

Book Review Article

Zygmunt Bauman 2012: Liquid Modernity (2nd Edition) Cambridge; Polity, pp. 228+xix (1st Edition 2000) by Preeti Tiwari*.

During the past three decades or so, two highly contested terms have entered not only in academic discourse but also in everyday discourse outside the groves of academe: postmodernism and globalization. Postmodernism arose at a moment when modernity itself was in various ways called into question, and many scholars declared that the project of modernity is over. Meanwhile, globalization accelerated and intensified during this period and was depicted as an effort to account for how spatial definitions of reality are being transformed in the era of fast capitalism. In the 1990s, globalization emerged as one of the most debatable academic issues. One set of scholars of globalization, particularly 'hyperglobalizers' (Held et al., 1999), see it as the beginning of a new epoch and pose a question mark on the conceptual power of the notion of modernity. At this juncture several social scientists clarified their theoretical position and replied to both the postmodernists and hyperglobalizers by following a transformationalist approach for explaining the changes in every sphere of contemporary social life through developing new conceptual frameworks, namely, 'high modernity' (Giddens 1990), network society' (Castells 2000), 'risk society' (Beck, Ulrich 1990) and liquid modernity (Bauman 2000). Among these, Zygmunt Bauman's Liquid Modernity (2000) is probably one of the most important works in which he makes a distinction between solid and liquid modernity by focusing on five concepts that have served to make sense of shared human life, and discuss at a length in five chapters: *Emancipation; Individuality; Time/Space; Work; and Community*, with two forewords: *forward to the first edition (2000)- On being Light and Liquid*; and *Forward to the 2012 edition- Liquid Modernity Revisited* and an essay "Afterthought: On Writings; On Writing Sociology", added as last chapter of this edition.

The first chapter, **Emancipation**, Bauman examines the concept of 'emancipation' which has been at the center of debates on modernity, particularly in the writings of contemporary neo-Marxist and critical thinkers. He begins the discussion with a quotation from Herbert Marcuse

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article “liberation from the affluent society”, (Marcuse, 1989) In which Marcuse emphasizes that “the problem we are facing is the need for liberation from a society which develops to a great extent the material and cultural needs of man- a society which, delivers the goods to an ever larger part of the population. And that implies, we are facing ‘liberation from a society’ where liberation is apparently without a mass basis” (Marcuse 1989: 277). Bauman puts it in simple words, “(very) few people wished to be liberated (from this society), even fewer were willing to act on that wish, and virtually no one was quite sure in what way the ‘liberation from society’ might differ from the state they were already in” (p.16). It suggests that very few people in society are interested in emancipation from the existing form of society, and among those who wish so, very few are ready to take action for emancipation. They are also quite unaware of the changing situation in society, i.e. transformation of society took place in the last few decades.

He then outlines his conception of liberation, noting that “to feel free means to experience no hindrance, obstacle, resistance, or any other impediment to the moves intended or desired” (pp. 16-17).

He further argues that feeling free from constraint means finding balance between one’s wishes (or imagination) and the stubborn indifference of the world to one’s intention. This balance might be achieved in two ways- through either expanding one’s capacity to act or through limiting one’s desires (imagination).

Bauman distinguished between two strategies of emancipation, namely, subjective freedom (perception of the limits of freedom) and objective freedom (one’s actual ability to act). The people may not be objective, but they are free because they either fail to realize they are not free or worry because they dislike the idea of freedom, given the hardship that comes along with freedom, which brings him into the mix blessings of freedom.

The main idea that Bauman advances in this book is that it is a mistake to see modernity as a monolithic period that stretches more or less unchanged from the late 19th century until today. He observes that “The society which enters the twenty-first century is no less ‘modern’ than the society which entered the twentieth; the most one can say is that it is modern in a different way” (p. 28).

Bauman distinguishes between two stages of modernity: The *first stage of modernity*, according to Bauman, is in the “top-heavy or solid” stage (p.29). This is the moment in the history of Western civilization where solid certainties of pre-modern times had disintegrated to such an extent that the only thing to do was to sweep these rotten underpinnings of pre-modern societies out of the way completely. The goal of this first stage of modernity was to erect its own solid certainties in the place of the ones that were going to be swept away by change. If we think about the trajectory of the Soviet approach to modernity, we will see that it fits in Bauman’s argument perfectly. The transformative push of the first few years of the revolution led to an impenetrable fortress of a repressive Communist regime. Bauman points out that the main fear of this first

stage of modernity was that totalitarianism would emerge from its push to create a new set of certainties on the wasteland of the old society that had been destroyed by the advent of modernity. George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949), says Bauman, is a perfect example of what this solid stage of modernity saw as its worst-case scenario. As know all too well today, totalitarian regimes did, in fact, flourish during this first stage of modernity.

Bauman refers to the *second stage of modernity* as "liquid." At this stage, there is no effort to replace a set of old rules, certainties, and identities with a new one. The freedom to switch identities as often as we want, move around, transform ourselves is now seen as an itself and the most prized characteristic of our existence. Bauman's goal in *Liquid Modernity* is to analyze the main concepts that inform this liquid stage of modernity and to point limitations of this freedom.

In the second chapter, **Individuality**, Bauman examines another important feature of modernity-Individualism under eight subheadings: 'Capitalism: Heavy or Light'; 'Have Car, Can Travel'; 'Stop Telling me, show me'; 'Compulsion Turned into Addiction'; 'The Consumer's Body'; 'Shopping as a rite of exorcism'; 'Free to Shop- or so it seems'; and 'Divide We Shop'. Here, he distinguishes between heavy capitalism by giving the example of Fordism and light capitalism (capitalism of today). He argues that in its heavy stage, capital was as much fixed to the ground as were the labour engaged. Nowadays, *capital travels light* - with cabin luggage only, which includes no more than a briefcase, a cellular phone, and a portable computer. Labour, on the other hand, remains as immobilized as it was in the past – but the place which it once anticipated being fixed to once and for all has lost its past solidity; searching in vain for boulders, anchors fall on friable sands. (p.58). While heavy capitalism tended to arrest the mobility of individuals, light capitalism made it easier for individuals to move from one place to another. He further argues that 'present-day light capitalism is not 'value-rational' in the Weberian sense, even if it departs from the ideal type of the instrumental-rational order. Today, a new type of uncertainty prevails: 'not knowing the ends' instead of the traditional uncertainty of 'not knowing the means'. This has great implications for an individual's social actions, leading to infinite possibilities and opportunities in today's world of liquid modernity. The mobility and flexibility of identification which characterize the 'shopping around' type of life are not so much vehicles of emancipation as the instruments of the redistribution of freedoms. 'Since the task shared by all has to be performed by each under sharply different conditions, it divides human situations and prompts cut-throat competition rather than unifying a human condition inclined to generate co-operation and solidarity' (p.90).

In the third Chapter, **Time/Space**, which is most important for modernity, according to Bauman, he discusses issues like 'When Strangers meet Strangers'; 'Emic Places, Phagic Places, Non-Places, Empty Spaces'; 'Don't Talk to Strangers'; 'Modernity as a History of Time'; 'From Heavy to Light Modernity'; 'The Seductive Lightness of Being'; and 'Instant Living'. Bauman here argues that the era of hardware, or heavy modernity – the bulk-obsessed modernity - is now coming to its close. It was the era of territorial conquest. Wealth and power were firmly rooted or

deposited deep inside the land. It was the routinization of time that held the place whole, compact, and subject to homogeneous logic. Routinized time tied labour to the ground while the massiveness of factory buildings, the heaviness of the machinery, and, last but not least, the permanently tied labour 'bonded' the capital. Neither capital nor labour was eager to move. In the era of heavy modernity, which was also the era of instrumental rationality, time was the means that needed to be husbanded and managed prudently so that the returns of value, which were space, could be maximized; in the era of software, of light modernity, the effectiveness of time as a means of value-attainment tends to approach infinity, with the paradoxical effect of levelling up (or rather down) the value of all units in the field of potential objectives. The question mark has moved from the side of the means to that of the ends. In terms of time-space relation, this means that since all parts of the space can be reached in the same time-span (that is, in no-time), no part of the space is privileged, none has 'special value'. Heavy modernity kept capital and labour in an iron cage of Bureaucracy, which none of them could escape. Light modernity let one partner (capital) out of the cage. Solid modernity was an era of mutual engagement. Fluid modernity is the epoch of disengagement, elusiveness, facile escape, and hopeless chase. In liquid modernity, it is those most elusive, those free to move without notice, who rule. This kind of transformation can also be seen in other sets of relations.

In the fourth chapter, **Work**, Bauman explores the transformations in the work situation over time under headings such as 'Progress and Trust in History'; 'The Rise and Fall of Labour'; 'From Marriage to Cohabitation'; 'Excursus: A Brief History of Procrastination'; 'Human Bonds in the fluid World'; and 'Self-perpetuation of non-confidence'. Bauman here discusses various changes that took place in the work sphere in contemporary society, characterized by liquid modernity.

In the fifth chapter, Bauman discusses the notion of **community** in terms of 'Nationalism Mark2'; 'Unity through Similarity and differences'; 'Security as a Price'; 'After the Nation-State'; 'Filling the Void'; and 'Cloakroom Communities'. Here, Bauman discusses his views on political changes, particularly in the context of the nation and nation-state. According to Bauman (2012: 173), 'the nation-state promoting the principle of ethnic unity was the only 'success story' of community in modern times or a sole entity which made the bid to a community status with any degree of conviction and effect'. In the formation of a nation-state, 'the idea of ethnicity (and ethnic homogeneity)' has been given a historical grounding as the legitimate basis of unity and self-assertion. Communitarianism and the nation-state are closely linked, as the philosophy often views the nation as a primary community that shapes individual identity and moral obligations. The nation-state owed its success to the suppression of self-asserting communities; it fought tooth and nail against 'parochialism', local customs or 'dialects', promoting a unified language and historical memory at the expense of communal traditions (Bauman 2012: 173).

The more determined the state-initiated and state-supervised *Kulturkämpfe*¹, the fuller the nation-state's success in the production of 'natural community' (Bauman 2012: 173). Moreover,

nation-states would not think of relying just on the power of indoctrination; their effort had a powerful support in the legal enforcement of official language, school curricula, and the unified system of law. Thus, nation-states were not just political entities but had control over the territory and population through different institutions of society, directly as well as indirectly (schools, etc.).

Thus, *in modern times, "the nation was 'another face' of the state and the principal weapon in its bid for sovereignty over the territory and its population. A good deal of the nation's credibility and attraction as the warrant of safety and durability has been derived from its intimate association with the state, and – through the state – with the actions aimed at laying the certainty and security citizens on a durable and trustworthy, since collectively insured, foundation"* (Bauman 2012: 185). However, today, under the new conditions, particularly in the age of globalization, *"little can be gained by the nation from its close links with the state"*, according to Bauman (2012: 185). The reason for this is that today, "the state may not expect much from the mobilizing potential of the nation, which it needs less and less" (Bauman 2012: 185). In the modern period, the people were forced to join military services by the state and were held together by desperately strengthening patriotic mania. Today, this has been replaced by "the elitist and coldly professional high-tech units, while the wealth of the country is measured not so much by the quality, quantity, and morale of its labour force as by the country's attractiveness to coolly mercenary forces of global capital" (Bauman 2012: 185). In his view, the centuries-long romance of the nation with the state is drawing to an end. This is not so much a divorce-like situation, but the consecrated marital togetherness grounded in unconditional loyalty is now being replaced by a just 'living together' state.

Throughout the stage of the modern era, nomadic habits remained out of favour. Citizenship went hand in hand with settlement, and the absence of a fixed "fixed address" and 'statelessness' meant exclusion from the law-abiding and law-protected community and often brought about the culprits legal discrimination, if not active prosecution.

While this still applies to the homeless and shifty underclass, which is subject to the old techniques of panoptical control (techniques largely abandoned as the prime vehicle of integrating and disciplining the bulk of the population). The era of unconditional superiority of sedentarism over nomadism and domination of the settled over the mobile is, on the whole, grinding fast to a halt. We can witness the revenge of nomadism over the principle of territoriality and settlement. In the fluid stage of modernity, the settled majority is ruled by the nomadic and extraterritorial elite.

Keeping the roads free for nomadic traffic and phasing out the remaining checkpoints has now become the purpose of politics, and so of wars. In the era of liquid modernity, what is at the stake in the new type of war: "not the conquest of a new territory, but crushing the walls which stop the flow of new, fluid global powers; beating out of the enemy's head, the desire to set up his own rules, and wall-off, inaccessible space to the operations of the other, non-military arms of power. War today, one may say, looks increasingly like a "promotion of global free trade by other means.

Thus, we can say that Bauman has explained with his notions of solid and liquid modernity the changes in the nature and the forms of the nation-states in the era of globalization.

The work under review is now a classical work which explains the trajectory of modernity in contemporary western society.

Notes

¹conflict between civil government and religious authorities, especially over control of education and church appointments; a legal attack by German Emperor Bismarck in 1870 on the Catholic Church, leading to secularization of education, civil marriage law, and social divisions.

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