Introduction

Tony Blackshaw

A man who wants the truth becomes a scientist; a man who wants to give free play to his subjectivity may become a writer; but what should a man do who wants something in between?

Robert Musil

Imagination is not, as is sometimes thought, the ability to invent; it is the ability to disclose that which exists.

John Berger

Every now and then a thinker rearranges the cognitive furniture inside my head. To date, one of the most influential of these has been Zygmunt Bauman. His work, when I first began to read it properly during my doctoral studies, was unlike anything I had encountered in sociology. It was a stunning revelation. The actual epiphany – which was so incredible that a physical thrill ran through me as it dawned that another kind of thinking existed – occurred whilst I was reading Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies.¹ This is a book in which we see Bauman at the height of his sociological powers. It takes a single subject – death – and finds doors to open in all directions. Amongst many other things it brilliantly reveals is that what is most important surrounding its topic is not that mortality is as certain as paying taxes, or even that for some people immortality is a pervasive need, but that without death life is not worth living. I have never read anything as exacting as this account of the human passage through life. Reading the book made me realize two important integrated things: on the one hand, the hardest thing of all to see is often what is directly in front of our eyes and, on the other, that thinking sociologically with Bauman is above all else about learning to see differently.

What my experience suggests is that Bauman’s sociology has the power to change the vision of its readers. However that may be, it by no means follows that this ability to open eyes to a new world will work in the same way for others. To see such a potential for themselves readers need to be prepared to put their own tacit assumptions to one side for a while, and consider the very different role accorded to thinking within
Bauman’s sociology which, as my experience shows, rather than helping us to identify what is familiar in the world, shows us instead what is most important by making the familiar strange.²

Indeed, when we embrace Bauman’s special way of thinking sociologically we become more attentive, not only in that the world is left freshly minted since it has been presented to us in a different way but also because our ethical sense of it is subtly shifted, as in Schöpfung. I have borrowed this use of the word Schöpfung (creation, shaping) from the great modern American poet Wallace Stevens. Stevens used it in his obituary in 1946 for the music critic Paul Rosenfeld, who in his view was a ‘shaper’ who saw ‘the world in his character as poet’.³ In common with Rosenfeld, Bauman is someone who has also lived such a life, that is to say as a Schöpfer, who, alert to the excitements as well as the contradictions of experience, lives for the sake of Schöpfung. Let us call this sense of Schöpfung the ‘Bauman Effect’.

The Bauman Effect defies easy definition. But what is clear about it is that it is immensely powerful; it has the power to redescribe, to say something new and different about the world. As my own experience shows, it also has the potential to be transformational. In the transforming moment when it captures your imagination a shift in understanding takes place, and you become more free there, in that space of imagination. Experiencing that profound sensation is the most important thing that great sociology (in saying this I am of course assuming Bauman is a great sociologist – and am aware that this is something that calls for proof rather than simply assent) can do for us. The actual feeling that you are free, that if you want to you can break through boundaries and go wherever you like.

Unconcerned with the borderlines between academic disciplines, Bauman operates in what Foucault once called a ‘frontier’ situation,⁴ making boundary crossings of all kinds, switching between actual, lived daily events and what goes in the imaginative innovation that underpins his own special way of thinking sociologically, and always hoping in the process to unsettle his readers. In so doing, he works like a potter at a wheel, spinning all kinds of stuff into new shapes. As the reader will see in the following readings, Bauman has created a metaphorical sociology that possesses a certain identity with literary worlds. And because he deals with metaphors rather than theory he is able to be much freer in his enquiries into the modern world than most other sociologists. He is someone who is able to write poetically. He creates his own understanding of the world, his own imaginative terrain. As a result, he brings the operations of modernity on to the page like nobody else in sociology.

Bauman is of the view that the great novelists are the most prescient
observers of society and its illusions. As the reader will also see, there is as a result a rich literary catalogue in his sociology that provides us with a guide to the literature he himself is always looking at and learning from and spinning into new shapes. As an example, let us briefly consider his understanding of social identity. The insights developed in Milan Kundera’s famous philosophical novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* shape Bauman’s understanding of this analytical category.

Kundera’s starting point in this novel is the paradox that we may think that everything we do is substantial and loaded with meaning in some large and permanent way, but it just might be that everything we do is weightless and meaning-free, since nothing in the modern world is meant to last. Bauman draws on the experience Kundera’s novel illuminates to suggest that what people have to learn first and foremost in the all-pervasive insecure and uncertain conditions of the modern world today is how to draw upon the powers of weightlessness in order to attain a bearable lightness of being. As he goes on to demonstrate in most of his twenty-first-century publications, the passage from ‘solid modernity’ to ‘liquid modernity’ has resulted in the transformation of social identity whereby the ritual performance of perpetual rebirth has become the norm. Quick-fix transformation, the sort that results from the demands of the market (for example, with the closures of the collieries in Britain in the 1980s government ministers told coal miners that they should quickly forget what it means to be miners and retrain for the service industry) or our personal choices (for example, taking up another new leisure activity or meeting a new lover), is ubiquitous. For Bauman, it isn’t just economics and politics that determine the fates of societies, both culture and individual choice matter just as much. In the event, there are simply so many competing loyalties with identity in the world today that it becomes, for the individual, a site of weighty ambivalence as its superbly elastic work finds itself pressed into yet another role.

Bauman’s is a sociology that always complies with this kind of literary sensibility. His approach to his discipline is essentially an extension of that sensibility. The strength of his sociology – which he would readily admit is also its limit – is that it is inescapably particular to him as an individual. It comes out of his identity, his personality, his personal experience, his interests, his liking for film, his passion for modern classic literature (from Balzac to Musil to Zola) and contemporary masters (as we have already seen Kundera, but also Calvino, Coetzee, Houellebecq, to name just a small number), his indignation about the human costs that accompany modern change, the whole of him. This conspicuous individual, who loves books, savours them, devours them and wants to change the world with them, has an attentiveness to social
nuance and moral detail which is so thoroughgoing and empathetic that his sociology is, you soon begin to realize, less a ‘method’ than an ethical principle.

In my experience, conspicuous individuals are not only the most interesting people, they are also invariably a bit mad. This might be said about Bauman. He is a highly individual person. He is always secretive about what he is currently working on. He has an exceptional work ethic. Of the need to get your sociological voice heard he recently compared its attraction ‘to Jack Nicholson’s attempt in One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest to tear a boiler out of its concrete casing and heave it up to break the iron bars in the asylum window. Jack was not mad enough to believe that he had enough strength to do it, but he wished to make sure that no one, including himself, could accuse him of not having tried.’ His reference to popular culture here is by no means an accident. His intention is to make reality and popular culture clash, because he works with the assumption that we have to use popular culture to show different aspects of reality.

Bauman uses everything from the seemingly most banal aspects of popular culture to old Polish jokes to great literature to establish a sense of strangeness or otherness. One of the upshots of this is that the world he describes in his books is invariably bent to his own predilections; he rejects convention in favour of something that feels more uncertain, risky and open-ended. He often goes off at tangents (excurses are a regular feature of these books), deviating into the wide open spaces of the unexpected – love, shopping, happiness, sex and so on – and the dark closed spaces where many others fear to tread – his study of the Holocaust is one good example – in defiance of the kind of sociology calculated to match outcome with expectation. These studies turn every one of their subjects on its head.

Less known in the USA than in Europe, where he has gathered up all sorts of prizes for a sociology that is unlike any other you will find in undergraduate textbooks, Bauman has always written this way. His sociological compass, though recognizably European, taking in the likes of Karl Marx, Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Antonio Gramsci and Sigmund Freud, knows all about majority sociology, but it is as separate from the mainstream as any sociology as ever been. Bauman is himself. He makes up his own mind: he does not follow the crowd. You might say that the Bauman Effect resembles a lucid iceberg of intelligence, much of which is under water, at a distance we cannot quite reach. The influences are so thoroughly assimilated into it we would be hard put to identify most of them. Bauman’s sociology reads as if it belongs to him and him alone.
Bauman thinks deeply about his *Schöpferkraft*. With their blending of popular culture, literature, the insights of the great professors and the quotidian, their interweaving of different kinds of narratives and shuffling of whatever exists or takes place in the world and those aspects of it he has found words for, his books require a great amount of time, skill and patience to produce the effect that they do. As someone who lives to write – *vivere scivere* actually is his method – Bauman lacks both the enthusiasm to define his sociology (which has an astonishing knack of making its insights seem organic and instantaneous) in precise terms and the scholarly patience to explain the art and techniques of his *Schöpferkraft*. The upshot of this is that he has to count on his readers being able to work out the connections between all of these things. This is no easy task as it demands a special kind of curiosity if you are to familiarize yourself appropriately with the Bauman Effect and its lexical ingenuity.

This is one of the reasons that makes Bauman a great sociologist. The trouble is that this is also what makes him problematic, demanding that we wrestle with him and take a few falls on the canvas before everything converges and we find out the truth about the Bauman Effect. Indeed, we cannot rest content with Peter Beilharz’s assertion that he is the ‘greatest sociologist writing in English today’; we must deal with some very real issues.

My optimistic facilitator of freedom must somehow be reconciled with the pessimistic figure identified by a number of Bauman’s critics, notably Mark Davis, who submits the view that Bauman’s ultimate verdict about modernity appears to portend the ‘end of freedom’; Anthony Elliott, who on the backboard cover of his edited book *The Contemporary Bauman* (2007) argues that ‘Bauman’s theory of “liquid modernity” presents a dramatic, dark portrait of the contemporary age’; and Ali Rattansi, who insists that ‘his critique of contemporary popular culture and his analysis of a total reification in which social relations become nothing but relations between commodities is such that to see him as a latter-day Adorno is far from fanciful’. People’s everyday experiences must be squared with Bauman’s ideal typologies of modern life, for example, the ‘player’, the ‘tourist’ and the ‘vagabond’, and his metaphors, for example his juxtaposing of ‘solid modernity’ and ‘liquid modernity’, which he uses to serve some ostensibly higher motive than simple empirical interpretation. We must respond to Larry Ray’s admonition that ‘[h]owever useful metaphors may be in stimulating imaginative enquiry they are no substitute for rigorous conceptualization and research into the social’. Indeed, we must consider the extent to which Bauman’s work is so far from being majority sociology that it might be...
argued that it is an example of a purported objective study of society violated by subjectivity, since in it what constitutes typical sociological research and empirical evidence is either treated as secondary or ignored altogether. For all Bauman’s work the same critical problem obtains: how to treat the gap between all these contradictions. This introduction is an attempt to bridge that gap.

In a related sense, you might say that here we must deal with the ambivalence of Bauman’s sociology. At the beginning of the book *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Bauman explains that ambivalence, ‘the possibility of assigning an object or an event to more than one category, is a language-specific disorder: a failure of the naming (segregating) function that language is meant to perform. The main symptom of disorder is the acute discomfort we feel when we are unable to read the situation properly and to choose between alternative actions.’ This is the essence of his sociology – bringing together different categories in a way that is meant to place a heavy burden on the shoulders of its readers. This should not surprise us, however, since in his sociology there are certain qualities which permit us to see it as belonging to the temper of our age, of the irreparable uncertainty of all choices. The sources of these choices are difficult to discover, but some of them quite clearly lie in the complexities and contradictions of the man himself. It is with these that this chapter begins.

But before we briefly look at the biography of this thoroughly twenty-first-century sociologist – who it has to be said at the offset is acutely aware of the unconditional contingency of his own identity – it would be remiss of me not to point out that the uninterrupted activity of *Schöpfer* that is the Bauman Effect dispels any possibility of my providing it with an ultimate shape. One of the reasons for this is that Bauman’s work is resistant to summary. His books never quite settle into a fixed form – they float across categories, now sociology, now philosophy, now social psychology, now existential guide to living, too fleet of foot to be pinned down (it is important to remember though that he sees his calling as a sociologist). What this chapter will do instead is offer the reader a generalizing introduction to Bauman’s sensibility, his own particular kind of sociology.

**Who is Zygmunt Bauman? Early Bauman and Marxism**

The most curious thing about Zygmunt Bauman is not that he is still a practising sociologist, who turned 90 years of age at the end of 2015, but that his long life is one of a series of unforeseen events which have in no uncertain terms shaped the métier of his sociology. Like several other
sociologists who made their mark in the second half of the twentieth century, Bauman began his sociological career with Marxism. This was not unsurprising since the ethical basis of his sociology was from the start unambiguous and simple, epitomized in Karl Marx’s famous observation that ‘The philosophers so far have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point [of sociology] is to change it’.

Like many other leftist thinkers, Bauman was particularly attracted to the interplay of human agency and culture in neo-Marxist, particularly Gramscian thinking. There were (and still are) two aspects to Bauman’s Marxism: an objective, analytical side, demonstrating his awareness of the essential dynamics of power located in advanced capitalism; and a Gramscian, subjective side which reflects his admonition that we must also give due regard to the role of human agency and the cultural process within those overall dynamics. Bauman works with the assumption that sociology is at its most effective when it succeeds in melding these two aspects together in a critical, organic whole.

However, in common with a number of other Marx-inspired sociologists, he ended up becoming disillusioned with the grey in grey of its revisionism. As he recalls in one interview, for all the conceptual sophistication that Marxism had gained by the 1960s and 1970s, it remained thoroughly ‘economistic, and in most cases severely reductionist’, and its trademark brand of still trying to fit ‘the working class’ into the make-believe thematic of the soon-to-be-realized worker’s paradise simply did not work any more.

In Bauman’s sociology, structure and agency come together in the lives of individuals – not as interpellations but as lived, human experiences (structure serving culture rather than the other way round), which expose the contradictions underlying power arrangements in modern capitalist societies. As I have pointed out in a number of other publications, by the 1980s he had become exasperated with the ‘productionist’, ‘workerist’ and ‘masculinist’ orientation of Marxist revisionism, which in its various manifestations continued to emphasize similarity rather than difference, fixity rather than contingency; incongruities that were now constantly being undermined and disrupted by a modern world that had become stubbornly insistent on change and by individual men and women no longer prepared to settle for a circumscribed life.

As Bauman saw it, the Marxist bubble was, by the 1980s, at bursting point because its protagonists could not get their collective heads around the increasingly individualized climatic conditions of ordinary men and women’s day-to-day existences in advanced capitalism.

In marked contrast to neo-Marxism, Bauman’s sociology suggests that the most important aspects of modern life today – the remunerations
offered by the market which in advanced capitalist societies binds people together to the greater advantage of some than of others, the bonds and fractures uniting and separating people, the ways in which people recalibrate their identities and adjust in the excitement of opportunity and the aftermath of loss, the symbolic significance of belonging in a persistently shifting world in which ‘community’ in the tradition sociological sense cannot help but be missing – have a reality that transcends any one theoretical perspective.

Unlike most other key post-Marxist thinkers whose alternative blueprints emerged in sociology and other leftist curricula during the 1980s, however, Bauman’s disillusionment with Marxism was also a product of his life experiences of living with actually existing Communism. Born into a family of Jewish origin in Poznan, Poland, in 1925, Bauman could have been a character in a twentieth-century novel by Jorge Luis Borges, an epic charting the peak and decline of the ‘solid’ stage of modernity, that is, modernity’s initial phase, what Ulrich Beck has called the ‘first modernity’. As Keith Tester has pointed out, by the ‘time he was twenty, Bauman had confronted anti-Semitism, Stalinism, Nazism and warfare’ and, despite fighting for his country against the Nazis during the Second World War, was expelled from the army in 1953 during an anti-Semitic purge. In 1968 he was also sacked from his professorship at Warsaw University and expatriated from his country during another purge of Jews from positions of power in Polish society. Bauman was now an exile who might have lost his first home, but he chose not to wander for long and found a new home in Leeds, England, where he became professor of sociology at the city’s university at the turn of the 1970s.

The story of Bauman’s biography is common to that of other intellectuals who came of age in Eastern Europe during the Second World War (see my comparison of Bauman and Agnes Heller in Leisure), but his is also a Polish-Jewish story that is particular to him (and his family), and there can be no doubting that his driving impulses have their genesis in his own personal circumstances. Indeed, the point that his social identity is Jewish, Polish, British, socialist, professorial and the rest means that the contingency of his own subjectivity is couched to be crucial in a particular way, which is unique to him, and which adds to our understanding of his sociology, which clearly embodies Max Weber’s idea of sociology’s ‘value relevance’ – the acknowledgement that a person’s own worldview and values affect the questions that preoccupy her or him.

But, in a way not dissimilar to a growing number of contemporary theorists, whose work is touched by their own personal identities and politics, Bauman takes Weber’s ‘value relevance’ much further,
Setting up the encounter

grounding it in his own embodied life positionings and experiences. To paraphrase Gramsci, Bauman had by the 1980s recognized that the starting point of his own new ‘critical elaboration’ of the world would be wrapped up in the consciousness of who he himself was as a product of the historical process to date, which had sedimented in him ‘an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory’. And it was through his ‘postmodern’ sociology that Bauman took up Gramsci’s challenge that he should compile such an inventory.

As we will see in the following pages, in compiling this inventory, Bauman is one of the few thinkers in the contemporary era who has had the confidence to seize, disarticulate and recast sociology, its apparently defining elements radically altered. Reading Bauman you begin to see not only the relationship between his personal identity and experiences and his sociology – which foregrounds in no uncertain terms the advantages of an émigré’s double vision – but crucially also the sequence of changes and variations sociology as an academic discipline must undergo if it is going to respond to social, cultural, economic and political shifts in the world and its values and needs over time.

Bauman and the founding fathers of sociology

Before we explore what this entails in Bauman’s work, we must begin by discussing the relationship between his sociology and that of the founding fathers. This is important since, as we learn from Hans-Georg Gadamer, our awareness of any individual can only be ‘a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life’, and we must take into account the inevitability of ‘prejudices’, the perspectives given to him (and us) by the heritage of which he (and we) are (cannot help being) part.23

One way in which we could do this would be to continue what I started in the last section of this introduction with Marx and compare and contrast Bauman’s sociology with that of the other founding fathers: Durkheim, Simmel and Weber. For example, it has often been said by Bauman himself that Georg Simmel is one of his key touchstones – perhaps, indeed, the main one – and the great German sociologist is frequently invoked in his work. Indeed, Bauman’s understanding of contemporary modern life could be interpreted as Simmelian: ‘I understand the task of sociology’, Simmel writes, ‘to be description and determination of the historico-psychological origin of those forms in which interactions take place between human beings. The totality of these interactions, springing from the most diverse impulses, directed toward the most diverse objects, and aiming at the most diverse end’.24 As we will see, this would make a fitting epigraph for all of Bauman’s
twenty-first-century work, and especially everything he has published since *Liquid Modernity*. Clearly, though, this is not the place to pursue all such comparisons with the founding fathers. Our concern here has to be much more limited.

What I wish to do instead is make the rather controversial argument that Bauman’s sociology wears that classic authority that R. A. Nisbet admired in the founding fathers, because it comes from a place that exists in that ‘wonderful tension between the esthetically concrete and the philosophically general that always lies in greatness’.\(^{25}\) The problem with making this comparison is that nowadays not only do such allusions to greatness tend to be downplayed but also most sociologists (if not all) are primarily concerned with identifying and analysing the way empirical reality is experienced, rather than ‘with deep intuition, with profound imaginative grasp, reacting to the world around [them], even as does the artist, and also like the artist, objectifying internal and only partly conscious, states of mind’.\(^{26}\) This raises the question of whether such a comparison is possible. An analogy used by Howard Bloom in his important book *The Anxiety of Influence* is useful in providing an answer.

Bloom suggests that we need to distinguish between the founding fathers and modern poets. In our everyday understanding the noun ‘poet’ is used to describe people who write poems. Bloom is using the term in an alternative way to identify those individuals in modern societies with special powers of imagination, who cannot help but find themselves operating in the shadow of their more illustrious predecessors. He likens modern poets to Satan in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Just as Satan fought to assert his individuality by defying the perfection of God, so must the modern poet engage in the struggle to define his or her vision in relation to the founding fathers of their own academic discipline. And yet all modern poets know that this is an ultimately futile task since none of them can hope to approach, let alone surpass, the ‘perfection’ of the achievements of their distinguished predecessors.

This is exactly the state of affairs in contemporary sociology, where modern poets must invariably operate in the shadow of the likes of Marx, Simmel and Weber. Most ordinary sociologists either concede their inability to match the ‘the embarrassments of a tradition grown too wealthy to need anything more’\(^{27}\) or settle for applying, or at best refining, its key ideas; a small minority attempt to denigrate them. The former response is nostalgic; the latter is childish. Both responses stop us thinking original thoughts. The best of the modern poets remain ambivalent about the achievements of their distinguished predecessors: on the one hand they accept the ‘perfection’ of their achievements, on
the other, they attempt to transcend them by exploring their limits. This is what Bauman does: ‘There and then in his bad, he finds his good; he chooses the heroic, to know damnation and to explore the limits of the possible within it.’

Such an argument resonates with what the painter Frank Auerbach recently said about how contemporary artists must take into account the art produced by their distinguished predecessors. This carries two demands: ‘First that you attempt to do something of a comparable scale and standard, which is impossible; second that you try and do something that has never been done before, that is also impossible. So in the face of this you can either just chuck it in, or you can spend all your energy and time and hopes in trying to cope with it. You will fail. But as [Samuel] Beckett very kindly said for all of us, “try again, fail better”.’

Applying the thesis underpinning Bauman’s seminal book *Legislators and Interpreters* (1987) is yet another useful way for explaining this line of argument. The legislators (read: the founding fathers) are intellectuals who once upon a time made authoritative statements about the world because they had the power to make the ‘procedural rules’ which assure the attainment of truth, the arrival of moral judgement, and the selection of proper artistic taste. Such procedural rules have a universal validity, as to the products of their application. In our time, the authority of these intellectuals has been downgraded in importance, and so has the power of their legislating message, their way of communicating truth, which has been undermined by an alternative interpretative mind-set, whose authority is more democratic.

In all these understandings, then, the Bauman Effect is to continue to rise to the challenge of the sociological imagination by undermining the ‘perfection’ of classical sociology. It operates with the tacit assumption that our responsibility is to respect the complexity of the ideas of the founding fathers (the legislators), on the one hand, and to think about the different ways in which ‘ordinary’ people (the interpreters) have always interpreted and constructed the world, on the other. It does this by imploring us to take responsibility for our responsibility, which is to recognize the ambivalence of the world and our understanding of it. In Bauman’s sociology this provides a new kind of ethics in which new obligations to each other and the world press on us. This observation notwithstanding we might also argue that Bauman’s sociology remains foundational, too, in the sense that it is written in the composed, expert, genial voice of the old-school legislator. In other words, when we embrace Bauman’s sociology we have to recognize the ambivalence inherent to modern intellectual work.
On becoming foxes rather than hedgehogs:  
Bauman’s antinomies and his metaphors

There is yet another kind of doubleness apparent in Bauman’s sociology. As we will see throughout the readings in this book, notwithstanding his admiration of the likes of Marx, Simmel and Weber, Bauman is one of the few contemporary sociologists to have demonstrated in no uncertain terms the profound significance of classic literature for sociology, and thereby used it in his ambition to renew both its ethical basis and the ‘intuitive or artistic frame of thought’ through which its most important ideas are arrived at. In this regard he is the sociologist who has done the most to radically reinvent the language of sociology for modern times, and who has in the process both maintained the necessity of sociology and questioned it from a place that counters any attempt to assign to it any particular truth.

As we saw in the last section, if an academic discipline is to flourish, not only does it need to have a healthy respect for its heritage but equally it must be prepared to engage in a lively confrontation with the external pressures and influences that require it to think itself anew. In 1989, Bauman contributed a chapter to an edited book titled *Social Theory of Modern Societies: Anthony Giddens and His Critics*. He concluded with a challenge. After arguing that sociology is an anachronism with deep roots in the nineteenth century, he said that ‘to claim the right to speak with authority sociology would have to update its theory of society’.

His message was clear: sociology won’t have a future if it carries on as if it is still ‘nineteenth-centuryish’. We must be foxes, not hedgehogs – to recall Archilochus’s incisive distinction which was made famous by Isaiah Berlin in modern times. We can illustrate this conception by returning to Bauman’s relationship with Marxism once more. Marxists are hedgehogs who know only one big thing that Marx taught them: the weight of human history is the history of class struggle. But what Marxists tend to forget is that Marx’s thesis was written when modernity was still in what Bauman describes as its formative, ‘heavy’ and ‘solid’ stage. In the contemporary world we need to know and do many things because we inhabit a more ‘light’ and ‘liquid’ software-focused modernity, altogether more underpatterned and underdetermined than its predecessor. This liquid modernity, as Bauman calls it, is rhizomatic rather than rooted, its trains of experience busy with unremitting new arrivals and speedy departures, and unexpected diversions, derailments and cancellations, which have replaced the secure tracks that once sustained modernity in Marx’s time.
Unlike Marx’s followers, Bauman is concerned not with the accumulated weight of history and how this helps us understand the continuing class struggle in the contemporary world but instead with the ‘remoteness and unreachability’ of global capitalism that has within its very structure matrices of power that operate like deep currents in the sea. As we have already seen, Bauman’s sociology is also driven by antinomies, and is especially interested in the moments when the ‘solid’ and the ‘liquid’, the ‘heavy’ and the ‘light’, clash. From this shuttling between ‘solid’ and ‘liquid’ – metaphors as magic wands in and of themselves which illuminate, with an almost miraculous precision, a way of thinking by maximizing contrast – it is possible to weave a larger fabric, a sustained deliberation on some key themes, to be precise, a picture of an always unrestful modernity. Bauman’s sociology is as a result one of dialectical thinking rather than the development of theory.

Bauman also uses single metaphors in a comparable way in order to make them carry their full force. Such a treatment requires formidable descriptive powers, which he possesses in spades. Pursue ‘liquid’ far enough and you will discover that the metaphor has the capacity to disclose hitherto unrealized possibilities. For example, in the case of water, we discover not only that ‘liquidity’ can be provisionally ‘frozen’ to enhance ‘speed’ but also that it holds the potential of ‘threat’ and ‘drowning’. Building on Ralph Waldo Emerson’s remark in his memorable essay ‘Experience’ that ‘we live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them’, Bauman explains how in liquid modernity life accelerates to the point at which speed has become one of our foremost assets: ‘When running among fast runners, to slow down means to be left behind; when running on thin ice, slowing down also means the real threat of being drowned. Speed, therefore, climbs to the top of the list of survival values.’

The range and potential of this ‘liquid’ metaphor means that we also might think of water as ‘replenishment’ and ‘refreshment’. It is in such terms that Bauman’s understanding of the potential of sociology resides. All that his readers have to do is unanchor themselves from their own tacit assumptions and set sail into the open sea that is the Bauman Effect. To borrow an analogy from that other modern poet and Schöpfer John Berger, I use the words set sail into instead of read because Bauman’s opus is like an ocean; you do not attempt to read it, you navigate it because here a new horizon beckons. And all shapes of things rise from below to streak the surface of the water.

As the reader will see in the rest of this book, in Bauman’s understanding of ‘liquidity’ peril and promise, just like control and freedom, are always combined: closure of the sociological imagination never occurs.
Prologue

His liquid metaphor takes his readers along both streams of thought. This is because he is someone who knows many things. He never stops thinking. Having said that, it is in the intensity of feeling as much as the assiduous thought that marks out his work as distinct from majority sociology, which, as we will see in the next section, if it has its own brisk efficiency, is often too held back, too coolly distanced from the ambivalence of the contemporary world. One of the upshots of this is that, rather than steering sociology into new waters, majority sociology has developed an obsession with the empirical world, which leaves it in danger of steering itself up a narrow creek, running it aground and leaving it stranded.

Changing the subject in sociology: on the ambivalence of hermeneutic sociology and sociological hermeneutics

What changes with the Bauman Effect is not just how we think sociologically but also how we think about certain epistemological (what we consider we know and how we know it) and ontological (what we consider to be ‘real’ in the world) issues raised when a sociologist works with the assumption that his Schöpferkraft bears a closer relation to art than to social science.

We must respond by setting this observation in the context of current intellectual debates about where contemporary sociology in general stands on issues of knowledge (i.e. is the sociologist’s job first and foremost to identify and interpret the way empirical reality is experienced?) and imagination (i.e. is it the sociologist’s job to draw us beyond what is visible to us on the surface of things into a deeper comprehension of reality?). As we shall see, the discussion below once again focuses on the issue of ambivalence.

The first thing to say about Bauman with regard to this debate is that he pays short shrift to conventional divisions of labour in sociology, and instead goes where his nose takes him. Bauman’s sense of sociology, as he once told me, is that it is like a sponge, a creature porous in texture and of uncertain outline, whose hollows embody countless visiting ideas which swim and often stay to breed. One of the upshots of this is that sociology will never be an academic discipline sure of itself, capable of making authoritative statements or offering definitive answers. It will always be, for better or worse, tentative in its deliberations. What this also tells us is that thinking sociologically should neither rest content that there is any one academic discipline best placed to make sense of the world nor ever be content with any one way of making sense of it.
The debate Bauman had some twenty-odd years ago in books such as *Intimations of Postmodernity* (1992) about the relative merits of the then new idea of postmodernism for sociology played a key part in shaping how he thinks about his *Schöpferkraft*. As Thomas Samuel Kuhn famously demonstrated in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, a new idea appears to be very close to madness because to be new it must reverse important basic beliefs and assumptions which have been institutionalized and administered by one or another kind of belief system with a vested interest in the old idea. And so it proved to be the case with postmodernism in sociology.

Back in the 1980s and early 1990s postmodernism was all the rage – or so it seemed at the time. Whilst most sociologists ended up rejecting the idea on the basis of its moral relativism, Bauman became fascinated by its ability to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions, especially when he observed it transforming academic fields as diverse as architecture, historiography and philosophy into something radically different by, on the one hand, moving them away from science and more closely to art and, on the other, breaking down assumed barriers between ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ forms of culture.

What his observations of postmodernism also taught him was to recognize the contingency of culture. That is, while there are many ways of being-in-the-world, all humans share the meaning of what it means to be human – in other words, all human beings have the sense of an inevitable, universal relation but with contingency attached to the cultural form it will take. It was this key insight of the convergence of the contingent and the inevitable that alerted Bauman to the ambivalence of human being-in-the-world.

Crucially postmodernism also alerted him to the fact that, if we want to argue convincingly for new ways of understanding the world, we must recognize that we cannot resort to any foundational criteria for justifying that our version is better than anybody else’s. In other words, we can do nothing else in our attempts to understand the world but simply assume that something like ‘reality’ exists and get on with the task of trying to get to grips with it through our own chosen approach or method.

On the face of it, charting reality, the one we all experience, would seem to be a relatively simple task for any sociologist. Let us consider my own preferred method: ethnography. You immerse yourself in the field, participate in the everyday lives of people over some length of time, either openly or covertly in some masquerading role, watching things that happen, listening to what is said, smelling, touching and tasting, taking note of things that are tacit, and in the light of
these observations ask pertinent questions, before you scribble all the
details down in the research diary, and then, after ‘eliminating’ all non-
sociological explanations, set about theorizing what you have found out.

Bauman rails against the notion that the job of sociologists (including
ethnographers) is merely to interpret and describe reality in this way, the
best they can, charting the ‘facts’ from one moment to the next, explain-
ing exactly what individuals did as they did it, thought as they thought
it, which supposedly is solid and self-evident with no gap between the
ethnographer who is interpreting it and the world ‘out there’, and no
need of the imagination to close that gap.

What Bauman thinks sociologists must do instead is find ways to
bridge that gap. This is because he thinks that nothing of what we find
out from the empirical research we conduct matters unless it is gener-
alisable, unless we can learn something from it that has implications
beyond its immediate context. In response to this challenge, he argues
that it is only as hermeneutics that sociology can hope to give shape to
both historical forces and the small contingencies that happen every day
but which without empirical sociological inquiry would go unrecorded,
hardly voiced. From the Greek words hermēneuein and hermēneutikos
meaning respectively ‘to interpret’ and ‘expert in interpretation’, the
term ‘hermeneutics’ is derived from the herald of the gods, Hermes,
whose role it was to make intelligible to humankind that which could
not otherwise be grasped. In Bauman’s understanding, the term is used
to refer to the sociological art of the interpretation. This sociology
works through a double approach which moves between developing
insight into the fates of individuals by interpreting contemporary sub-
cultures (what Bauman calls hermeneutic sociology) and attempts to
explain the wider context of their prospects and struggles (what Bauman
calls sociological hermeneutics).

The most accomplished practitioners of hermeneutic sociology tend to
be those ethnographers, such as Henning Bech in his classic phenomeno-
logical study of male homosexuality When Men Meet, who succeed in
‘reaching the totality through a case study’, by interpreting social figu-
ration and then producing both thorough and profound insights into
human experience – and that is different from documenting the ‘facts’.
But this is only half of it. Bauman’s own sociology focuses its attention
fully on the translation of hermeneutic sociology to sociological herme-
neutics, which ‘demands that the continuous and changing aspects of
life strategies alike be traced back to the social figurations they serve (in
a dialectic process of reciprocal determination) – and forward, to the
patterns of daily life in which they find expression’. In other words,
sociological hermeneutics entails transforming the personal and the
Setting up the encounter

subcultural into something emphatically political. Hermeneutic sociology can tell us what it feels like to be a gay man or part of a gay scene in a liquid modern world; hermeneutic sociology cannot explain the consequences of liquid modernity for gay men. Sociological hermeneutics can. In this regard Bauman doggedly fulfils his vocation to address modernity’s big issues, and we are pulled away from glimpsed ethnographies of individual lives into dense, critical accounts of the larger factors that bear down on them.

The problem is that as someone who practises sociological hermeneutics Bauman is faced with a predicament different from that of the hermeneutic sociologist who practises ethnography. Let us recall Larry Ray’s criticism of his sociology: ‘However useful metaphors may be in stimulating imaginative enquiry they are no substitute for rigorous conceptualization and research into the social.’ To tweak an insight from John Berger once again, ethnographers can either reveal (or hide) the ‘facts’ they have found which support their thesis, take them nearer to the truth. If they have to fight, they can fight with their backs to the evidence they have accumulated from the field of their research. But, in Bauman’s sociology, truth is variable. He deals only with his own version, the particular way of looking that he has selected. Bauman has nothing to put his back against – except his own decisions.

Taking John Keats’s attitude toward his Schöpferkraft, Bauman is a man of ‘negative capability’; that is, someone ‘capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’. His starting point is that the world as you see it before your eyes might ostensibly seem to be a familiar one, but there is something about it that escapes all of us as we look at it. Reality can never be totally visible to us in the way that say a film can, where surface is everything. With reality, there is surface, but there is so much more to it ‘than meets the eye, that the most important part is hidden from view, and that there is a huge and dense tissue of inter-human connections below the visible tip of the iceberg’. Or, in other words, behind that seemingly solid veneer there is flux. What Bauman is interested in is drawing the essence of this flux out the shadows; what his sociology gives us is not ‘reality’ but what always happens in the human world, not only the actions that are played out there but the there itself.

Bauman takes seriously Plato’s idea of the cave as a metaphor of human life. All of us sociologists live in such a cave, seeing only shadows cast on its arches and hollows by the light streaming in from the entrance. The objects outside the cave are ideas, and all the things that we perceive inside are imperfect imaginings of ideas. A corollary of this is that he works with the assumption that there is no way to gain access
to the ‘facts’ independent of some cognitive frame. Another way to explain this would be to say that Bauman recognizes that we all actually live between two worlds, the observed one and the one in our imagination. Unlike most other sociologists, Bauman regards the two as equals and trusts his sociological imagination as much as he trusts his observations of the empirical world. To favour one over the other is inconceivable to him. His sociology is not just a record of things observed but a deeper reading of them with the aid of the imagination. In other words, Bauman’s sociology works differently from hermeneutic sociology. It operates with an impulse to present rather than represent an interpretation of ‘reality’. His publications are always geared to purpose and theme: they are ethical formulations too honest and indignant to be merely representations; they are intended as proofs. This is the ‘real’ in Bauman’s sociology.

From such considerations it ought to be clear by now that in sociology under the auspices of the Bauman Effect the common tokens of knowledge and imagination are in and of themselves no longer acceptable as criteria. His sociology undercuts this dualism. That it is written metaphorically does not make it any less ‘real’ than ethnography; it is full of stories that pop and hiss with real life. But the underlying truth of it lies in the organic necessity of its parts. It deals with the stuff of everyday modern life, for sure, usually enacted in the public arena, and most likely familiar to us from some minor or major variation in our own lives. But we are not reading empirical sociology.

This is sociology whose power derives from the curiosity of social observation and the depths of Bauman’s sociological imagination. Bauman finds in this arbitrary relationship not Truth but truth. He writes his metaphors so that people with common sense will mistake his sociology for ‘reality’ rather than requiring that we have to lend it the evidence of ‘fact’ through some kind of ‘realist’ licence before it can be believed. The Bauman Effect, then, reminds us that we must acknowledge the conditioned character of all thought. It opens up a new prospect, and, like every other sociology, it leaves behind it unfinished business. Nonetheless it makes a new freedom imaginable; and it also throws light upon new possibilities beyond the either/or, the this and that.

Far more difficult is fusing these possibilities with magic and ethos. Bauman presents sociology as having a dual aesthetic and ethical strategy: on the one hand, the linguistic magic he conjures to reveal what is often ‘hidden from view’, on the other, his outlier ability to turn conventional wisdom on its head – revitalizing sociology in the process. All of this indicates the scale of Bauman’s thinking, and its remarkable
integrity. It also demonstrates his use of his aesthetic sense as a particularly rigorous mode of inquiry; it is this that makes Bauman’s sociology radical, original and true.

To think sociologically with Bauman, then, is to move constantly between ethical criticism and aesthetic contemplation, and we have to recognize that what he does is – not to invent, to recall John Berger’s admonition – but to assemble. Human minds are creative. His books are ‘assemblages’. To treat what we assemble through that creativity as either knowledge or imagination is to miss the point. This metaphor coined by Deleuze and Guattari helps our understanding of Bauman’s sociology. What is an assemblage? What is appealing about this metaphor is that it enables us to dissolve the distinction between knowledge and imagination. An assemblage is neither knowledge nor imagination; it is a more humble, hybrid form that has an entirely different status: ‘it is a collective assemblage of enunciation; it is a machinic assemblage of desire’. In other words, an assemblage is the combining of the two planes of subject matter and expression: a heterogeneous, fluid, patchwork quilt of content, if you like, which is in and of itself expressive, but as a meeting place of multiplicity also marks an important threshold in the development of sociology. At this meeting place, to borrow a sentence from Mallarmé, ‘an immaculate grouping of universal relationships come together for some miraculous and glittering occasion’.

Bauman’s assemblages are first and foremost free creations intended to enhance our understanding of the world. What is most fascinating is that in them knowledge and imagination coalesce to reveal – not ‘reality’ – but as John Berger would say the freedom to ‘disclose that which exists’. His is a sociology that requires you to go with the flow, to suspend your own epistemological assumptions, ignore the idea that the ‘real’ is somehow fixed and known to us only by giving ontological priority to empirical experience, and accept the logic (or lack thereof) of his way of thinking; the extent to which the Bauman Effect works for you will depend on your ability to do so.

Trust Bauman and you will experience a quiet, cerebral awakening, as much personal as intellectual. But don’t follow him. He doesn’t want disciples. Bauman thinks it does little to be in a ‘school’ and follow sociological gurus. His view is that we should attempt to be free and independent. As he concludes in the book Liquid Modernity, the job of sociology is to see to it that choices are genuinely free, and that they remain so, increasingly so, for the duration of humanity. Sociology reimagined for the twenty-first-century by Bauman is a sociology calculated to nourish the freedoms of us all.
Summing up Zygmunt Bauman in a phrase or two, as has hopefully been demonstrated throughout this introduction, is impossible; not least because his virtues are many. But, if I had to identify the bedrock of his achievement, it would be that he has extended the boundaries of what is sociologically possible. Robert Nisbet once said that ‘we are living in an age when well-meaning and eloquent teachers of sociology, and of other social sciences as well, all too often insist on what is scientific (and therefore important!) in their discipline is the consequence of problem-defining, problem solving thought’. Throughout all his work, Bauman has rejected such a view by working with the assumption that the power of sociology actually lies in its production. Indeed, the way that Bauman practises his *Schöpferkraft* is through a critical synthesis of the historical process to date and the conscious and unconscious thought processes that go on in his magnificent mind. In this way he has banished the puritanical belief that ‘problem solving’ thought cannot simultaneously be art – imagination, creativity, vision, intuition. He has made sociology more critical by showing that knowledge and imagination, just like identity and difference, are bedfellows rather than opposites.

The various elements of this ambivalence are captured suggestively in the following paraphrasing of Michel Foucault on Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* which, as is well known, is a story about a ‘madman’ and a ‘poet’ whose life is entirely formed by his reading, and who lives in and through imaginary tales about ‘knights errant’, as he looks back at a disappearing feudal world. I will leave it unglossed, other than to say the hope is that it will resonate in the mind of those consulting the readings that follow. If it does, it will be one indication that their own sociological imagination has been seized by the Bauman Effect.

Zygmunt Bauman’s work is the first modern sociology of the twenty first century because in it we see the cruel reason of identities and differences make endless sport of signs and similitudes; because in it language breaks off its old kinship with things and enters into that lonely sovereignty from which it will reappear, in its separated state, only as literature; because it marks the point where resemblance enters an age which is, from the point of view of resemblance, one of madness and imagination …

Bauman’s sociology is in this regard the mark of a new experience of language and things. At the fringes of a knowledge that separates beings, signs, and similitudes, and as though to limit its power, the madman Bauman fulfils the function of homosemanticism: he groups all signs together and leads them with a resemblance that never ceases to proliferate. The poet Bauman fulfils the opposite function: his is the allegorical role; beneath
the language of signs and beneath the interplay of their precisely delineated distinctions, he strains his ears to catch that ‘other language’, the language, without words or discourse, of resemblance. The poet Bauman brings similitude to the signs that speak it, whereas the madman Bauman loads all signs with a resemblance that ultimately erases them. Bauman the madman and Bauman the poet share, then, on the outer edge of sociology and at the point nearest to its essential divisions, that ‘frontier’ situation – a marginal position and a profoundly archaic silhouette – where their words unceasingly renew the power of their strangeness and the strength of their contestation. Between them there has opened up a new field of sociological knowledge in which, because of an essential rupture in the modern world, what has become important is no longer resemblances but identities and differences.48

Notes
14 Bauman, Liquid Modernity.
Prologue


28 Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*.


33 Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*.


38 Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*.


41 Berger, *Selected Essays*, p. 44.


Setting up the encounter