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Zygmunt Bauman and the Task of the Translator

Abstract

The author presents the figure of Zygmunt Bauman as a public intellectual and a translator. Following Walter Benjamin and his essay “The Task of the Translator” and Jacques Derrida and his text “What Is a ‘Relevant’ Translation,” the author concludes that a public intellectual as a translator is persistently confronted with the task of translating statements and postulates from the “language of politics” into “language of practice” and “individual experience”, from the “language of science” into the “language of collective action”, and from the “language of sociology” into the “language of the media.” The author claims that the key category in Bauman’s thinking was neither “liquidity” nor “modernity”, but “socialism as active utopia”. For Bauman, socialism is impossible without a socialist culture, but culture is a practice, i.e. it is an attempt to attune our collective goals aimed at improving the social world. This alignment comes without resorting to the idea of a collective conductor (a program), but by means of resorting to the idea of a translator.

Keywords: active utopia, culture, strangers, practice, socialism, individual society, translator.

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Introduction

After the death of Zygmunt Bauman, which surprised me, I did the work of mourning to try answering one simple question: when I think “Zygmunt Bauman” what do I actually think? The following text is a record of this moment of reflection on the meaning and on the stake of Zygmunt Bauman’s writing. It is an attempt to conjecture its non-obvious meaning.

My essay consists of three sections. First, I discuss the vocabulary of the author of *Liquid Modernity*. This is an attempt to identify the set of instruments that allow thinking and the set of tools determining what should be the subject of thinking. In the second part I discuss the social world which Bauman was constantly diagnosing. Here, I am talking about the conditions and the environment anchoring Bauman’s thinking. Finally, in the third part, I reflect on the effect of Bauman’s thinking, i.e., I ask the following question: what is the result of juxtaposing the instruments (vocabulary) and the social conditions (world), the “thinking of Bauman” and “Baumanian thinking”? What picture of Bauman emerges from this juxtaposition and arrangement? Is it not the picture of a much more conflicted a sociologist than we often thought him to be? Was Bauman not – to some degree – a tragic thinker who never reconciled with the world and society which blew hot and cold on his thinking, endorsing it and suppressing it? What, therefore, do I think when I think “Zygmunt Bauman”?

Active Utopia

When I think “Zygmunt Bauman”, I think above all about „active utopia”. It is not a chimera of a search for islands of happiness, other worlds, and fictitious prosperous societies. Neither it is a project of modernization of traditional society nor it is a rational utopia of Enlightenment. Active utopia is a set of beliefs and postulates that allow for a permanent and endless correction of the social world in which we live. It is for a reason that the opening chapter of Bauman’s 1976 book entitled *Socialism: The Active Utopia* begins with juxtaposing “Utopia and Reality”. It demonstrates that utopia is above all a vision on the future, and thus it is a vision of the coming present². Utopia is not dissimilar to reality; it is merely a correction imposed on reality. As such,

² Zygmunt Bauman, *Socialism: The Active Utopia*, New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, 1976.

utopia allows us to formulate the answer to one of the fundamental questions of Kantian anthropology, that is: what we can hope for.³

For Bauman, utopia is filled with concrete content. Utopia is a socialist utopia. Bauman writes explicitly: Socialism has emerged in nineteenth century Europe as a Utopia. It made people think of society not as something to be maintained and preserved, but as something to be ennobled through the establishment of a society of equal and free people. This is only allowed in democracy, which – in philosophical thinking – still functions as a scandal.

Here, democracy is not understood as a “dictatorship of the people” – a homogeneous community of citizens who safeguard their right to citizenship (or territory) nor as a “procedural democracy” – a collection of rights and powers stronger than the will of the people. Instead, it is conceived as a democracy which is a critical extension of the liberal freedoms. Liberalism, in its most refined form, perceives equality as the formal condition of freedom; on the contrary, socialism, recognizes equality to be the way of realizing and establishing society. Hence the slogan: socialism or barbarity.

Socialism is a democracy in action. It justifies and allows to understand Bauman's strong interest in British socialism, the subject of his 1959 book entitled *British Socialism: Sources, Philosophy, Political Doctrine*.⁴ Democracy, not to be merely an emblem, a technique of government, or a procedure for administering the social world must be the practice of equality.

Utopia is therefore an active utopia, which actively influences our thinking, sensitivity and action. Utopia is a socialist utopia, because it is socialism that allows us to think of the establishment of a society of equal and free people. This means, however, that socialism requires a socialist culture. Socialism is above all “culture as a practice”, and therefore it is a struggle against the hegemonic culture. This is the main conclusion Bauman derives from the reading of Antonio Gramsci's *Letters from Prison*.⁵ In his 1973 book entitled *Culture as Praxis* Bauman openly says that culture is not a system (in polemics with Talcott Parsons) nor a structure (in polemics with Claude Lévi-Strauss) nor even a collection of functions (in polemics with Pierre Bourdieu), but the common practice of values for the establishment of a good society.⁶ If culture

³ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer, Allen W. Wood, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1781/1998.

⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Socjalizm brytyjski: Źródła, filozofia, doktryna polityczna [British Socialism: Sources, Philosophy, Political Doctrine]*, Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1959).

⁵ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, International Publishers, 1971.

⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, *Culture as Praxis*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973.

was merely a hegemonic culture, we would have no right to change, we would not have the right to hope.

When Pierre Bourdieu will use the term *habitus*, he will say something extremely complex and subversive. *Habitus* are persistent dispositions, “structuring structures”, “rules for generating and stabilizing practices and images” that despite not being the effect of submission and modelling can be regulated, that despite not being objectives can be aligned with objectives, and that despite not being the result of “organizing actions of the conductor may be collectively orchestrated”. For Bourdieu, therefore, destruction of *habitus* would involve the destruction of collective orchestration of social life and the return to the stage of unregulated improvisation.⁷ Although Bauman agrees with this conclusion, he also recognizes that destruction is necessary for the search for new forms of orchestration.

Let me summarize: when I think “Zygmunt Bauman,” I think above all active utopia. However, this refers me to socialism understood as a significant correction of liberalism. Socialism is impossible without a socialist culture but culture proves to be a practice that is neither a “practical sense” nor “embodied reason” nor even a “reflective action,” nor it is a *habitus* or a set of habits, but an attempt to attune our collective goals aimed at improving the social world, i.e. a kind of political alignment or political orchestration without referring to the idea of a conductor.

Modernity and Order

This was the reading of texts by Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer and in particular Michel Foucault that raised Bauman's suspicion towards modernity, which he later judged to be the most frightening form of instrumental rationalization. Bauman in a renowned and widely discussed book *Modernity and the Holocaust* ties a mental knot between the project of Enlightenment and Auschwitz.⁸ Bauman says – following the path set by Adorno and Foucault – that mass murders were meant to be a surgical procedure opening the way to a perfect, harmonious society. Concentration camps – in the project of social modernization – have therefore played the role of large laboratories, which examined how far one can go in the elimination or re-education of

⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

⁸ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989).

undersized or non-paradigmatic human beings. Extermination camps were not a departure from the principles of social rationalism, on the contrary – they were the consequence of the modern, rationalistic vision of the world.

Extermination camps are therefore an invention of modernity and they continue to be eagerly used as tools, as are electronic weapons, petrol cars, video cameras and tape recorders. Tools – we should add – often used against other inventions of modernity, such as personal inviolability, freedom of speech, parliamentary principles, individual rights and tolerance of diversity. Perfect happiness required perfect order, and this could only be a work of government. Total happiness required total order, and total order required total control. Bauman says that the horrors of the 20th century were the result of the search for total happiness and order. It was only in Auschwitz – Bauman suggests – where we have come to fully understand what terror of Reason means. Horrors of our age – writes the Polish sociologist – were monstrous, perhaps degenerate but legitimate progeny of the modern romance with man-led, perfect order.

Can anyone imagine a more ironic and perverse attempt to reevaluate the ideals of the Enlightenment? Can one imagine a more rudimentary and ruthless accusation of Reason? Foucault in his lecture from the elite series *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* entitled “Omnes et singulatim,” asks: “Shall we ‘try’ reason?”, and immediately replies: “To my mind, nothing would be more sterile.”⁹ In essence, the relationship between rationalization and the abuse of political power is so obvious that one needs not see bureaucracies or concentration camps to grasp it. From Foucault’s point of view, such a trial would make us take one of the sides, of either rationalism (advocacy) or irrationality (prosecutors). From my point of view, even bringing a case on reason – rather than *against* reason – would also be barren because such a ‘trial’ has already been held. Following the judgement rendered by Bauman one can only expect to hear this or the other incidental defence speech or a witness testimony by diagnosticians or therapists who are in authority to determine the degree to which the subject is susceptible to persuasive therapeutic techniques.

Is not the contemporary return of new realists, accusing postmodernists of epistemological populism and engagement in empty discourse, not a sign that former defendants have become prosecutors today? Neorealist-sclaim that without the notion of truth, reality ruled by unconditioned laws and without critical reason, there is no emancipation, no real democracy and

⁹ Michel Foucault, “Omnes et Singulatim”: Toward a Critique of Political Reason”, in: Michel Foucault, *Power: Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 3, New York: The New Press, 2000. Pp. 298-325.

no science, and all hopes for better tomorrow are mired in conformism and blurring of relativism in the media buzz, which make from even fairy tales some version of the truth. Maurizio Ferraris, the author of the *Manifesto of New Realism*, writes explicitly: critique is imbedded in realism just as submission is imbedded in irreality. Constructivism and discursivism are fairy tales for children to fall asleep. For new Realists, the rejection of Enlightenment in the name of philosophical postmodernism, hermeneutic communism, or political populism means taking the alternative route proposed by the Great Inquisitor: the way of miracles, secrets, and authorities. The New Realism is the defence of ontology against the aspirations of constructivist epistemology, the critique against radical hermeneutics and Enlightenment, that is: science against politics and rhetoric.¹⁰

Postmodern wisdom, however, does not seem to be a correction of modern wisdom, but rather its extension and intensification. This wisdom recognizes only one planning, namely: “family planning”. The name for this process has been selected as if in parodying Orwellian newspeak - not to inform but to confuse; for the essence of “family planning” is to prevent the family, i.e. to prevent conception, to control outgrowth, to decouple actions from their consequences. What remains then? Where should the work of reason, in particular critical reason, stand in this world?

The thought of Bauman is as follows: thanks to the critics of the Enlightenment we are facing the question of what kind of faith in the Enlightenment deserves to be saved today. The criticism, therefore, had similar cleansing power as the criticism of religious schemata by nineteenth-century philosophers, with the difference that it was primarily concerned with scientific reason and not the sphere of religious rites. Thanks to them, we can transform the Enlightenment project in such a way that it ceases to be a terror of reason, a new dogmatism, and instead it becomes a reflection on the limits of reason. In this sense, it also becomes a natural consequence of the thinking initiated by the three *Critics* of Kant and continued among others by Wittgenstein.

An Intellectual as a Translator

The conductor got replaced by a public intellectual who is a translator, not a sage or expert. When I think “Zygmunt Bauman,” I think of the figure of a translator and his task, which is the task of continual translation from the

¹⁰ Maurizio Ferraris, Sarah De Sanctis, Graham Harman, *Manifesto of New Realism*, New York: State University of New York Press, 2014.

language of politics into the language of practice and individual experience, from the language of science into the language of collective action, from the language of sociology to the language of the media. In contemporary theory of culture, the translation became a metaphor for social utopia¹¹, impossibility of communication¹², colonial policy and emancipation¹³ or modernity¹⁴. The translator therefore becomes an impure creature, a problematic species, and his language is composed of translated languages found in the world. Walter Benjamin in 1923 in a classic essay titled *The Translator's Task* wrote that a real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not black its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium to shine upon the original.¹⁵ Bauman was such a reinforcing medium. Yet, the translator's work does not end here.

In two essays dedicated to the question of translation, *Des tours de Babel*, in which he closely reads Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator", and *What Is a 'Relevant' Translation*, following Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*, Jacques Derrida presents two notions of translation.¹⁶ The first points at literal translation, such as Benjamin searched after, namely a translation which stays close to the source's pound of flesh, while the second notion refers to a conceptual translation that strives to find a semantic equivalent in the target language through a dialectic reappropriation which Derrida, himself translating from Hegel, calls "relevantization".

On the basis of *The Merchant of Venice*, both notions are translated into the language of the Judeo-Christian conflict between Shylock and what one owes to Shylock, "the insolvable itself" on the one hand, and Antonio, Portia, and, by extension, Venice, who demand from Shylock conversion-translation without residue, on the other. Derrida, while addressing a public of translators ("those men and women who, to my mind, are the only ones who know how to read and write") and incorporating into his discourse Shylock's figure

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in: Benjamin Walter, *Selected Writings Volume 1 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England, 1923/1996.

¹² Jacques Derrida, "What Is a 'Relevant' Translation?," trans. Lawrence Venuti, *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 2: (2001), 174-200.

¹³ Chakravorty Spivak, . *Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

¹⁴ Wolfgang Welsch, *Wegeaus der Moderne. Schlüsseltexthe der Postmoderne-Diskussion*, Berlin: Weinheim, Akademieverlag, 1994.

¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in: Benjamin Walter, *Selected Writings Volume 1 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England, 1923/1996.

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Des tours de Babel," in: *Difference in Translation*, ed. Joseph F. Graham, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985. Pp. 209-48.

and speech, wonders to what extent the translator, anyone, Jew as well as non-Jew, does not wish after all to consume the idiomatic body of the other in a cannibalistic, regressive gesture – in order to translate, or better, in order to be.

To paraphrase Derrida, one could say that Bauman, by referring to the public also translates the speech of “the infamous Shylock” – the same person who, in Shakespeare’s play, was prepared to take a pound of flesh from his debtor after his failure to repay the loan on time—in order to explain to the public (audience) why the language of business is so difficult to translate into the language of values and vice versa. Bauman presents us with another alternative: it is either translation or barbarity. We need a nonliteral translation where translation of a pound of flesh does necessitate the formulation of a direct equivalent. We need a conceptual translation resorting to inventiveness, i.e. one that does not seek to find the semantic equivalent of the translated term in the target language, but one that through many associations tries to rediscover this concept in a new language. I think Bauman made such new discoveries, and I think that Bauman’s life reinforced the need for such discoveries.

Active utopia, socialism, culture as a practice, translation - this is the conceptual corpus and set of conditions for social life in the thought of Zygmunt Bauman and in my thought when I call his name. However, in what world does Bauman think? In a world full of ambivalence, i.e., arrhythmic life and opaque world of what is social, i.e. the world incapable of undertaking action for the establishment of socialism. Bauman writes in the world where what is social and what is common was pulled into pieces. The concept of community has been abducted by infinitely divisive imaginary communities – national, ethnic, sports, health (of those with bulimia or those with Alzheimer’s), artistic, housing, culinary, etc. In turn, the concept of freedom has been abducted by the language of ultra-liberalism, which speaks only of freedom understood as the absence of obstacles to further flows and freedom focussed on the individual.

I claim that for Bauman, the central concept in the description of the social world was not at all the category of “ambivalence” as in *Modernity and Ambivalence* from 1991 – in Polish language edition functioning as “polysemy” (as in literal translation: *Modern polysemy, polysemous modernity*), nor it was “postmodernity” as in *Postmodernity and its Discontents*, nor even the famous “liquidity”.¹⁷ Instead, I claim that the dearest to Bauman was the notion of a society of individuals which Bauman borrowed from the Norbert Elias

¹⁷ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991; Bauman, Z. *Postmodernity and its Discontents*, New York: New York University, 1997.

vocabulary.¹⁸ In the world of ambivalence and liquidity we can be who we want, we have the ostensible freedom of choice in terms of symbolic identity, but to establish oneself in such a world one has to choose one identity that always somehow betrays one and which, even though never fully adequate, is necessary to establish oneself in this world.

The world of ambivalence only offers, but does not coerce to, permanent symbolic identification; but as I give up and reset the legal-political identity of myself, existing through a specific place in the socio-symbolic structure, I must have a certain identity (icon) to enter this network at all, or, in other words, to register in it. Liquidity of the world leads to the concentration of individuals and places the focus on individuals.

Criticism of a Society of Individuals

All of Bauman's books on liquidity are critiques "a society of individuals," the society after the dismantling of the social. "Liquid Modernity" published in 2000 provides a theoretical framework for analysing liquidity, and pronounces the withdrawal or concealment of the notion of "society" – as if Bauman wanted to frighten us (and himself) with the famous 1987 statement by Margaret Thatcher: "There is no such thing as society." This statement from the former Prime Minister of Great Britain has become the emblematic motto of the economic and political changes of recent decades. Neoliberal economics, well-conceptualized by so many theorists of culture, such as David Harvey, Judith Butler, Isabella Lorey, Lauren Berlant, or Zygmunt Bauman, continues to be the mainstream of contemporary cultural theory.¹⁹ In the last decades contemporary culture and its theories have reacted, in particular, to the phenomena of globalization and precarization, thus becoming a space for public debate, but also providing inspiration for scientific analysis. Studies by Luca Boltanski, Fryderyk Jameson and Zygmunt Bauman opened the space for discussion on the transformations of culture in economic context and in the global perspective, especially after the untapped social crisis of 2007-2009.²⁰

¹⁸ Norbert Elias, *The Society of Individuals*, ed. Robert van Krieken, Dublin: UCD Press, 2010.

¹⁹ David Harvey, *Seventeen, Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014; Judith Butler, *Notes toward a performative theory of assembly*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015; Lorey, I. *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*, trans. Aileen Derieg, London: Verso, 2015; Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011.

²⁰ Frederic Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*, London & New York: Verso, 2009; Luc Boltanski, *Love and Justice as Competences. Three Essays on the Sociology of Action*, trans. Catherine Porter, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012/1990.

Consecutive volumes of Bauman's writings speak only of the consequences of the dismantling of the social, that is, they talk about the fate of concepts that cannot be thought separately but together, yet because of "liquidity" they are thought within the framework of "a society of individuals." These concepts are: love²¹, life²², fear and security²³, time and uncertainty²⁴, power and surveillance²⁵ and finally, wealth and poverty, work and unemployment²⁶.

Bauman writes, therefore, about disassembled society, i.e. about the society of aroused but deprived of love individuals, of the working but unemployed people, of the people who are constantly frightened and who are seeking security, of the people who have access to knowledge, but live in uncertainty, people who desire wealth and celebrate the wealthy, but experience nothing but poverty, of the people who still believe they make a difference, but have long ago been transformed into consumers.

Having delivered such a diagnosis on the demolition of society, Bauman asks the laconic question: is politics at all possible in an individualized society? Love, knowledge, safety, work, but also –one's own life and time cannot be experienced separately. Certain things cannot be done and should not be done in solitude. That is why the only subject of Bauman's thoughts are deep waters of life, which he tried to describe in his confession titled *This is Not a Diary*²⁷. Life is what is common and there is no life beyond what is common. The absence of socialism in our thinking about life leads to the privatization of life. This entails the death of "active utopia" and "culture as practice" or rather the death of "common multiple practices." All this together means death of human hope.

Not Just Flows

Let me draw the final conclusion. Bauman is a sociologist deeply conflicted with his time. Bauman does not write his praise of liquidity, free flow, uncertainty, free love, terrifying inequalities, dispersed time, empty life, illusion

²¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003.

²² Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Life*, Cambridge: Polity, 2005.

²³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Fear*, Cambridge: Polity, 2006.

²⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, Z. *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*, Cambridge: Polity, 2006.

²⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, David Lyone, *Liquid Surveillance: A Conversation*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012.

²⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, *Does the Richness of the Few Benefit Us All?*, Cambridge: Polity, 2013.

²⁷ Zygmunt Bauman, *This is Not a Diary*, Cambridge: Polity, 2012.

of immortality, or life reduced to pulp. Society is not just about flows. Bauman is certainly not a philosopher praising the “free flow” and the “sociology of fluids”. His thoughts do not follow the thought of Gilles Deleuze or Luce Irigaray.²⁸ Alone, flow is not sufficient for the establishment of society. What is necessary is a socialist practice. For something to happen, it is not enough for something to be happening – on the contrary, it often takes something to stop happening and connect, bind, and betogether. Bauman, as a result, writes about our unfulfilled hopes for a better life.

The author of *Liquid Times* is the writer of the death of an active Utopia, describing the exclusion of socialism from our thinking and feeling. This exclusion leads to the annulment of the friendship policy, the ethics of hospitality necessary when we have fellow-creature guests at the door, i.e. when at the border, at the threshold of the society of individuals, there appears uninvited guest. It is not abstract. Other of philosophers but a tangible. Other with expressive face, unpleasant breath, foreign speech, incomprehensible customs, disturbing clothing and uncomfortable religious beliefs. It is a stranger seeking closeness, a stranger, about whom – in terms of moral panic – Bauman writes in *Strangers at Our Door*.²⁹

When I think “Zygmunt Bauman”, I think his definiteness, I think his face, I think the moment when he first read Janina Bauman’s *Winter in the morning: a young girl’s life in Warsaw ghetto and beyond*.³⁰ When I think “Zygmunt Bauman,” I think of my last letter from the Professor, where he responds to my request for a title of his lecture at the conference on atheism, which he was to be held in October this year at the Faculty of “Artes Liberales” at Warsaw University. He replied in the simplest possible way, guided as usual by his friendship with the world: “On Non-self-sufficient Man in Search of God ...” and added, “As long as I live and if in October I am able to visit Polish friends without bringing them harm...”.

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²⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993; Irigaray, L. *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

²⁹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Strangers at Our Door*, Cambridge: Polity, 2016.

³⁰ Janina Bauman, *Winter in the morning: a young girl’s life in the Warsaw ghetto and beyond, 1939-1945*, New York: The Free Press, 1986.

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