

Interview with **ZYGMUNT BAUMAN**

Leeds, February 2009

ygmunt Bauman was born in Pozna, Poland in 1925 and has resided in England since 1971. Bauman studied sociology and philosophy in Warsaw, after having served during World War II in the Polish First Army. He was awarded the Military Cross of Value in 1945. Bauman became a lecturer at the University of Warsaw in 1954 until he was forced to resign and give up his Polish citizenship during the anti-Semitic campaigns of 1968 in Poland. He first went to Israel to teach at Tel Aviv University, before accepting a chair in sociology at the University of Leeds, where he is now Emeritus Professor. A committed communist at the beginning of his career, Bauman became with time strongly critical of the totalitarian regimes built behind the Iron Curtain. Bauman is best known for his analyses of the links between modernity and the Holocaust, the contemporary world of consumerism, and the so called "liquid modernity"; a term that he coined to describe the "postmodern" phase of modernity. Bauman's books have achieved a considerable degree of popularity and have been translated into many languages. Bauman received the ICCD team at his house in Leeds, where he convened to talk and reflect upon the Jewish situation in Europe today (although having warned us ahead of time that "in most cases I am a bird rather than an ornithologist, and birds don't make reliable ornithologists...")



Zygmunt Bauman: I would like to make a general comment before we start. There was a Russian poet, probably you heard about him, named Vladimir Mayakovsky who had a saying: "never paint epic canvases during the revolution, because the revolutionaries will tear them apart." And we are living at the moment in revolutionary times. Argentineans probably are more aware of it than anybody else, because they tasted it several years earlier - but now the whole world is in trouble. Everybody is in trouble, including the up-and-coming economic miracles of China, Brazil or India. It is more or less clear that one idea which should emerge from the crash, whatever happens with the attempts to save the banks from bankruptcy and people from being evicted from their homes, is that this kind of life is unsustainable. We cannot go on like this... something must be done.

Now, all of your questions-and probably, it is my fault, because you took them from my writings—were built into a world which is now finished. What will happen next year? (If I survive until 2010, and you come here next year for another interview), I am not a prophet; I cannot predict what will happen. All the skills which I have acquired during my sociological life allow me to diagnose and explain what is going on, but not to predict what will happen. There are at least two tendencies today, both triggered by the latest crisis... and equally strong. One is the overwhelming desire to continue, to return to normal- meaning to continue the style of life pursuing every new chance, even if paid for with rising volume of risks for that privilege. The other tendency is exactly the contrary: "back to your tents, O Israel!" Go home, huddle together! Help each other; return to old-style community, which was a fate, the destiny, not a matter a choice. "Once there, always there", would give you less freedom than you recently enjoyed, but more security. Security not in the sense of safety from terrorists, burglars, or pickpockets... but security in the sense of knowing where you are, who you are, on what kind of future you can count, what will happen, whether you will preserve your position in society or whether you will be degraded and humiliated-this sort of security. This sort of security for many, many people—a rising number of people—looks at the moment more attractive than more freedom.

After many years of thinking, reading and writing and looking, I came to believe that there are two basic, essential values which are indispensable for humane, decent, dignified life: one is freedom, and the other is security. Freedom without security portends chaos, perpetual anxiety and fear. Security without freedom means slavery. So, each on its own is awful; only together they make for a good life. But, a big "but": being both necessary, complementing each other, they are nevertheless virtually incompatible. The more security we have, the less freedom there is; more freedom means less security. You can hardly have enough of both at the same time. As the English say: "You cannot have a cake and eat it too. Either you eat it, or you have it." The so called "progress," "time marching on," is not a straight line, but a pendulum. If you look back on the history of the 20th century, the 19th century or even to the ancien régime of the 18th century, you will see that first people rebelled against the order of things because of lack of liberty, and demanded more freedom. And when they got more freedom, they got frightened, and they desired more security for a change. After a while, though, they started complaining, although more secure, they also become more dependent and rule-bound... In the last thirty years we have gained enormous amount of freedom (everywhere, except perhaps in places like Burma or North Korea), but we lost quite a large amount of security. Because of all sorts of reasons, because of globalization which stripped the nation state of a large part of its sovereignty away, because of dismantling of the so-called welfare state. As a result, people feel simultaneously much freer and much more insecure.

My suspicion-I'm not predicting, I repeat, I'm not a prophet-is that the latest credit crunch, this economic catastrophe, will be the drop that overfills the glass, the straw that breaks the camel's back. The pendulum may move again towards more security, away from freedom. You can see already vivid signs of it when there are security alarms in the airports and flights are cancelled. I was watching the TV broadcasts interviewing people stranded at airports for days on end, losing their holidays, their important business meetings and the long-awaited ability to see their families... In short, suffering. No one complained, though! They kept repeating: we are so grateful for the care taken of our safety, for feeling. They were ready to surrender a good deal of their human dignity, individuality, freedom of choice.

JDC-ICCD: It seems that demands towards freedom are always led by collectives, whereas demands towards security are led by individuals.

ZB: Are you sure? I think it is rather the other way around. Security is the slogan for people who feel unable to function by their own means. 'I am insecure' means: I can't cope on my own. The odds are overwhelming. I can't resist them on my own. I need us to join forces, stand shoulder to shoulder, march hand in hand. Security was the demand which set in motion labour movements in history; trade unions, friendly societies, consumer cooperatives were all about compensating for the impotence of individual resistance. Freedom is the slogan which speaks to the ears of people who feel strong enough to manage on their own using their own resources, who can do without dependency because they can do without others caring for them. Freedom is the slogan of the strong, who feel self confident, self sufficient to do it alone...

MY SUSPICION IS THAT THIS ECONOMIC CATASTROPHE MAY MOVE THE PENDULUM AGAIN TOWARDS MORE SECURITY, AWAY FROM FREEDOM

JDC-ICCD: Peter Berger talks about the heretical imperative—that in modern times we are forced to choose, which provides a sense of ontological self-dissolution and makes us lose our faith. Is there a way back from that freedom of choice? In this sense not necessarily more security in the airport but something deep inside us, something that is constitutive of ourselves, which we are no longer given by the tribe.

ZB: We are always confronted with choice. And we always have a modicum of security, so there is hardly any time that there is one without the other completely. That is true, but what is happening now is that the number of people who are not strong enough or do not feel strong enough to decide to live without the security provided by the community or the state, is going up.

Middle class people, the bourgeoisie, they are also feeling frightened at the moment. Some fear losing their fortunes; some go bankrupt; some are thinking about suicide. They don't know if they will retain the beautiful house that they bought, or what will happen to the five family cars. The problem of insufficient security was, until quite recently, a matter of a minority; now it is becoming very quickly a majority matter. That is a major change. That's why I said at the very beginning that we are here discussing a situation which is about to pass. But in what direction will it change? I have no inkling.

We already have plenty of fundamentalism and fundamental sects like for instance Rabbi Schneerson and Chabad Lubavitch. They feel more secure because they are in the warm, caring/sharing community. This is the difference between community (Gemeinschaft) and what

Ferdinand Tönnies called Gesellschaft: a kind of setting in which you have no rights to do anything unless you pay for it, and no right to get anything unless you prove that you are 'credit worthy'. In a Gemeinschaft, however, you have a place at the table guaranteed whatever happens. Community is like a big family. There were no "unemployed" in the impoverished Polish countryside before the Second World War. Not a single unemployed. Every child that was born in the peasant family had his room at the table and his job in the field, stable or pigsty... If there was not enough food, everybody got less. If food was plentiful, everybody ate better. In such a setting, we may say, the problem of security couldn't even arise... One was born with life-long rights; the only thing that one could not do was to change them. A setting good on the side of security, though bad on the side of freedom...

JDC-ICCD: In Jewish life, for the past thirty years the Chabad Lubavitch group has grown the fastest, and the more secular Jewish world, has weakened. What we find today when we work with communities, is that people don't want to surrender their liberty to join a sect or a group that says: "this is the order." People who still feel the push to fight for freedom are searching for new ways of feeling affiliated to a tribe—in place of community.

ZB: It is so true that in liquid modernity freedom was, so to speak, let off the leash, and for a quite a number of years the freedom of choice was "in principle" unlimited. One result was the weakening of inter-human bonds, particularly inherited bonds, and the counterfactual assumption that individuals must and can fend for themselves. "Community" came to be seen as a chatgroup: you switch on as long as your pleasure lasts, then push another button and switch off. Very easy to go in and out, join and leave.

To return to the Jewish problem: throughout early modernity there were very strong pressures on Jews to assimilate. Assimilating meant cutting your ties with the community of origin. In a lecture I gave in London recently¹, I quote Hannah Arendt remembering a Jew, refugee from Germany, saying to the applause of other people like him, "We were good Germans; we will now become good Frenchmen." But "becoming" a good Frenchman (or German, or Spaniard) was precisely what solid modernity made impossible. You couldn't assimilate and retain your identity. You had to abandon it, and wash it off. Of course even if you did surrender it, you would not be forgiven because at its extreme, at its essence

¹ Zygmunt Bauman, "Jews and other Europeans, Old and new", lecture given at the Institute for Jewish Policy Research, December 2007. Available at http://www.jpr.org.uk/downloads/Bauman%20policy%20debate_WEB.pdf

really, the demand of assimilation was a demand to stop having been somebody else-not just being someone else. Lev (Léon) Shestov, a Russian Jew who later became a French Jew and even converted to Catholicism, defined God not by His power to create the laws of universe, but His ability to break them at will - the capacity for miracles. God could cancel the past! For instance, God could decide retrospectively, that Socrates was never poisoned... Assimilation demanded a miracle: that you stop having been somebody else before... But only God can do it.

Another issue: with globalization and with a lot of power evaporating from the nation-states, the late-19th century established hierarchies of importance, or 'pecking orders' of cultures, presenting assimilation as an advancement or promotion, dissolved. There is less pressure on abandoning native communities: what for? There is nothing to be gained by it. On one hand, there are plenty tempting opportunities of experimenting with identitiesbeing one kind of person today and a different the next day. On the other hand, there is little pressure to include the ethnic identity or religious identity into this mechanism, because now everybody is in a kind of Diaspora today. Jews and Gypsies were well-nigh the only Diasporas in 19th century Europe. Now go to London, it is a collection of Diasporas. The question of identity has separated from the issue of 'assimilation', having lost much of its drama and become, so to speak, a secular problem. Jews are no longer pressed and obliged to fight, hide or deny their Jewishness. What for? No one actually requires today to abandon the idiosyncrasy of some other culture or ethnic tradition. The great achievement of this last period is that we have been slowly, sometimes reluctantly, yet steadily, learning the art of living with differences. In "solid modernity" difference was tolerated as a temporary irritant only, expected to disappear tomorrow, when "those aliens" will become like us. "Living with strangers" was therefore not something to last and did not call for developing appropriate arts and skills. Now, however, it looks like that diasporic context of our living will not go away-it will be there forever, so learning how to live with strangers day in, day out without abandoning my own strangeness is high on the agenda. You are a stranger, I am a stranger, we all remain strangers, and nevertheless we can like or even love each other...

JDC-ICCD: Doesn't that create a certain cultural and eventually moral relativism?

ZB: Why are people so concerned with relativism? If you look back in history, millions of people were killed because of someone's dogmatic views, but I do not remember anybody being killed due to the tolerance of difference, to relativism; ethically relativism does not seem to be such an awful thing, really. The Chief Rabbi of Britain was almost excommunicated by Jewish Orthodox traditionalists because he said that the truth is out there in heaven; here on earth there are truths. He had to correct it in the second printing. I think the first rendering was right. As long as we say: "Alright, it is truth for me, and I believe in it and I am ready to fight for it, but I accept that others have different beliefs-and so let me have a closer look at what they believe"—we can gain from our intercourse thanks to our difference, not despite our difference. The value of other people is that they have something unique to offer. Jacques Derrida beautifully said: "With every death, a world is disappearing." A whole world is taken to the grave with the dead person; each one of us is unique and unrepeatable. If that's relativism, then I am a relativist.

THE PROBLEM OF INSUFFICIENT SECURITY WAS, UNTIL QUITE RECENTLY, A MATTER OF A MINORITY; NOW IT IS BECOMING VERY QUICKLY A MAJORITY **MATTER**

JDC-ICCD: You mentioned how Jewish characteristics play out in modernity, and how Jews were somehow well fitted to faith. Another characteristic of the Jews is their relationship to the text, to the Bible. It is a paradoxical relation because on the one hand, the text commands. The text is out there, above us, but on the other hand because any individual can interpret the text, the text is actually below us, because anybody can make it say whatever fits him/her. Isn't this paradoxical approach to the text somehow linked with the condition of liquid modernity?

ZB: It is as if the whole text was created in order to produce more and more Mishnah, comments, interpretation. In a different context, Knud Logstrup a great Danish philosopher and Protestant theologian of 20th century, insisted that Christ could not create a codified 'Christian ethics'; such a thing would be a contradiction in terms. If Christ would have left Christian ethics codified on the table, then he wouldn't produce moral beings choosing between good and evil, but conformists fulfilling orders. I think the same can be said about the Bible. The Bible unites its interpreters as a shared focus of attention, but it does not demand consensus. On the contrary, it invites and prods us to make responsible choices, to take responsibility for the choices that we have made...



It was always like that, and our holy scripture grows over the centuries, gets thicker and thicker, with more texts around, which need/have to be looked into, referred to, considered. The Bible provides unity without imposing uniformity, without prohibiting change; it is a standing invitation to thinking and to take responsibilities.

JEWS ARE NO LONGER PRESSED AND OBLIGED TO FIGHT, HIDE OR DENY THEIR JEWISHNESS. WHAT FOR?

JDC-ICCD: Can that experience with the text help Judaism today?

ZB: Well, in Celan's words a Jew is "a man with a little book under the shoulder." We are the keepers of tradition. [Theodor] Adorno was very Jewish when he said: "The task is to keep the lost opportunities of the past alive." Let's do it. I think that the essential instruction of the Bible is very much topical. The sole problem is that with every change of historical setting, you need to readjust the interpretation of the message. Every interpretation is but an introduction to another interpretation, and that is how Talmud pages are printed... What comes first, where does it all end? Which direction does it move in? The itinerary is not linear. Adorno, again, was also very Jewish when he said that our bad luck is that our writing is linear, while we think circularly. He complained the absence of circular scripture...

JDC-ICCD: In November 2008, we sponsored a meeting of Jewish young leaders of Europe at our Oxford based Centre for Community Development. They were around 20 people. At one moment they were divided into three groups and they made scenarios for the future. And the three groups independently arrived at the same scenario. They see in the next decade the loss of tolerance and people creating enclaves—Jews, Protestants, et cetera—with very few bridges. The question was: is the state so weak today that it is unable to create communication between the enclaves? Does someone have to come from the outside to create communication? That is the part of modernity that is disappearing: the freedom of being different.

ZB: Why can't we exclude this scenario? That might happen; it is a quite realistic scenario. It is a natural human response to a shaking world. It happened after every catastrophe; we keep silent about it, but it is what has happened after Katrina, in New Orleans, when some people were dying when some others were just packing

their belongings and running away to save their bodies and possessions. That might happen. Some dozens of years ago, there was a debate conducted between people insisting that "this loaf of bread must be redistributed," and the others who said "instead of worrying about redistributing it, cutting differently, let's make it bigger." A third possibility was not imagined: that the loaf may be shrinking. But it is now a genuine possibility. It is even acting upon already, like in the case of the American invasion of Afghanistan and of Iraq in order to secure the supply of petrol for the Americans addicted to gasguzzling cars.

JDC-ICCD: Perhaps the concept of forever enlarging the "loaf of bread," which was a capitalist idea, has to be readapted. How will the global economy work when you have to produce less because people do not consume as much as before?

ZB: The big question is whether we can exit from this situation and return to the previous one... Remember the first message of Bush to the nation when the twin towers crashed: "Go back to normal life... go shopping!" Now people are worried not about the prospects of buying new things, but about how to pay for the things they bought yesterday, a year ago or years before. It is, as Americans like to say, "a wholly different kind of ball-game"...

You have raised a fundamental issue. The greatest economic minds of the 19th century, all of them without exception, considered economic growth as a temporary necessity. When all human needs are satisfied, then we will have a stable economy, reproducing every year the same things. We will stop straining ourselves worrying about development or growth. How naïve they were! One more reason to be reluctant about predicting the future. No doubt they were wiser than me, but even they made such a mistake! Why shouldn't I, a sillier man, err yet more abominably?

Ingeniously, capitalism discovered that the economy may be moved not by satisfying existing needs, but by creating new ones. Life purpose may be shifted from achieving a 'steady state' (an equilibrium between desires and plausibilities) to the excitement of running after novelties. In other words, be guided by new desires, not by extant needs. There was a famous controversy between Mr. Henry Ford and Mr. Alfred P. Sloane from General Motors. Ford calculated when designing his Ford T that there were so many Americans who had to go from here to there, and once all of them had black Ford T models to do so, production would be limited to the need

to replace destroyed and aged specimens. But Sloane, the genuine pioneer of liquid modernity and a prophet of the society of consumers, was of a different opinion: "Why should people buy cars in order to go from here to there? Why should they not buy cars in order to manifest their superiority to their next door neighbor, or to seduce a woman, or to prove to themselves their masculinity, and myriads of other reasons?" Our consumer-oriented economy wouldn't survive without economic growth. The whole mechanism depends on invention and insinuation of novelties, arousing new wants, seduction and temptation. This is the problem we face—much more than recapitalizing the banks. The question is: Is that kind of economy sustainable?

THE BIBLE UNITES ITS INTERPRETERS AS A SHARED FOCUS OF ATTENTION, BUT IT DOES NOT DEMAND CONSENSUS

JDC-ICCD: Jews held the monopoly of the minority in Europe for two thousand years. Today, Jews are not the only minority; there are many minorities from the Diasporas that have migrated to Europe. What classification should Jews have, taking this new situation into account?

ZB: There is no instant solution to this problem. It takes time to find a solution. I will give you an example from a different field: marriage. Once upon a time, when I was young, people saw a wedding as an event that determined the rest of their life. For a rising number of people today, it is quite normal to "try and err", marry, divorce, marry again... It is easy now to break the vows. It is even easier to part your ways if vows haven't been taken. Most young people today prefer just to move in together and stay together as long, but no longer, as satisfaction lasts. What is the impact of these two patterns of partnership on human behavior? When people think, rightly or wrongly, that marriage is forever, they are stimulated to seek and find a resolution, a *modus vivendi*, whenever they guarrel. When opting out from partnership is so easy, every minor disagreement is perceived as a major catastrophe and irreparable disaster. "I can't suffer you any longer; I need more space for myself; I move away".

Quite similar things could be said on living in a Diaspora among diasporas, as strangers among strangers. As long as being a stranger and surrounded by strangers was seen as a temporary irritant, a smallest departure from the binding rules of conduct by a member of a minority, was taken for a major crime justifying deportation. Once, however, we realize that the strangers are here forever and won't go away—(Georg Simmel, arguably the greatest sociologist of all times, defined the stranger as "someone who comes today and doesn't leave tomorrow")—then, like husband and wife in the old-style marriage, we would try to find a way of living together peacefully and with mutual benefit. The sooner we understand that in a globalized world the diasporic nature of cohabitation is never likely to end, that it will always be with us, I believe such *modus vivendi* will be found.

Cornelius Castoriadis, the great French social philosopher of Greek origin, was asked once by an exasperated interviewer: "What do you want, Mr. Castoriadis-to change humanity?" He answered: "No, God forbid, I only want humanity to change itself, as it has done so many times in the past." I would be inclined to answer the same way. I believe that in this one case there is no alternative: we are already and will remain all in the same boat. The planet is full and we will be rubbing shoulders forever. There is nowhere else to go. Once upon a time there were the Pampas in Argentina, that people could treat as "empty lands" and where they could run away from their problems from problem-ridden homes. That eventuality is no longer available. Being condemned by fate to perpetual togetherness, we better make that shared fate into our shared, consciously and gladly embraced, destiny.

JDC-ICCD: We are three generations away from the Holocaust—a time period when no one dared to attack Jews or Israel because it was branded as anti-Semitic. Now it seems this period has passed, and people may say loudly to Jews: "You are terrible, you do terrible things," in part because we are part of the same community, in the same countries. Is this the beginning of a new type of discrimination, putting the moral imperative of the Jews in higher standards than they put on others?

ZB: I expect awful things to happen, with Lieberman probably becoming the deputy Prime Minister in Israel. The descent of Israel from the morally towering position of a 'light for the nations' to the lowest of the low and one of the last relics of bygone shameful times of merciless imperialism, conquest, exploitation is on the cards. I worry about the Israeli moral standard, Israeli humanity. I worry about younger generations who were born to view their country trampling on humanity of everyone that comes in its way, as the 'normal state of affairs" – because they knew no other. We know how easy it is to shed, under such circumstances, the thin and frail veneer of civilization, not to mention the moral standards of which the Jews

were presumed to be the world's teachers. Have you read [Philip] Zimbardo's recent book "The Lucifer Effect"? He did a research of behavioral patterns of ordinary, decent American lads and girls, once they found themselves in a place like Abu Ghraib. Very decent, very average, very normal young Americans. They turned into beasts.

JDC-ICCD: The Japanese and Germans did all this, and after the war, many soldiers had a decent life for the next half a century.

ZB: More than anything else I learned from Hannah Arendt's "Eichmann in Jerusalem," I was devastated by the fact that the highest caliber psychiatrists and psychologists engaged by the Israeli court to investigate and test Eichmann's psyche came unanimously to the opinion that Eichmann was in all 'ordinary', common respects a 'normal human being.' Under 'normal circumstances' he wouldn't harm a person; he was in his 'nonprofessional' life an exemplary neighbor, exemplary father, exemplary husband. I live in this little *cul de sac*, all residents greet each other and smile to each other. But if one of my neighbors were Eichmann, how would I recognize his potential for monstrosity?

If only evil things are done by evil people... Life would be then safe, morally elevated, cozy—we know how to spot evil people and what to do with them to pay for their crimes. Alas, you don't need monsters for monstrous deeds to be accomplished. The tragedy is what—given the 'right circumstances,'—normal decent folks, like you and me, will do. This is what makes me worry whenever looking on the road that Israel entered and shows no intention of leaving.

JDC-ICCD: You start your book "Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi" by telling a story where you are asked to choose whether to have the Polish or English national anthems played at an academic ceremony. You relate resolving this dilemma by finally choosing the European anthem. But you do not mention anything about the role your Jewish identity played—if it played any role...

ZB: It was not a choice between nationalities; it was a choice between states. Selection of anthems depended on the country of citizenship. I used to be earlier a citizen of Poland, but my citizenship was later withdrawn. I found refuge in England, but I was only adopted by that country. Here and there, I am a "bloody foreigner"... (laughs).

JDC-ICCD: But in terms of Judaism, how do you feel? How do you define yourself?

ZB: The Hatikvah would have been completely out of place, since I am not an Israeli citizen. It was Janina's idea (which I accepted immediately) that there is the European anthem (Alle Menschen werden Brüder) that renders the choice between Poland and England redundant and opposition between identities non-existent. Agnes Heller once said: "I am Hungarian, I am American, I am Jewish, I am a philosopher, I am a woman-much too many identities for one person." I could say something similar. And about my Jewishness? The great Polish-Jewish poet Julian Tuwim said: "The proof of my Polishness is that the Polish anti-Semitism pains me more than the anti-Semitism of any other country." Following his example, I would say that the proof of my Jewishness is that iniquities done by Israel pain me much more than iniquities perpetrated by any other country.

BEING CONDEMNED BY FATE TO PERPETUAL TOGETHERNESS, WE BETTER MAKE THAT SHARED FATE INTO OUR SHARED, CONSCIOUSLY AND GLADLY EMBRACED, DESTINY.

JDC-ICCD: Some say the Jews were the only "real" Yugoslavs, and the Jews the only "real" Czechoslovaks, because they were the only ones who embraced this collective idea. The question is: was it naïve or noble?

ZB: In Montreal, where I taught in 1970, I met many people. The only ones who said to me they were Canadians, were Jews. All the rest were Scotts, Irish, English, French, Swedes... Another example: I have met in Amsterdam, a Jewish intellectual who left Belgrade after the break of Yugoslavia; asked about his nationality, he introduced himself like this: "I am a former Yugoslavian." (laughs)



The JDC International Centre for Community Development (JDC-ICCD) was founded in 2005. It aims to identify, understand and analyze ongoing changes and transformations taking place in Europe that impact particularly Jewish Communities on the continent.

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