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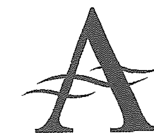

ANTHEM PRESS

Anthem Press
An imprint of Wimbledon Publishing Company
www.anthempress.com

This edition first published in UK and USA 2023
by ANTHEM PRESS
75–76 Blackfriars Road, London SE1 8HA, UK
or PO Box 9779, London SW19 7ZG, UK
and
244 Madison Ave #116, New York, NY 10016, USA

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested.
2023938098

ISBN-13: 978-1-83998-874-5 (Hbk)
ISBN-10: 1-83998-874-6 (Hbk)

Cover Credit: Polski: Zygmunt Bauman podczas uroczystości wręczenia Złotej Pieczęci
Miasta Poznania by Michał Nadolski, Creative Commons

This title is also available as an e-book.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is the outcome of a collaboration between a group of international scholars who have all in their own lives and intellectual careers been inspired by Zygmunt Bauman. Anyone who ever met Zygmunt Bauman can testify that this experience left an indelible impression. Anyone who has ever read the work of Zygmunt Bauman will know that it has a lasting impact on the reader. I want to thank all the contributors to this volume for their insightful and thought-provoking chapters that each in their way show many of the important ideas developed and pursued by Zygmunt Bauman throughout his own work. At the same time, I want to thank all those at Anthem Press involved in the production of this book for their professional assistance as well as extend my gratitude to Bryan S. Turner for incorporating this volume on Zygmunt Bauman into the Anthem Press Companion to Sociology series. This book is a testimony of my friendship with and intellectual inspiration from Zygmunt Bauman.

Aalborg University, Spring 2023
Michael Hviid Jacobsen

Chapter Nine

SEEKING WINDOWS IN A WORLD OF MIRRORS: ZYGMUNT BAUMAN'S DIFFICULT ART OF CONVERSATION

Mark Davis and Elena Álvarez-Álvarez

Introduction

In this chapter, we explore the main themes and ideas emerging from the final six books to be published during Zygmunt Bauman's lifetime: *Practices of Selfhood* (Bauman and Raud 2015), *Of God and Man* (Bauman and Obirek 2015a), *On the World and Ourselves* (Bauman and Obirek 2015b), *Liquid Evil* (Bauman and Donskis 2016), *Babel* (Bauman and Mauro 2016) and *Strangers at Our Door* (Bauman 2016).[1] What is immediately striking about these lesser-known books is that five of them follow the format of a conversation. In adopting this format, Bauman is following a form of sociological practice inspired by a method of hermeneutics (Dawson 2015, 2017; Davis 2013, 2020), evident since his earliest works in both Polish and English (Bauman 1962, 1965; Brzeziński 2017), as part of a sustained commitment to open and inclusive dialogue as the best solution to society's most urgent problems.

Throughout his long vocation as a sociologist, Bauman chased new ways of unmasking various forms of fundamentalist thinking in order to open up spaces for true dialogue between people who do not begin from a position of agreement. Bauman's thoughts in these later books are not always "new." Presented in a more accessible style, they are written to engage an educated and curious audience "out there" in civil society, rather than "in here" amongst the Academy. Yet for the rich variety of different topics covered in these books, they remain firmly rooted in his best-known academic insights. First, that today the enduring social ills of rampant individualism and growing social division must be confronted head-on to save democracy and its principle of collective provision against individual misfortune. And second, that the best remedy against these ills remains the pursuit of "true dialogue" by embracing the difficult art of conversation. After all, why privilege the "new" when both the problem and its solution may require repetition rather than novelty? (Tester 2018).

In attempting to understand the richness and complexity of Bauman's writing across more than six decades, it is important to grasp both the breadth of that material and the methodological core that provides it with its sense of coherence. Following the Gadamerian idea of a "fusion of horizons," *Hermeneutics and Social Science* (Bauman 1978)

is the third installment in an argument about sociological method that also includes *Culture as Praxis* (1973) and *Towards a Critical Sociology* (1976b). It is these books that provide the foundations upon which all of his better-known insights are subsequently built (Campbell, Davis and Palmer 2018; Davis 2020; Davis et al. 2023).

One of Bauman's core ideas from this period, sustained throughout his writing and so also one of the keys to unlocking the entirety of his sociological project, is that of the "hermeneutic circle" (Bauman 1978, 17). Simply put, the hermeneutic circle implies that human understanding is not—as scientism might prefer—a linear progression from vulnerable to less vulnerable forms of knowledge. Instead, human understanding is meandering, circuitous, frequently (re)discovering that which previous generations held to be obvious, but that was quickly forgotten by those who followed. Steeped in the *verstehen* tradition of *Geisteswissenschaften* (i.e., the human sciences, embraced as different ways of interpreting the human condition; see Outhwaite 1986), for Bauman understanding consisted of an endless discussion of existing modes of thought in joint pursuit of collective enlightenment. The art of conversation is difficult because one has to enter it knowing that any conclusions reached can only be temporary, and so open to other interpretations and future scrutiny. Nothing is ever finally decided upon and agreed. The point is to keep the conversation going, to understand each other better than before. For example, while his interest in religion is long-standing, not least in his cultural analyses of Judaism (Cheyette 2020), Bauman strengthens his interest in Catholicism by seeing Pope Francis as a leading authority on social issues (Polhuijs 2022).[2] As we will show throughout what follows, at the core of Bauman's sociology is a concept of moral responsibility towards the self and the wider world that begins (and never ends) with conversation.

In what follows, then, we do not address each of these final six books in turn, since Bauman stresses and returns time and again to similar issues and concerns. To be helpful to the reader, we have preferred instead to select and review the main themes and ideas emanating from their pages, establishing points of contact with Bauman's better-known work as we proceed. The first theme to address, as the context for all six books, is the ongoing problem of modernity.

Melting Modernity?

In discussing the inadequacy of the term "postmodernity," Bauman's concern was with the prefix "post" (Gane 2004, 17–46). If language means anything, he stressed, then "post-X" surely had to imply that whatever was being taken to represent "X" had now ceased to exist. Yet, as we will see, so many aspects of the project of modernity remain firmly with us. Bauman concluded, therefore, that "postmodern theory" was misleading and thus unhelpful as a framework for understanding the tyrannies of the present moment, too uncritical in its tolerance of consumerist playfulness and market-led solutions (Bauman, Cantell and Pedersen 1992, 135). Likewise, Bauman held similar reservations towards proposals for other prefixes intended to capture what was happening with modernity, as "second" (Beck 1992; Beck and Grande, 2010), "reflexive" (Beck, Bonß and Lau 2003; Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994) and especially "late" modernities were roundly dismissed. As he explained in an interview with *Los Angeles Review of Books*:

> I had (and still have) serious 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?) A responsible answer to such questions may be given only once the period in question is already definitely over—as in the concepts of "late Antiquity" or "late Middle Ages"—and so it suggests much bigger mental powers 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) can responsibly claim. (Bauman, Kristal and de Boever 2014).

Bauman's serious reservations were what led him to develop his preferred alternative, "liquid modernity" (Bauman 2000). With this concept he intended to convey that, though the once solid structures of modernity may still be with us, they had started to melt, setting free (cutting adrift?) individuals to survive upon their own wit and muscle in the turbulent new century.

This metaphor of liquidity was deployed to capture a sense of movement, a characteristic feature of a modernity that swings between freedom and security: "We move, pendulum-style, from yearning for more freedom to yearning for more security. But we cannot get both of them in sufficient quantity" (Bauman and Mauro 2016, 9). Like a pendulum, the modern impulse of secure societies is to swing towards greater autonomy, and of free societies towards greater security. Yet, once it reaches amplitude at the outer edge of each swing, instead of a graceful equilibrium, societies tend to find more agonistic extremes. For Bauman, liquid society is the amplitude point of the desire for greater autonomy and freedom for the individual (Bauman and Donskis 2016, 35–36). Now, as far away from security as it is possible to reach, this form of individual freedom feels remarkably like a pendulum bob suspended precariously before it descends at an accelerating speed (Bauman and Mauro 2016, 8–9).

Common to each movement of the pendulum is power. Power is understood as the capacity to manipulate the probabilities of other people's choices, so that "people may be *compelled* to do what they would rather abstain from doing" (Bauman and Mauro 2016, 76, original emphasis). The "hard" power of solid modernity operated by *repression*, manifest in the monopoly of violence by the State (*qua* Max Weber 1946 [1918]) and directed towards those people at the margins of society. Today's "soft" power instead operates mainly by *seduction*, stimulating the individual's appetite for consumerist pleasure via market forces and now directed at the whole of society (Bauman and Mauro 2016, 16, 77; Bauman and Donskis 2016, 69–70). Solid modern "hard" power promised security via deriving what counted as "good" or "evil" from the specific values and needs of those ruling society. Liquid modern "soft" power fulfills that same function, but now in an individualized and dispersed form via market forces rather than the State (Bauman and Donskis 2016, 32–34).

The conditions of "soft" power, with all its uncertainty and instability, are therefore also the conditions under which individual selves are today composed, reproduced, or abandoned. This is the main theme of Bauman's conversation with Rein Raud in *Practices of Selfhood* (2015). We learn that the history of modernity, melting from solid to liquid, is also a history of a certain type of "self," which following Martin Heidegger is recast from a given (*Zuhanden*) into a task (*Vorhanden*). In liquid modernity, the self becomes something that is no longer given (ascribed) but that has to be constantly worked upon (achieved). It is thus an idealized form to be relentlessly pursued, yet never actually realized in practice:

> Self-realization, presumed to be a DIY job and an inalienable task of the "self's owner", is, however, much too complex an affair for people trained in the "nowist" culture (that is, afflicted by a steady shrinking of their attention-span, by shallowing of memory and by fast-growing impatience) to resist the temptation to settle for performances of self-realization instead of the real thing (Bauman and Raud 2015, 69).

Failure to achieve full self-realization is socially necessary, however, since such a "completed" individual could never be a truly moral self. Unshaken self-confidence, impervious to criticism, and armed against doubt, can only lead to "moral blindness" (Bauman and Donskis 2013). As such, Bauman states that "the fate of the moral self is to remain in a state of uncertainty, and that the ambiguity of problems as well as of the ambivalence of their solutions make for the most fertile soil for the moral self to grow and mature" (Bauman and Obirek 2015b, 165).

Bauman's point could not be clearer: uncertainty is *a necessary pre-condition for the moral self to exist*. Seeking moral certainty outside of the self—from State or market authorities, from charismatic personalities—is the abnegation of that responsibility, not its embrace. The trouble is, as we know from Bauman's (1989; 1991; 1993) better-known writings elsewhere, that uncertainty is also an "un-drying font of our misery" (Bauman and Raud 2015, viii), an unbearable condition that human beings wish to expunge from their daily lives with increasing fervor. In seeking to avoid uncertainty, we thus lose sight of ourselves and each other—becoming a stranger to both.

Strangers to Ourselves (and Each Other)

Within solid modernity there inhered a rapacious "will-to-order" (Bauman 1989, 1991, Beilharz 2002; Davis 2008), understood as the urge to classify all the rich variety and differences of human life and creativity into neat little boxes marked with clearly drawn and impervious edges. Anyone who didn't fit into these modern boxes—typically marked "nation," "ethnicity," "religion," "gender," and so on—was thrown out by the urgency of a classifying effort striving to remove ambivalence and so uncertainty from the human-made world. As we will see, this is the origin of what Bauman calls "monologue" or "monotheism" and it gives rise to an exclusionary and divisive form of fundamentalism.

In *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Bauman (1991) extrapolates the Jewish experience in modern European history to all those who now find themselves marginalized,

excluded, or persecuted as a result of modernity's classification of the world into boxes marked "us" and "them." The concept of the "stranger" becomes central here, since strangers are not simply people currently in transition between categories of "us" and "them," but rather are held as being *incapable* of transition. They are not just unclassified; they are *unclassifiable*:

> Strangers tend to cause anxiety precisely because of being "strange"—and so, fearsomely unpredictable, unlike the people with whom we interact daily and from whom we believe we know what to expect; for all we know, the massive influx of strangers might have destroyed the things we cherished—and intend to maim or wipe out our consolingly familiar way of life (Bauman and Obirek 2015b, 8).

The stranger is a constant threat to the order and harmony of any local community, nation, or other identity-group, because they cannot but reveal the lie at the center of the modern urge to classify. They expose the brutal truth that any individual's status as part of "us" is until further notice, hopelessly contingent on the whims of those responsible for discharging the duties of the classification effort. Their ambivalence causes uncertainty, which in turn forces individuals to reflect upon their own moral responsibility as being a choice of how to act towards unknown "Others," instead of assuming that somebody else must hold technical responsibility for their care and management, and thus for eradicating such uncertainty from our midst. As Bauman explains:

> What is, however, principally avoidable (and so, from the ethical point of view, needs to be by all means averted and eschewed) is the common tendency for human societies to set limits also on the aggregate of human creatures to whose treatment moral responsibilities must be applied: in other words, the exemption of certain categories of other humans from the realm of moral obligation ... To put it bluntly: what is wholly and unconditionally alien to the quality of "being moral", and what militates against it, is the tendency to halt and renounce moral responsibility for others at the border drawn between "us" and "them" (Bauman 2016, 82–83).

The greater mobility of people moving around the world today—either voluntarily for economic reward or enforced by political catastrophe—has led to an abundance of strangers and the "so-called problem of migration," the focus of *Strangers at Our Door* (Bauman 2016). Few politicians in office, or aspiring to an office, can resist the temptation of capitalizing upon the uncertainty generated by this sudden influx of strangers, whom they are quick to dehumanize and classify in any terms other than somehow being "our" moral responsibility:

> Dehumanization paves the way for their exclusion from the category of legitimate human rights-holders and leads, with dire consequences, to the shifting of the migration issue from the sphere of ethics to that of threats to security, crime prevention and punishment, criminality, defence of order, and, all in all, the state of emergency usually associated with the threat of military aggression and hostilities (Bauman 2016, 86).

For Bauman, migrants are the most dramatic face of human suffering. Their classification as "migrants," instead of simply human beings, enables their criminalization and thus a political capitalization upon their suffering. This dehumanization is all-too-modern, using the "hard" power of the State to classify and control populations of people who do not neatly fit into a box marked "us." Yet, as we have seen, this not the only form of power operating in liquid modern societies, and so it is not the only form of evil either.

Liquid Evil and Its Victims

Having laid bare these hard realities for State-managed populations, Bauman is quick to point out that the rest of society also needs to be wary. A new form of "liquid evil" now operates via the market, through the seductive pleasures of consumerism, infiltrating human being-in-the-world (Bauman and Donskis 2016). Liquid evil does not proceed through open and violent repression. It is instead sinisterly disguised as freedom itself (Bauman 1988; Davis 2008):

> Evil is built into our common mode of being-in-the-world, the world which we inhabit and share. Elimination of evil, if at all conceivable, requires no less than a thorough rethinking and radical overhaul of this mode (Bauman and Donskis 2016, 51).

Liquid evil is more difficult to identify and to resist, therefore, when compared to its previously solid forms (Bauman and Donskis 2016, viii-ix, 38). But its pernicious effects are revealed daily in public attitudes towards its victims, variously named as the "new poor" (Bauman 1998) and those condemned to live "wasted lives" (Bauman 2004). One such effect is *adiaphorization*, understood as the cancellation or denial of the moral impulse through mounting indifference towards the fate of those who suffer from misery (Bauman and Donskis 2016, 50). A further, consequential effect is the loss of collective solidarity. For all the horrors of solid modernity's version of "hard power," it was nevertheless a world "hospitable to solidarity," indeed "a factory of solidarity" (Bauman and Obirek 2015a, 30). In that context, individual fears and suffering were seen as the responsibility of all, to be resolved through collective provision against individual misfortune. For this reason, "fears were to be recycled into hopes, and hopes into adventurous experiments destined to ossify into the institution of the modern state" (Bauman and Mauro 2016, 15).

In the hyper-individualized world of liquid modernity, however, there is little room for solidarity. The privileged are isolated from each other through an inward turn to the self and a focus upon identity building, navigated through consumption. As a result of their ongoing exclusion, the "new poor" may (not unreasonably) conclude that they are forever beyond the moral obligation of such privileged others (Bauman and Donskis 2016, 60–61; Bauman and Mauro 2016, 49). Where public reactions against this increase in human misery do erupt—from peaceful demonstrations to radical explosions of violence, seeking vengeance—Bauman considers them to be "protest moments." He thus deliberately stops short of labeling them as "movements," stressing that the instantaneity of the eruption is matched only by their equally swift dissolution

(Bauman 1993, 237–238). The problem with these moments is that they are reactive, expressing only a *refusal*, with little sense of wanting to embark upon the difficult art of conversation in order collectively to find and build an alternative (Bauman and Donskis 2016, 41, 88). Since they do not express a "common cause," they cannot be considered genuine expressions of solidarity. To extend Bauman's own terminology, therefore we propose that these moments are better described as expressions of *liquidarity*.

The loss of solidarity—or, the rise of fleeting protest moments of liquidiarity—is in part the result of a widespread and enduring TINA syndrome (this being, "There-Is-No-Alternative"), which prevents individuals from recognizing that human made things can be made differently. Unlike the solid modern utopias of Marxism, Liberalism, and the like, the TINA syndrome entails a form of Manicheism, according to which there is believed to be only one solution to the problems of the world (Bauman and Donskis 2016, 149–151). The habit of seeking refuge from the uncertainty of moral responsibility leads individuals desperately seeking certainty to submit to forms of authority, now sought in the market and its experts as much as in charismatic personalities (Bauman and Mauro 2016, 78). The TINA syndrome, in Bauman's view, is nothing more than an excuse for avoiding the task of assuming moral responsibility, towards the self, towards victims of injustice, and towards nature and the wider world. And yet, he writes:

> I believe that the chance of salvation for democracy as a preventive medicine for abandonment, alienation, vulnerability, and related social ills depends on our ability and resolve to look, think and act above the boundaries of territorial states. Here, alas, there are no short-cuts and instant solutions. We are at the start of a long and tortuous process, neither shorter nor less tortuous than the passage from local communities to the "imagined community" of the modern nation-states (Bauman and Mauro 2016, 20).

In the amplitude of modernity's pendulum swing, liquid modernity is the stage of "too much freedom" (more precisely, too much uncertainty over making choices). This has led to an increasing demand for greater security, and the certainty it promises, which has emerged around the world in a revival of fundamentalist thinking (Davis 2020). Perhaps we should not be surprised. Steve Bruce (2000), Grace Davie (2013) and Pankaj Mishra (2017) have each shown that fundamentalism returns with greater vitality whenever the traditional norms, values, and beliefs of a community are held to be under threat from strangers. In response, communities cut themselves off, into both offline and online spaces, in order to establish clear and unambiguous "islands of certainty" within which the once unquestioned ways of thinking and being can be preserved at all costs.

And here we come to the principal problem of the liquid modern world, against which Bauman offers the solution of true dialogue. Shorn up against the turbulent waters beyond, today individuals cease searching for windows through which they can see out onto the world and prefer to find themselves comforted by living inside various halls of mirrors. Instead of looking out at the wider world in order to understand it better, and one's own place within it, today individuals prefer to see only themselves,

reflecting only inwards. Such a move is temporarily reassuring, because mirrors mean never needing to confront anything or anyone strange and unfamiliar. But halls of mirrors are notorious for producing a confusing distortion, whereby it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between truth and illusion and between competing versions of reality about the wider world "out there." Such an experience is further intensified by now encountering that reality primarily online (Armstrong 2001; Almond, Appleby and Sivan 2003), which risks extinguishing any flickering curiosity about other ways of seeing, being, and acting, and so all but eliminating any latent willingness to engage strangers in dialogue. The role of the internet and smart technologies in intensifying these processes is another recurrent theme across all six books.

Listening in a World of Noise

At the level of human interaction, new communications technologies played a fundamental role in the shift from solid to liquid modernity. Constantly "surfing" the internet has contributed to the sense that everything today flows, changes, nothing remaining still long enough to be grasped before it disappears again below the waves. Long before the arrival of the internet and linked smart devices, modernity's grand narratives had already been called into question. But those technologies dramatically increased the quantity of narratives available, each one, in turn, being contradictory and incompatible with the last. In Bauman's (1987) view, too much communication risks leading to "a world of noise." Today, it is extremely difficult for any individual—especially an ontologically uncertain modern self (Giddens 2001 [1991])—to assess the value of each piece of available evidence, and to synthesize what they have learned into a singular coherent narrative of the world. Cognitive dissonance—the capacity to hold in one's own mind a set of contradictory values, attitudes, and perspectives about the same thing, all at the same time—is thus a common experience of liquid modern individuals.

In *Babel*, Bauman and Ezio Mauro (2016, 105) discuss how this situation provokes a decline in the art of critical thinking, a vital attribute for all citizens tasked with sustaining democracy. Today, we live an "electronics/dependent existence in a time in which communication has supplanted—mutilated, knocked out—understanding" (Bauman and Mauro 2016, 106) and which threatens that careful practice of truly listening to each other:

> Humanity is in crisis—and there is no exit from that crisis other than solidarity of humans. The first obstacle on the road to the exit from mutual alienation is the refusal of dialogue: the silence born of—while simultaneously bolstering—self-alienation, aloofness, inattention, disregard and, all in all, indifference (Bauman 2016, 19).

And so, social media is a trap (Bauman and de Querol 2016). In promising greater connectivity and communication, it has greatly numbed our desire for the difficult art of conversation by encouraging its individual users to group together into "networks." For Bauman, networks are different from communities because they form connections

rather than bonds. Connections are neither given nor fixed, simply built and rebuilt time and again according to individual preference. Networks are thus far easier to build than communities, but within them, it is also far more difficult to develop shared understanding and true dialogue because it is too easy to hit "delete" and remove anyone that expresses disagreement (Bauman and Mauro 2016, 89–90). As Bauman explains elsewhere:

> 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 find lots of people who you need to enter into sensible interaction with (Bauman and de Querol 2016).

In dividing the world into its online and offline variants, smart technology appeals because of the apparent comfort and convenience of being able to choose the audiences with whom one interacts. It promises to reduce (if not fully to eliminate) the frictions and frustrations that come from encountering in close physical proximity the stranger who does not look alike, sound alike, or believe the same things about the world. Neighborliness was once a vital social skill made to the measure of a solid modern world where employment was likely to be locally fixed, and so public spaces shared with those living in close proximity. But in a diffuse and mobile liquid modern world, individuals may shun the practice of neighborliness, "freeing" themselves of such tiresome offline encounters by experiencing the world in its fully mediated form and accessed through screens. The result is that networks represent a "City of Loners," full "of solitary, self-referential beings let loose by fading and wilting, eminently revocable and disposable, inter-human bonds" (Bauman and Donskis 2016, 36) and leading many to experience "isolation in a crowd of solitary people" (Bauman and Obirek 2015a, 80).

According to Bauman, then, the vast *quantity* of online communication made possible by advances in smart technology has nevertheless eroded the *quality* of that communication in a world of noise. In so doing, it has greatly reduced the number of encounters one has with people who see the world differently. While appearing to broaden the encounter with the world, instead online life has paradoxically resulted in a separation of horizons as we turn away from those whose values, lifestyles, and beliefs we hold in contempt. Precisely because others can be "deleted" from online spaces, today individuals seek out only the sound of their own voice and the reflection of their own face amongst the millions of encounters now ostensibly available to them. Living in echo chambers is a thoroughly liquid modern experience.

At this point, it is helpful to recall the powerful imagery Bauman (1989) chose to deploy in his Preface to *Modernity and the Holocaust*. There, he praises the writings of his first wife Janina Bauman (1986, 1988) for awakening him to the relative paucity of sociological commentary on that particular solid modern atrocity by stating "the Holocaust was a window, rather than a picture on the wall" (Bauman 1989, viii). Brought up to date for the liquid modern world, Bauman suggests that online life today

leads to an intensified form of moral blindness precisely because instead of seeking windows through which to see the wider world anew, today we seek only mirrors to reflect upon who we already are as individuals. To retain a hope that we may yet avoid the same dehumanizing consequences about which Janina had written so evocatively, Bauman argues that we must rehumanize all the strangers at our door by engaging them in dialogue.

Hope in Dialogue: Towards a Fusion of Horizons

In his conversation with Stanisław Obirek in *Of God and Man*, Bauman stated:

> As to the question of hope: if I did not have it, I would most probably not write books or give lectures. … What humans can do, humans can undo … If there is any hope for humanity, it resides in hope itself. While hope is still alive, writing obituaries for humanity is sorely premature. And I am unable to rid myself of the belief that hope is immortal (Bauman and Obirek 2015a, 44–45).

For Bauman (1976a), hope is intimately related to the concept of utopia as understood in Gramscian terms (Aidnik and Jacobsen 2019; Davis 2011; Jacobsen 2020). Utopia is the name given to an optimism of will capable of driving out a pessimism of intellect in order to invest still more effort in a given struggle, "seeing the task's difficulty [as] the beginning of our work, not the end" (Bauman and Mauro 2016, 61–62). The space for hope in our divided and individualized world resides precisely in the uncertainty of our human condition. What need is there for hope in a world of total certainties? It must also reside therefore in the carriers of that uncertainty, in the increasing mobility of people, in their different ideas and values. This difference may provoke a physical and spiritual distancing leading to mutual suspicion (Bauman and Donskis 2016, 141, 148), but it offers also a chance to learn to live with difference by talking with and so learning from each other (Bauman and Mauro 2016, 150–151). To this end, Bauman points to the limits he sees in various theories of multiculturalism, advocating instead for a spirit of positive multiculturality:

> Multiculturality is reality, and a tough one, that can hardly be chased away or wished away. Differentiation of values and of the criteria for setting apart the proper from the improper, humane from inhuman and the decent from the indecent, as well as the awesome holding power of firm convictions and communal solidarities, are indeed facts of life. But "multiculturalism", in its dual manifestation of a standpoint and a policy—both calculated to inform and trigger practices able to detoxify the unprepossessing consequences of that reality—sets a site for a tension-and-anxiety-ridden minefield (Bauman and Donskis 2016, 143).

The only way to navigate a safe path through this minefield—that is, to overcome individualization and the seductive impulses of consumerism in order to build a shared multiculturality of genuine solidarity—is via the difficult art of conversation between people who do not begin from a position of agreement. After all, dialogue presupposes

the right to recognition. Echoing Hannah Arendt, Bauman states that "truly human dialogue differs from mere talk or even discussion in that it is entirely permeated by pleasure in the other person and what he [*sic*] says" (Arendt 1970, 19; here quoted after Bauman and Obirek 2015b, 111). For this reason, Bauman asserts that dialogue is, first and foremost, an *attitude* that will lead to understanding: "For the future of humanity in an irrevocably multicultural and multi-centric world, consent to dialogue is a matter of life and death" (Bauman and Obirek 2015b, 126).

Bauman thus defines dialogue after Martin Buber as *Begegnungen*, meaning a mutual enrichment achieved by broadening the range of options considered by each participant. It is a form of connivance that creates mutual understanding in the context of difference. It is opposed to *Vergegnungen*, which is a form of conceptual understanding that avoids encountering difference (Bauman and Obirek 2015a, 62), similar to Erving Goffman's (1963) concept of "civil inattention" in public places. True dialogue means being open to admitting that one may be wrong. In so doing, one exists with an open disposition to change (Bauman and Obirek 2015a, 64). Pope Francis is cited as an embodiment of just this disposition, in particular his decision to give his very first interview following papal election to a self-proclaimed atheist, the Italian journalist Eugenio Scalfari. The figure of Pope Francis, and what is to be gained through a creative dialogue between sociology and religion (Polhuijs 2022), is offered as one example of a hermeneutic fusion of horizons. This encounter between a sociologist and prominent religious figure demonstrates the merits of a polyvocal public space, something Bauman (1999, 201) has advocated elsewhere. Polyvocality means including all voices on moral issues, whether as individuals or as groups. Each unique voice, in all its radical singularity, can nevertheless enrich the common quest for a shared understanding of social and moral troubles that concern us all. In this respect, Bauman calls into questions one of the core principles of modernity, namely the advantages of secularization over religion.

Beyond Good and Evil? Convergence in Post-Secular Times

Zeger Polhuijs's (2022) study of the dialogue between Bauman and Pope Francis reveals two thinkers deeply concerned about social inequity, who both see its persistence as a calling to the moral impulse. In Pope Francis, Bauman recognizes the voice of an authority independent of politics, who dares to address the world (both believers and nonbelievers alike) concerning the dangers of capitalism in its individualized, consumerist, liquid modern phase. Bauman finds convergence too in their shared concern for the world's poor, in the view that poverty is a consequence of social inequity, and in the appeal to rethink deeply the capitalist system as a whole (Bauman and Donskis 2016, 42–44, 130).

The departure point for Bauman's reflections on religion is a reading of the Biblical narration of the Creation, influenced by Emmanuel Lévinas (Lévinas and Nemo 1985). In *Of God and Man*, for example, Bauman's conversation with Stanisław Obirek (2015a, 11–13, 22) stresses the centrality that God gives to humanity, inviting them to cooperate in completing the Creator's work. In this regard, he argues elsewhere, the task of humanity is to avoid the temptation to renounce one's moral responsibility

by attributing solutions to the gods (Bauman and Mauro 2016, 79). Bauman refers to Prometheus as an archetype of this responsibility towards the world and contrasts him both with the Messiah (who will reestablish justice in a second coming) and with Satan (who subverts order in pursuit of chaos). He thus paints an image of responsibility as an "active utopia" (Bauman 1976a; Davis 2011), one that acts in and on the present, trying to improve the world here and now in a disinterested manner (Bauman and Obirek 2015a, 50). Since human beings are responsible for making the world better, they are by consequence also guilty when they decide to leave the state of things as they are (Bauman and Donskis 2016, 29–30). Bauman approaches religion in both its cultural and social aspects, seeking a convergence of voices about suffering and the moral troubles of the liquid modern world. Yet he remains an agnostic sociologist, interested chiefly in an open and polyvocal conversation about how to better the society in which we all live.

The transition from solid to liquid modernity has also affected religion itself. Bauman focuses his attention on the concept of "monotheism," mentioned earlier, by assessing its risks and dangers for a plural society seeking multiculturality. "Monotheism," in Bauman's meaning, is compared with the concept of truth, the latter being an *agonistic idea*, formed from a diversity of opinions, contesting them, or trying to overcome them through testing. Monotheism is born from precisely the opposite effort, a fundamentalist desire to cancel any and all other visions of God, who is presented as the one, true religious figurehead (Bauman and Obirek 2015a, 19; Bauman and Donskis 2016, 99–100). Monotheism, in this rendering, is a concept of *division* and *exclusion*, one which builds hard borders between different groups. Although this tendency to division is somehow permanent in the human condition, it is nonetheless a barrier to making the world moral (Bauman and Obirek 2015a, 25). If monotheism means a set of norms and rules intended to provide absolute certainty when making decisions, the problem is that this deprives the individual subject of their uncertainty, which as we now know is seen by Bauman as the fertile soil necessary for the development of moral responsibility:

> This is what I want to talk to people about, and this is the very thing I want them to listen to. And it is this in which I invest my hope that they might listen. Because it depends on them and them alone whether what is humanly possible will get done—or, on the contrary, neglected and overlooked. We will not overcome our human limitations, and God protect us from trying to; let us avoid playing at an omnipotence that we ascribe to God (Bauman and Obirek 2015a, 51).

Following his Polish contemporary, the philosopher Leszek Kołakowski, Bauman asserts that God is the acknowledgment of human inadequacy. But this position is as incomplete as trying to impose a single (monotheistic) truth. Likewise, for Bauman, secularization makes the same mistakes as monotheism, by deifying humanity and pretending to monopolize the truth, but this time in the name of science. Secularization has become a power struggle that tries to impose its explanation of the world as exclusive, canceling all alternatives (Bauman and Obirek 2015a, 34, 38, 91, 94). Secularized governments, therefore, have simply transposed onto human

beings the power formerly attributed to God (Bauman and Donskis 2016, 31–32). As such, both monotheism and secularization are:

> Two faiths—two mutually exclusive claims of monopoly on truth. Two monotheisms, as two stags locking antlers in the hope that the other will bend first and give way ... Studies show that most of us find life without faith hard to accept, and even harder to practice. It is from this state of affairs that both varieties of monotheism, the "scientific" and the "theistic", draw their hope of victory and the determination to continue with hostilities—the sole result being the chances of an end to conflict growing yet more remote (Bauman and Obirek 2015a, 94).

The response to the *imposition* of secularization must be to advance a "post-secular" society, one which acknowledges the errors of its own past, questions its own presuppositions, and discloses the possibility that religions may yet provide moral enrichment to a pluralized and polyvocal society striving for multiculturality (Bauman and Donskis 2016, 31). Following Ulrich Beck, he writes:

> Secular society must become post-secular, i.e. skeptical and open-minded towards the choices of religion ... Permitting religious language to enter the public sphere should be regarded as enrichment, not as intrusion. Such a change is no less ambitious than the general toleration of secular nihilism by the religions (Bauman and Obirek 2015a, 56).

Bauman's thoughts on religion embrace that principle of multiculturality, of the recognition of the right to difference. By this, he refuses the option of syncretism, or the definition of a common Credo which integrates all the others. The reason is not just that it seems unfeasible, but that it is imposing, once more, a single unquestionable vision upon others, canceling genuine difference and eliminating the need for further dialogue (Bauman and Obirek 2015a, 11). Again, what is there for us to talk about when a fundamental truth has been established? Using the concept in an altogether broader, social sense, Bauman instead advocates for a kind of secular "polytheism," or coexistence with "heterodoxy." This means embracing difference as a positive, as an opportunity to expand horizons, always respecting the rights of the other to recognition as an equal participant in discussion. Bauman considers this proposal as morally sound precisely because it permits each individual or group to find a way to its own definition, while respecting the right of others to find their own path (Bauman and Obirek 2015a, 21, 106). But to do so will require individuals to have the courage to encounter not only strangers out there in the wider world, but also the strangeness of one's own self—its curious values, beliefs, and preferences, that through this encounter are revealed in all their radical uncertainty.

Conclusion

Penned more than a decade before the internet bifurcated our liquid world into its offline and online variants, Zygmunt Bauman had somehow already diagnosed the principal challenge for society as it approached the end of another century. Amidst a growing crescendo of voices, emerging from all corners of the world and clamoring

to be heard over each other, the difficulty for human beings was now to become one of *too much communication*: "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 1987, 163). In other words, being able to identify those voices worth listening to, and that require our genuine care and attention, now confronts the world as a moral challenge. In a world of noise, the task is to *facilitate meaningful conversation* in pursuit of "mutually-enriching cultural exchange" between people at a time when new forms of technology are radically reconfiguring forms of communication.

And, as we now know, those forms of communication are too often reduced to a series of truncated messages punched out by geographically (and so perhaps also morally) distant individuals on various platforms and social media channels. With a growing number of "faceless" screen-to-screen encounters online quickly becoming preferable to the awkward and vexing offline encounters notorious within face-to-face encounters, Bauman *qua* Emmanuel Lévinas (Lévinas and Nemo 1985) continued to maintain that the only way to rescue our moral commitment to the human being behind the screen was to engage in open and mutually-enriching dialogue with them.

As we have shown throughout this chapter, time and again across all six books considered here Zygmunt Bauman puts forward a simple, inclusive solution that is accessible to all who are willing to step bravely beyond the shores of their island of certainty: namely, *true dialogue*: "that is, dialogue between people of explicitly different views—conducted with the aim of mutual understanding: not the kind practiced in a mutual-approbation society with a view to a standing ovation" (Bauman and Obirek 2015b, 124).

The most powerful response to any fundamentalist promise of certainty—a promise that can only be kept by pursuing the futile task of returning liquid modern life to its previously solid modern state, forcing people and things back into neat little boxes—is an openness to conversing with those who believe different things. Individuals striving to be moral must encounter the hitherto "unknown" stranger in order to familiarize themselves with the unfamiliar, to get to know the Other in all their specificity and on equal terms. In doing so, they would close down the attempts of those eager to exploit gaps in knowledge about the "Other," a political strategy unraveled by extending an open invitation to mutual understanding through true dialogue with strangers (Bauman and Raud 2015, 30; Bauman and Obirek 2015b, 116). And yet, the art of conversation remains difficult because:

> … when entering into a dialogue worthy of its name, we risk defeat, we risk our truth (our belief) being proven wrong, the opponent's being proven more right than ours … and those concerns have a tendency to deepen and self-replicate, because the less we meet with people with views and ways of thinking other than ours, the more fragile our ability to defend the merits of our position (instead of just shouting down or blocking our ears to the arguments of someone who is seen a priori as an opponent) and the greater the reasons for fearing defeat in argument (Bauman and Obirek 2015b, 125).

By way of ending the chapter, we may say that from Bauman we learn the value of going in search of windows through which we can look out onto the world and see it anew, rather than simply spending time looking blankly at ourselves in so many mirrors that are capable only of reflecting what one can already see. Seeking windows in a world of mirrors is a crucial first task in opening up a radical space in which to recognize one's responsibility to make moral choices. It increases and intensifies a sense of uncertainty, for sure, since one's own deeply held values, beliefs, and way of being in the world are suddenly open to doubt. But—and this is and always has been Bauman's key message—uncertainty is, and must remain, the home of the moral self. Keeping the difficult art of conversation going is therefore our only hope.

Notes

1 *Retrotopia* was the first of Bauman's book published posthumously, in 2017, so it is not included here. Unlike the six books under review, it has also been discussed extensively elsewhere: Aidnik and Jacobsen (2019), Brzeziński (2020), Clegg (2018), Davis (2020), Jacobsen (2020), and Kociatkiewicz and Kostera (2018).

2 Bauman's affinity with Catholicism was already noted by Flanagan (2010).

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