

Peter Beilharz

Professor of Sociology and Director of the Thesis Eleven Centre for Cultural Sociology at La Trobe university

Therapy with Bauman

(Commentary to Zygmunt Bauman: Freudian civilization revisited)

Whatever happened to the reality principle? Perhaps it depends on for whom we ask or address this question, where in the world they are or where they find themselves. For those who live by the rule of necessity, to make their living or to please their gods, the reality principle is powerful and pressing. For those who, alternatively, live in the lap of consumer luxury, regardless of how they finance it, perhaps for them the pleasure principle rules. Only the pleasures are fleeting, transient, maybe superficial; and they still have to be paid for. Everything has to be paid for, whether in money, in kind, or in the suffering that pleasure's passing brings with it, when we return to reality after pleasure's moment has passed.

Where is the reality principle for Zygmunt Bauman? His own life has had the measure of Goethe's, outside its own moments of political turmoil. Bauman has lived an exemplary life, for he has sought and found the true things, the really necessary pleasures, often associated with images of Freud – work and love. The Freud Museum webpage tells us that this famous edict is not to be found in Freud's work, notwithstanding the fact that Erikson cited it there. During his long engagement Freud put it that his own ambition was to have Martha as his wife and to be able to work – 'Couldn't I for once have you and the work at the same time?' Elsewhere he refers to Eros and Ananke, Love and Necessity, as the foundations of society. In *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) we find: 'The communal life of human beings had, therefore, a two-fold foundation: the compulsion to work, which was created by external necessity, and the power of love ...' (Freud, *Standard Edition*, XIX)

What do girls want? What do boys want? What do postmodern times do to all this – do we change, are we different? Zygmunt Bauman thinks so, and has spent much of his recent working life telling us so, trying to explain. He revisits these themes and issues in his leading piece in this issue of *Anthropological Psychology*, via a specific encounter with Freud. Civilization was sometimes thought, by liberals, to be the result of a pact or social contract between men who fear the potential damage they might do to each other. Famously, *homo*

hominis lupus est. But perhaps this is not really a choice. Perhaps, as Bauman senses in sympathy with Freud, civilization is not a contract but an act of coercion, where the beasts in us are temporarily put at bay by renunciation, more powerfully by repression, and by the repression of some, our inferiors, by others, those who know and those who know how to rule.

Bauman has been visiting Freud's rooms for some time now, at least since the essays collected as *Post-modernity and its Discontents*, (Bauman 1997) the title itself as clear an act of homage as could be imagined. The key terms of reference here are those of security and freedom, which Bauman sees as though they were the principles of reality and pleasure, or else are translated into them. You cannot have both, or at least, whatever you have of one you cannot have of the other. But these are sociological, or societal, more than directly individual or personal choices, though it is difficult not to feel that at some point the one tips over into the other. Viewed as societal types, the shift from 'solid' to 'liquid' modernity reflects the transition from the postwar world, where security and social security were paramount, to the present, where freedom to choose, freedom to consume, freedom to walk, to walk away, freedom to dispose of things and others becomes the central and institutionally sanctioned desire. These days we (Europeans? Americans? Australians?) like to imagine ourselves as risk takers. The societal and global problems of risk come together with the pleasures of individually risky living. To live, these days, is to take risks, to eschew security; though perhaps this ethic of the new life nevertheless depends invisibly on the fact of security, or abundance. The risk of falling may well be less severe in a culture of abundance, or at least more readily rectified.

Bauman's personal ethic may be more like Goethe's, as John Armstrong explains it in his book *Love, Life, Goethe* (Armstrong 2006). Goethe's role is still exemplary for the conduct of everyday life, as Armstrong shows; even if the answers are not always right, the questions confronted and the project proposed are moving and profound. Bauman seeks out balance, and thinks that this is also what we should do, whether as actors or

in terms of societal models. We should seek to balance security and freedom, necessity and love – love and work. Perhaps, for some of us, we can even seek to love our work, at least when its passion first calls to us, first attracts us. But who, these days, has a vocation? Perhaps the psychoanalyst; certainly not those of us who labor in those institutions still stubbornly called universities, where necessity, number, output, product, turnover, results are all that matter. No longer does sweet reason rule, even in these institutions of extraordinary privilege. Perhaps the university is not in ruins, but now simply impossible. Built on the noble foundations of sweet reason, tolerance, the persuasion of the better argument, the dream of undistorted communication, universities too, and too often feel like Freudian cesspits, at worst or kindergartens, at best where narcissism and rampant egoism constantly undermine all those grander claims to the lofty ideals of the community of scholars. But this much is nothing new.

What place does therapy have in this world? Evidently it is a middle class practice, both in terms of its financial and its emotional availability. Bauman makes this clear when he refers to the incapacity of reason really to alleviate suffering. As he puts it, once revealed and brought into the light of reason, the causes of psychic discomfort won't necessarily alleviate, even if some sense of calm or some degree of insight may follow. But this is middle class misery, which unlike the plight of the oppressed majority is receptive to therapy-by-reason. The trade-off for most denizens of the west today remains that between freedom and security. The fears of personal insecurity have likely always afflicted the middle class more; after all, there is a long tradition of thinking and criticism for which the middle class is the anxious class, the class that Barbara Ehrenreich tells us is obsessed by the 'fear of falling' (Ehrenreich 1989). The upwardly mobile ambitions of the middle class always rest in an uneasy tension with the fear of the possibility of social decline and descent into the ranks of the great unwashed. How much more can these anxieties be heightened by the prospect of the ongoing effects of the global financial crisis? (Furlong 2001). Therapists, in all this, will have their work cut out, for therapy is also, as Jeffrey Alexander puts it, modernity writ large in the subjective voice; nothing has changed when it comes to the need for the talking cure. Modernity still rules, and it has its need of the subject (Alexander 2009).

Bauman senses in the new individualism the ever-present potential of a new authoritarianism. This is a strong motif across his work, that the outward pursuit of the newly rugged individualism also carries with it an inner impulse to conformism. So the hapless individuals

trapped in airport terminals by security-obsessed delays and endless body checks actually end up loving Big Brother. And there seem to be numerous evenings when there is nothing better to watch on TV but their trials and tribulations. The most popular TV show recently in Australia is called *Border Control*, which features the pathetically unconvincing portraits of unsuccessful souls smuggling drugs, breaking visa stays, or seeking otherwise to share in the prosperity that Australians apparently believe belongs by right only to those (us) who got there first, or earlier. Though it remains difficult to say whether this kind of televised pap reflects public opinion or forms it, or what it might have to do with public opinion at all. Perhaps, as consumers, the problem is simply that we are bored, and too lazy or weary to complain.

Bauman locates all these concerns in the larger arcs of most of his recent writing, in lamenting (or is he?) the passing of solid modernity. The inhabitants of Thomas Mann's novels might have been stiff and stiff-backed, but at least they knew what the rules were. Today, we do not have rules, and we certainly have not learned to make and to abide by rules of our own. Anything goes, or almost, or if you can get away with it. For Bauman, the shift which can be symbolized as the transition from solid to liquid modernity coincides with the transformation of producer society into consumer society. This coincides with what Richard Sennett calls the emergence of flexible capitalism in *The Corrosion of Character* (Sennett 1998). Sennett's title, like Bauman's, is carefully chosen. Character results from finding a place to stand, and from having things, authorities and institutions to stand against.

These claims may involve clichés, but they remain representative of real problems nevertheless. If the world now seems out of control (this is new?), then the anxiety becomes manifest in all the things we do. Parental influence over children is eroded by youth culture and its instantaneity, by what happens in schools and via the media which so absorb younger people, where parents become the enemy, real or imagined, and children have to deal with adult levels of responsibility and the desire for self-transformation and speedy gratification. Seduction replaces repression, at least for middle class children. These are worlds of infinite choices, infinite possibilities, even as we slowly come to recognise that limits and finitude press upon us, and these not only ecologically.

The theme of youth is an old one for Bauman. It goes back to his much earlier work in Poland, where even then the rising tide of expectations into the sixties did not so much offer to raise all hopes as to increase the unhappiness of those who missed out, or felt them-

selves to be missing out (Beilharz 2009). How do I know that I am not missing out? How do I know that this is the girl or boy for me when a prettier one might come along? How might I learn that there are limits, in all things? These were questions enough for youth then, let alone now. The 'long term' becomes bad for business, but also frightening for the young.

On his way back from Freud Bauman passes by Weber's image of the iron cage. Perhaps it was less dull and compulsory than necessary, and even reassuring. For the 'steel casing' which Weber speaks of, that housing as hard as steel mistranslated by Talcott Parsons via John Bunyan as the 'iron cage' might also be a source of protection, like the shell of the crustacean or the house carried by the snail. What Sennett refers to as the discontinuous reinvention of institutions may apply to postmodern individuals as well. The question of identity may no longer be, 'who am I?', but 'who am I today?' As Bauman puts it, what we used to call identification risks becoming a matter of perpetual reidentification. The Permanent Revolution has arrived, and it is us – us, or our children.

Is it then the case that young people, as Bauman notes, develop a special talent for marketing themselves? I find it difficult not to sense that something is different in the modus operandi of the students I work with today. We professors are institutionally obliged to market ourselves, and we have to be taught how to do so. As for the lives of our students, change becomes normalised, second nature, no matter how surprising the process seems to us.

So where is the reality principle, in all this? Perhaps this is the new reality, at least for those on the planet sufficiently well placed to enjoy it. Perhaps this new way of living is the new necessity. Somewhere Simmel observes that perhaps all that freedom can mean now is the momentary release from our obligations. That was a century ago, already. Zygmunt Bauman knows that he is a follower, and a follower of Simmel in particular, as well as of Marx, Weber and Freud. In all his work his ethical purpose is to poke us in the eye, to provoke, to question. Better to be wrong, in this way of thinking, than not to speak your mind. Better to swim against the current than to coast with the comfort of the tide. Bauman gives us both, of his work and love, of the unease that comes of knowing that we could do better, the difficulty of seeking to live a good life in an imperfect world. After the larger dreams of redemption have collapsed, the idea of the exemplary life nevertheless remains intact. The restorative powers of the work of love remain central for us, as they did for Freud, and as they have for Bauman (Beilharz 2007).

References

- Freud, *Standard Edition*, XIX, p.101
- Bauman, Z. (1997) *Postmodernity and its Discontents*, London, Polity.
- Armstrong, J. (2006): *Love, Life, Goethe. How to be Happy in an Imperfect World*, London, Penguin.
- Ehrenreich B. (1989), *The Fear of Falling, The Inner Life of the Middle Class*, New York, Harper.
- Furlong, M. (2001): 'All Gone, Down the Gurgler', *Overland*, 194
- Alexander, J. (2009): 'Social Subjectivity: Psychotherapy as Central Institution', *Thesis Eleven* 96.
- Sennett, R. (1998): *The Corrosion of Character*, New York, Norton.
- Beilharz, (P) (2009): 'Modernity and Communism: Zygmunt Bauman and the Other Totalitarianism', in *Socialism and Modernity*, Minnesota University Press,
- Beilharz, P. (2000): *Zygmunt Bauman – Dialectic of Modernity*, London, Sage.
- Beilharz, P. (2007): 'Bauman's Coat' in Michael Hviid Jacobsen, Sophia Marshman, Keith Tester eds, *Bauman Beyond Postmodernity*, Aalborg, Aalborg University Press.