processes of disintegration" – among which the breakdown of metaphysical and religious beliefs, awesome advances of natural sciences and the ultimate triumph of the nation-state as virtually the sole form of government figured most

prominently. The forces which required long centuries to "undermine the ancient beliefs and political ways of life" in the West, "took only a few decades to break down [...] beliefs and ways of life in all other parts of the world".

Such kind of unification could not but produce a "solidarity of mankind" that is 'entirely negative'. Each part of human population of the earth is made vulnerable by all other parts and each of the other parts. This is, we may say, 'solidarity' of dangers, risks and fears. For most of the time and in most thoughts, 'unity of the planet' boils down to the horror of threats gestating or incubated in distant parts of the world – the world 'reaching out yet itself out of reach'. John Donne of our days would perhaps modify the admonition contained in his *Devotions* : "never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee – the death knell"... But he would, it seems, hold to the observation that "no man is an Island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of Continent, a part of the main" – only it would mean now, first and foremost, that one can no longer count on the secure shelter islands used to provide in simpler and poorer times. On a continent, crisscrossed – as all continents nowadays are, by rail– and motor–ways – there is nowhere to hide. There is no place left "away from beaten tracks", nor "far from madding crowds" – however passionate and hectic are the efforts to keep the crowds away from the gates and fences and make the tracks accessible for selected users only and selected use.

The world is not humane just because it is made by human beings, and it does not become humane just because the human voice sounds in it, but only when it has become the object of discourse [...] We humanize what is going on in the world and in ourselves only by speaking of it, and in the course of speaking of it we learn to be human. The Greeks called this humanness which is achieved in the discourse of friendship *philanthropia*, "love of man", since it manifests itself in a readiness to share the world with other men.

The above words of Hannah Arendt<sup>2</sup> could be – should be – read as prolegomena to all future efforts aimed at arresting the reverse drift and bringing history closer to the ideal of "human community". Following Lessing, her intellectual hero, Arendt avers that "openness to others" is "the precondition of 'humanity' in every sense of the word" [...T] ruly human dialogue differs from mere talk or even discussion in that it is entirely permeated by pleasure in the other person and what he says<sup>3</sup>.

It was the great merit of Lessing, in Arendt's view, that "he was glad for the sake of the infinite number of opinions that arise when men discuss the affairs of this world". Lessing

rejoiced in the very thing that has ever – or at least since Parmenides and Plato – distressed philosophers: that the truth, as soon as it is uttered, is immediately transformed into one opinion among many, is contested, reformulated, reduced to one subject of discourse among others. Lessing's greatness does not merely consist in a theoretical insight that there cannot be one single truth within the human world but in his gladness that it does not exist and that, therefore, the unending discourse among men will never cease as long as there are men at all. A single absolute truth [...] would have been the death of all those disputes [...] and this would have spelled the end of

humanity<sup>4</sup>.

The facts that others disagree with us (do not hold dear what we do but instead hold dear what we don't; believe that human togetherness may benefit from being based on other rules than those which we consider superior; above all, doubt our claim of access to a hotline to absolute truth, and so also our bid to know for sure where the discussion must end before it started) *is not* an obstacle on the road to human community. But our conviction that our opinions *are* the whole truth, nothing but the truth and above all the sole truth that there is, and our belief that other people's truths, if different from ours, are 'mere opinions' – *are* such an obstacle.

So where are we today? Are not the prospects for living together in peace, respecting each other, caring for each other, learning from each other and enjoying each other's presence, uniformly and prospectlessly dark?

In an Irish joke, a passer-by asked by a driver "how to get from here to Dublin", answers: "If I wished to go to Dublin, I wouldn't start from here." Indeed, one can easily imagine a world better fit to journey towards a "universal unity of mankind" (predicted – postulated – by Immanuel Kant two centuries ago) than the world we happen to inhabit today, at the far end of the territory/nation/state Trinity era. But there is no such alternative world, and so no other site from which to start the journey. And yet not starting it, and starting with no more delay, is – in this case beyond doubt – *not an option*.

The unity of the human species that Kant postulated may be, as he suggested, resonant with Nature's intention – but it certainly does not seem 'historically determined'. The continuing uncontrollability of the already global network of mutual dependence and "mutually assured vulnerability" most certainly does not increase the chance of such unity. This only means, however, that at no other time has the keen search for common humanity, and the practice that follows such an assumption, been as urgent and imperative as it is now. In the era of globalization, the cause and the politics of shared humanity face the most fateful among the many fateful steps they have made in their long history.

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<sup>1</sup> In the *New York Times* of 5–6 May 2002

<sup>2</sup> "On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing", in: *Men in Dark Times*, pp.24–5

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26–7

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