

Telos PRIMOPIANO

Zygmunt Bauman is one of the most admired and influential thinkers of our time. An English sociologist with a Polish-Jewish heritage, he invented the dazzling definition of “*liquid modernity*”. Provocatively, he encourages us to think afresh about our flexible world, so full of challenges. Instead of looking for solutions, Bauman suggests that we should refocus our way of thinking, the models we inherited having become an obstacle. He addresses the process of globalization stemming from the social, political and economic change occurred over the past years focusing on comprehensive understanding rather than on quantitative analysis, as the academic mainstream would require. Bauman is Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the Universities of Leeds and Warsaw. Since 2000, he has published *Liquid Modernity*, *Liquid Life*, *Consuming Life*, *The Art of Life*.

Editorial

The title of this publication, “*Primo Piano, Scala c*”, namely our address, did not come by chance. Within these walls, we at Telos spend an important part of our lives working, studying and thinking together. Yes it's true, probably we had to manipulate it a bit, but by putting “*primo piano*” (first floor) first and by writing it in full we simply meant to express our wish to frame thoughts, analysis, points of view from outstanding figures of our age, as clearly and neatly as in a cinematographic close up (“*primo piano*”). Right from the beginning we cultivated the ambition to create a monthly editorial event, awaited for and above all “read”. The first conversation we host is a tangible proof of this. We start in issue n.1 with an enlightened, accessible yet stimulating dialogue with Prof. Zygmunt Bauman, whom we asked to guide us in an exploratory voyage through the present and near future. We hope that this conversation will stir your curiosity and raise your expectations of authentically loyal readers for our next issue.

Mariella Palazzolo

Zygmunt Bauman: “We are living in an interval between two normalities.”

Telos: Your work was really enlightening for those who, like us, work in strategic consulting and try to understand dynamics of our society: your analysis of the modern liquid life, where society modifies itself before behaviors become consolidate procedures. A liquid society that puts an end to certainties, stability and rules. In such a scenario, how do you think we can try to identify a “crate” that could give a form to water, thus to society?

Zygmunt Bauman: Conditions under which we act are now globally determined, but tools of effective action remain, as before, local. As long as such discrepancy between the size of the challenge and the potency of our tools persists, a truly impermeable “container”, a container able to hold the fluid inside, keep it in shape and prevent its contamination, will stay beyond our reach.

In such sudden changes in our society, as in the case, described in your book *Consuming Life*, of Social Networks spreading like contagious diseases and causing an overlapping between real and virtual life, is still there a place for politics? How can Institutions respond to the fast-growing needs coming from the society?

Networks are assembled and dissembled with equal ease. “Network politics” is for that reason much more “fluid” – flexible, and quicker to adjust to changing circumstances than the “solid” orthodox institutions of opinion-forming and governance. The extant, cumbersome and inert structures of politic parties are unfit to compete just like powerful but heavy armies meant for the old-style territorial wars but unable to conquer much weaker but nimble and light-fingered terrorists units. “Network politics” looks therefore as a more effective form of engagement... it is indeed a suitable weapon to deploy in the “destructive” part of the job but its assets turn into liabilities when it comes to construct a viable replacement...



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The transformation of social groups into swarms is another aspect you focused on in your work. Groups have a hierarchy, swarm don't. Swarms are convinced to have chosen the right direction just because of the certainty of the number. Swarms are not long lasting, neither in formation nor in direction. Such fickleness in their targets makes their future directions unpredictable. Does this process appear to be irreversible to you?

Swarms seem to be the sole feasible form of coordinated (organised) collective action as long as the frailty of human bonds and the facility to terminate commitments at short notice or without notice continue and so the condition of unpredictability persists. "Hierarchies" and "structures" of the traditional groups were after all weapons against randomness, precautions against flexibility and change; contraptions to keep the group "on a steady course", make behavior predictable and calculations reliable.

You stressed the importance of movements and associations, nevertheless you underline the danger that might arrive from "activists that consider their initiatives as a more valid alternative to democracy. Their approach towards participation to politics show a strong undemocratic ethos". Is the victory of anti-politics so close?

I wouldn't speak here of "anti-politics". Politics is much older than political parties, parliaments, or representative democracy, which are all novelties of modernity. What we witness today is a slow disintegration of some increasingly impotent form of politics and birth pangs of new ones, yet impossible to visualize. Antonio Gramsci compared such situations to *interregnum* – an interval between two "normalities", a time in which "the old is dying and the new can't be born"

In *Consuming Life* you also affirm that big companies, regardless of their business area, have accepted such insatiable, capricious and hasty search for novelty. Do you believe possible or even credible to speak about sustainable development, if not ethics of the productive world?

Not much hope for "sustainable development" (on a planetary scale, that is) as long as the economy feeds (as it must in our consumers society) on unstoppable productions of new needs, temptations, seduction euphemistically called "creation of demand" or "discovery of new markets". Without behaving like that our type economy would be as inconceivable as non-blowing winds or non-flowing rivers...

We referred to your analysis previous to the economic crisis that we are experiencing. Governments appear to have fully come back on the scene, together with rules. Do you think that this crisis will change our world radically or, markets, jobs, finance, production and the geopolitical balance will rather return to the past after its end?

Let's not jump to conclusions! The governmental reactions so far, impressive and even revolutionary as they might have appeared once processed in the media headlines and politicians' sound-bites, has been of the "more of the same" kind: efforts to re-capitalize the money lenders and to make their debtors credit-worthy once more, so the business of leading and borrowing, of falling in debt, could return to the "usual". But that yesterday's "usuality" has been the prime cause of our present troubles. We are as yet far from drawing the lessons from the crisis which is itself still far from revealing all its volume.