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Is there a future to Freud's illusions about civilization?

(Commentary to Zygmunt Bauman: *Freudian civilization revisited*)

Professor Bauman both honors and caricatures Freud by referring to "Freudian civilization" (p.1). But, as he knows very well, Freud's pretensions to extend his truly startling discoveries in the realm of the individual human mind to the realm of the collective human entity, while fascinating, tend to fall short of endorsement by social scientists, by cognitive neuroscientists, and by an increasing number of contemporary psychoanalysts.

While tempted to discuss his paper in terms of the category error of addressing the whole as a multiple of its parts, thereby 'individuo-morphizing' group phenomena, I will instead address Bauman's arguments from the perspective of the limitations of Western world views. Briefly, I characterize those views as dualistic, divisive, and polarizing. Broadly speaking, I offer an alternative Eastern perspective, largely, but not exclusively, rooted in Buddhist thought. An excerpt from the Taoist *Xin Xin Ming*, written in Tang Dynasty China in the seventh century BCE, will hopefully be illustrative: *If the mind does not make any distinctions, all the phenomenal world will be one with reality.* (Dumoulin 1944 & 1998)

Bauman appears to share Freud's dualistic scotomata. A major example is the concept of an ongoing struggle between "the" reality and pleasure principles. Philosophically speaking, this appears to reflect a world view that diametrical opposition and competition are at the immutable core of human life in individuals and in groups. This polarizing concept of man vs. beast, with all of its rich and thorny history

in human thought pre- and post Descartes, is an almost expectable outcome of such an orientation. We perceive what we are predisposed to perceive. This naturally selected facet of mammalian adaptation, under increasingly study in recent years by cognitive/affective neuroscience, has already become more than shrewd and intuitive wisdom.

So, I begin by wondering whether Bauman's endorsement of Freud's dualistic concept of civilization as elaborated in his "Future of an Illusion" (1927), and, somewhat more extravagantly, in his "Civilization and its Discontents" (1930) is a figment of my own misreading. In both papers, Freud's category error in judging group behavior by the presumed characteristics of the individual's inner world should be apparent. Nevertheless, I must proceed with a number of questions. Most of them, due to space limitations, will be merely mentioned in this paragraph. Examples are: Did Freud imply an *a priori* principle of reality? Do "reality" and "pleasure" principles beg for deconstruction? Must these two supposed principles always be opposed – even in the individual? Does recent research in clinical process, development, psychopathogenesis, and evolutionary psychology confirm that Freud's drive theory refers only to gratification rather than to relational intentionality? Do ethological studies confirm Freud's dichotomous understanding of man vs. beast? With regard to Freud's valorization of the pole of reason over the pole of affect, and in view of recent world events, can one agree with his

statement in “Illusion” (1927 p. 39) that “civilization has little to fear from educated people and brain-workers”?

It appears that Professor Bauman joins many other scholars from a wide array of disciplines in seizing upon one of Freud’s debatable speculations as a launching pad for his own consilient agenda. I plead guilty to similar misdemeanors. As a medical psychoanalytic clinician and teacher, I gratify my own ‘pleasure principle’ when highlighting the master’s limitations and suggesting ways to improve on his biases. For example, I pounce on Freud’s “Project for a Scientific Psychology” (1895/1950) and his frequent references to the bodily nature of the ego (e.g. Freud 1923 p.27) to support my belief that he would resonate with my proposals for a 21st Century Darwinian neuro-psychoanalysis. (Brickman 1998, 2008).

Bauman’s agenda, like Freud’s, appears to be echoing Aristotle’s in lamenting the alleged pleasure-vectored, diffidence and mindlessness of contemporary youth, portrayed by Bauman as eager consumers hypnotized by manipulative marketers into wasteful spending on pleasurable electronic forays against “the” reality principle. And, by inference, only the parent – especially the father – is identified as the guardian of the reality principle. That is the implicit assumption that underlies classical Oedipocentric Freudian – and even Lacanian – theory.

My reading of Bauman’s main argument is that Freud’s major assertion in “Illusion” (and in “Discontents”) on the uncontrollability of man’s allegedly inherent bestiality warrants deep concern over current changes in social structure from a putative era of parental control in a community of ‘producers and soldiers’ into a community of neutralized parental influence in a contemporary society of dissolute youthful consumers (pp 4-7). My problem with his assertion is that the current web-based

communicative links among youth – and an increasing number of adults – are a questionable instance of growing insecurity and alleged youthful irresponsibility. *Au contraire*, these phenomena can be understood as widely distributed deterministic chaotic dynamical systems. Such systems can predict resolution of current polarized ontologies in favor of an increasing globalizing ethos of connectedness and pluralism. More of that below.

In order to further support my arguments, let us consider a prevalent ontological outlook – meant in this essay as a set of orienting assumptions underlying perceptions and behavior – that appears common both to Freud and to Professor Bauman. Those interpretive predispositions, furthered by Cartesian thinking for the past hundreds of years, and arising even earlier than the dualistic outlooks of Abrahamic monotheism, look at the world in terms of radical divisions and opposites. A burdensome legacy of Western monotheism is a “reality principle” characterized by polarization and struggle for dominance between good (the deity) and bad (the work of an evil counteragent). Certainly a workable balance between competition and cooperation continues to be a problem that has evaded solutions in genus Homo since the early Holocene era. We have yet to see natural selection producing the evolved human capabilities *en masse* that allow for good-enough transition from life in a village of hunter-gatherers to membership in a complex multi-ethnic and multi-racial urban and world community with or without the religious outlooks deemed by Freud in “Illusions” as necessary evils.

Burdened with dichotomizing ontologies, a “we vs. them” *Weltanschauung*, we Westerners tend to divide the human world into believers vs. nonbelievers. The Qur’an sharply divides the planet into two distinct areas: ‘*Dar al-Islam*’, the realm of the faithful, and ‘*Dar al-Harb*’, the realm of war. A canon of Chris-

tian belief divides the human world into the saved and the candidates for fiery eternal damnation. Many Israelis resort to Biblical justification for building settlements on Palestinian lands. Even in the professional field of psychoanalysis, such polarities as ‘classical vs. contemporary’ serve to separate colleagues who on careful examination have more clinical views in common than in dispute. But, in making that error as well as subscribing to the Freudian dichotomies of ego vs. id, are we mindless sons and daughters of Freud doing anything more than bowing to the eternal wisdom of our ideological founder? No matter: Freud himself hedged his bets in considering a statement to his patient that “much would be gained if we succeed in transforming your hysterical misery into common unhappiness” (Breuer & Freud 1955). Incidentally, I doubt Bauman’s belief that Freud would regard the common unhappiness of his day as stemming from a dearth of security at the societal level (p.3), despite the menacing growth of Nazism.

As a contemporary critic of Freud as well as one of his many admiring beneficiaries, I can gratefully acknowledge his creative genius and his at least partially malleable theories, while deploring, for example, his unshakable phallogocentric misunderstanding of female sexuality. On the other hand, I am inspired by his implicit recognition of the fundamentally two-person nature of analytic clinical process in his “Recommendations to physicians practicing psycho-analysis” (Freud 1912), despite many prior and subsequent wanderings from that stance. For a dualist, intersubjectivity is a pill that does not go down easily. Freud’s persistent Cartesian dualism, displayed in “Illusion”, “Discontents” and in most of his other works, has served as a persistent lure for many scholars in neighboring disciplines who attempt to apply his perspectives to communal life.

Lest I appear to monistically deny the existence of conflict in human subjectivity and

social interaction in favor of an idealized and sanitized world of cooperation and collaboration, I harbor no such millenarian ideas. Darwin and his successors in evolutionary biology and psychology have taught us that parent-child conflict flows from the competition for resources that begins with the uterine implantation of a fertilized egg. More recently, geneticists have observed the effects of conflict between maternal and paternal genes (Burt & Trivers 2006). The fetus is a parasite that can only exist at the expense of extracting nutrients from the mother’s body. The mother’s body, in turn, can react with hypertension and consequent deadly eclampsia. This is an arms race that, in less potentially lethal form, continues during infancy and early childhood. The mother’s love for the infant stems from a combination of hormonal secretions (e.g. oxytocin) and the initiation and maintenance of a mutually admiring but irreducibly self-centered infant-mother interaction. That maternal love, as evolutionary psychologists tell us, is inevitably mitigated, for example, by naturally selected urges to have more children. Psychological and interpersonal conflict exist everywhere, and generate anxiety in many individuals, but the realities of such social concerns as news of terrorist threats produce diagnosable symptoms only in those with existing, albeit unconscious, vulnerabilities. Generally, it would seem that compromise eases conflict if supposed adversaries acknowledge their differences and are motivated to seek positive outcomes.

As a clinical practitioner and teacher, therefore, I question Bauman’s assertion that the typical psychoanalytic patient’s *Angst* reflects society’s contemporary dearth of security (* p.4). While a more fundamental, more deeply personal, issue of security is an important psychopathogenic factor, that issue is clinically approachable by addressing anxiety symptoms and character pathology that result from faulty

and often traumatic developmental experiences in the individual's very early childhood. These causal factors are highlighted by the growing literature on child-parent attachment (e.g. Fonagy 2001). Faulty and insecure attachment experiences have been impinging on developing children for a far longer time than the existence of terrorist threats, and to indict those threats as a cause of maternal deprivation leading in turn to insecure attachment requires a stretch of intellectual credulity that is beyond my capacities.

Of course, Freud had studied Darwin 1859 on the origin of species – at least enough to serve as a partial inspiration for his sequential-phase theory of child psychosexual development. It is unclear, however, if Freud read Darwin 1871 on sexual selection, since he seemed to ignore Darwin's finding that mating in all animals is by female choice. In addition, to some extent similarly to Darwin himself, Freud was Lamarckian in his belief in the inheritance of acquired characteristics. I would submit, moreover, that Darwin's views of the common characteristics of all animals were not reflected in Freud's writings, if only by virtue of the latter's Hobbesian conviction that an intrinsic human bestiality required forceful suppression by society. This questionable conviction energized "Illusions" and Discontents". It also seems to have inhabited Durkheim (p. 5).

Hobbes's famous *homo homini lupus est* (p. 2) is inconsistent, therefore, with Darwin's (1872) perspective of a continuum of emotions and behavior in all mammals. Furthermore, canids (including wolves) are one of the most socially interwoven mammalian species, and intraspecies aggression is largely confined to sexual rivalry and dominance display. The story of Romulus and Remus need not be mythical after all. On the other hand one could turn Hobbes's dictum on its ear and exclaim: "yes, genus Homo is a complexly social

mammal whose aggression is far from a random expression of instinctual drives, but rather evoked by competition for resources and mating opportunities." That line of reasoning would also portray wolves as in fact *less* brutal than man in view of the prevalence of vicious crimes of violence among humans in our civilization. And, unlike wolves, we generally do not deliberately kill to eat our victims.

In a sense, Bauman's emphasis on the alleged roles of "masturbation panic" and "sexual abuse panic" in shaping parent-child conflict can be seen as examples of last-ditch efforts by which the writers he quotes try to deal with the continuum of individual sexual fantasy and behavior that Freud announced to his Victorian public with his writings on infantile sexuality. His concept of a prohibitive and paternalistic superego projected onto civilization in his "Illusions" and "Discontents" reflected the widespread divisive need of many adults to assert leverage over the envied – healthier, more vital – younger generation out of their own growing powerlessness and death anxiety. This is an even more understandable form of panic.

We tend to live out our divisive ontologies by governing through repressive elitism, battling over territory, creating consumerism through seductive marketing, dominating supposedly inferior members of our species through colonialism, and forming coalitions of nations to allegedly protect ourselves against the intrusion of *auslanders* and those who are considered threats to our economic systems of resource exploitation. The very real threat of terrorist violence stemming to a major extent from our incapacity to embrace differences as a fact of a more adaptive 'reality principle' must be adequately met, but is unlikely to be substantially reduced while we are still guided by polarizing ontologies.

Lamenting the slippage of parental control and the evanescent identity of youth with

which Bauman seems to resonate raises the question of how identity develops in a child's emergence beyond the maternal symbiosis and the umbrella of the family circle. Contrary to former convictions, it is becoming increasingly clear that, heritable temperamental tendencies aside, childhood social identity beyond the earliest years is influenced to a greater extent by peer relationships in the school, neighborhood, and playground than by parental influences (Harris 1999). The questionable concept of an immutable self (see Metzinger 2003 on his philosophical arguments against selves in the world, e.g. p. 3) also reflects the rigidity of dualistic ontologies. The role of youthful connectedness in cyberspace, to be further elaborated below, is consistent with this more contemporary view of self and identity. And a subjectively pointillist conception of time (p. 8), not necessarily pathological, may in fact be adaptive.

Over millions of years, the human brain, our major survival organ, has evolved as an exquisite learning machine with memory capacities, both implicit and explicit, to enhance our abilities as social animals to survive and reproduce. The patterns, or networks, of neural connections in the brain most vital to survival are passed on genetically, and experiences in that social world build a capacity for each individual to anticipate, or predict, the social predicaments that await the growing child and adult. This adaptational capacity depends on a sensorimotor filtering system in the brain that automatically and non-consciously assesses representations of the physical and social surround as well as bodily states for ultimate survival meaning. A significant characteristic of this neuropsychological assessing system is its multiple connections with memory circuits.

It amounts to the building and maintenance of an 'ontological unconscious' (Brickman 1998) with an interpretive predisposition which I have termed "ontic expectancy"

(Brickman 2008). Through these neuropsychological functions we make sense of both outer and inner (affective, fantasied) worlds. Without pursuing further details irrelevant to this paper, a Darwinian psychoanalytic perspective leads unerringly to clinical processes based on a two-person intersubjective model. The implicit clinical goal is euthymia that embraces alterity rather than the orthodox dualistic Freudian model of an objective doctor diagnosing and definitively curing a self-identified patient within a hierarchical medical model. A post-Modern Synthesis application of Darwinian perspectives, not available to Freud in his day, argues for the primacy of personal and genomic survival rather than the struggle between polarized principles of reality and pleasure still doggedly passed on as canonical in present-day psychoanalytic education.

At the risk of emulating Freud's speculative ventures into social science, I suggest that the ontological outlook implicit in new developments in psychoanalytic theory and technique is concordant with a growing *Weltanschauung* shaping recent sociopolitical developments in the United States. I am advancing an argument that this Darwinian theory of pathogenesis, predisposition, and relational clinical process is concordant with recent events in the American *polis*. The current American president, himself a product of mixed racial and ethnic origins, has arguably been elected with the significant help of young people who have largely ignored the polarizations of party politics in favor of electronic social networking.

These youthful citizens, weary of the opacity, divisive power games, and military destructiveness that reflect the pleasure principles of their elders, have utilized those very electronic connections and friendship networks deplored by Bauman (p. 7) to engage in new channels of political discourse (e.g. via Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, etc.). They had do-

nated relatively small individual sums to a national campaign for a candidate who represented himself as scornful of divisive domestic and foreign policies fostered by his predecessor. This is an example of the beneficial effects of networking in cyberspace, allowing individuals to express their unique voices while interacting with peers who take principled pleasure in this kind of discourse. It is a way of negotiating with peers and exercising influence outside the realm of conventional political and inter-generational power games. A pointillist (p. 8) subjectivity need not be deplored and can in fact ward off cynical uses of time in favor of living in a vibrant, multi-colored, multifaceted 'now' in which otherness is embraced rather than feared. A postulated trade-off (p. 9) of freedom vs. security might not continue to exist in a more pluralistic and less dualistic civilization. Is this a possible answer to Professor Bauman's puzzlement over the future of "the" reality principle?

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