

Knowledge and Society

Zygmund Bauman's Metaphorical Social-Philosophy

I.

Research Objectives

The aim of this dissertation is the analysis of Zygmunt Bauman's works on social-theory of modernity and post-modernity. I want to point out that in Bauman's papers there are three aspects of the modernity-post-modernity problem. (1. The societal function of the intellectuals, 2. the ethical questions, 3. the identity-problems) My analysis wants to emphasize the metaphorical language of Bauman's social notions, what I consider as a method.

Bauman himself stress that he can understand the social theory just as a permanent dialog with the human experience. And this experience is always undivided. The social theory which is compatible with that experience has to catch even the pictures and the poetical side in the social world, the calculation along with the story. My assumption is that the metaphorical language of Bauman's work enables him to carry out his program: to be an intellectual who is first of all interpreter. The metaphors used by Bauman enable him to stimulate our thinking, to carry on thinking on societal problems – just as Bauman do.

II.

Research Methodology

To analyse the realization of Bauman's programme and to point out the strength of his metaphorical language I've chosen Bauman's most significant works. The four chosen books are not marks of creative eras in Bauman's life but significant theories on modernity and post-modernity. In these books Bauman creates new (or re-create old) metaphors.

The four analysed theories:

a.

The first approach (*Bauman, Zygmunt: Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Postmodernity and Intellectuals. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987)*) puts emphasis on the role (or function) of intellectuals. In this context the modernity is characterized with the *gardener*, while the post-modernity is characterized with the *interpreter* metaphor.

b.

The concept of the *Life in Fragments* (Blackwell,1995) is very different: here not just the role of the intellectuals but the ethical questions of the human living are in the focus point of Bauman's analysis.

In this concept modernity is the fight against chaos, and society is the most important and most effective weapon in this fight. The fight is inevitable because modernity has a vision – says Bauman: a vision of an orderly universe.

c.

The third modernity concept (Bauman, Zygmunt: *Postmodernity and its Discontents* (New York University Press, 1997) is about the individual life. Our frame of reference is the notion that modernity is the world of order. From the point of view of the individual the modernity is about the identity. The identity is the project of the individual, a dream which is accessible – with hard work and devotion.

d.

The fourth modernity conception (Bauman, Zygmunt: *Lyquid Modernity* (Polity Press, 2000) is very manifold. Simultaneously means social order-making, individual identity-creating and the feature of the world of everyday life. Modernity here all this but first of all the mode of the individual life. This is determined by the institutions

which are condensed from the everyday routine of the social life. But determined also by the most direct environment of the human individual's everyday life – the *space* and *time* its life.

Bauman's vision on modernity and post-modernity takes shape through some well-selected metaphors. This could be unnerving for the traditional criticism but because of this language becomes possible in our era (which is averse from essentialism and universalism) that we could continue the discourse on our common world.

Thanks to this metaphorical language (which is characterized by the strong and strange poetics of words and the appeal of pictures) Bauman's analysis could take shape in other fashion – not in the frames of the old western metaphysical (scientific-philosophical) vocabulary.

The metaphors have vital significance in Bauman's work – we can see he preferably creates new metaphors than confront new argumentations with old ones. Bauman's metaphorical thinking is deriving from his deep and irreducible suspiciousness against the project of modernity, which on the road to the dream of the ordered and rationally supported world at the end arrived to the Holocaust.

The grand narratives are not dead – but became irrevocable dirty and tired. Lost their appeal, but they are here. And that's why hard to Bauman to take place in the discourse of the social problems in the old fashioned ways.

Why could be interesting the metaphorical language of Bauman's works?

To solve this problem we have to review two basic questions:

1. what is a metaphor?
2. why should we create metaphors?

And after the investigation of the possible reasons of the existence of metaphors we can answer the question: why Bauman creates metaphors during his social-theoretical analyses? And we can consider the equity of Bauman's method – could the metaphors be legitimate tools in the socio-theoretical analysis?

What are the advantages of the metaphorical language as a method (say: Bauman's analysis)?

First of all the metaphor as investigation tool discovers the deep layers of the social relations, which remain unnoticed in the usual everyday life. Through metaphors became possible understanding the life of the individual, moreover this kind of interpretation is always unique and fresh. Creating (and understanding) a metaphor means using moral elements, shadows which play crucial role in human behaviour and refer aspects beyond rationality.

Analysing the interpretations which are related the social life-world we can know the connection between subjects and its life-world. Metaphors enable us to accomplish this analysis.

So Bauman's metaphorical analysis – the novelty of his method – not just enables him to avoid the classification (in one or other ideological party) but the tension of his language create tension in the reader of his works and encourage the self-understanding process. So does the playfulness of the multi-layer and manifold language. This language anticipates that Bauman can break the rules. And he has to break the rules because he has just message and no obligations, and his program is to encourage thinking and not indoctrination.

And now we have to answer the question: using a language like this make the philosophy (social-theory) finally became poetry?

We can say: no. Because a metaphor of a philosopher always will be a philosopher's metaphor – says Paul Ricoeur.

The philosopher's metaphors are like the poet's metaphors so far as they create divergence to the world of the regular language. The philosopher can pronounce the strange – rejuvenating some old metaphors. (This is the main point of the philosophical investigation.)

And he can create new ones – as Bauman does.

III.

New Results and Theses

Since the last decades of the twentieth century we have seen some theories analyse the end of the modernity. They were different in one aspect: in the description of the world-after-modernity.

The term post-modernity became popular, when it appeared in J.F Lyotard works.¹ He analyses the human thinking methods which are grounded on the enlightenment.

Lyotard questions the metanarrative of the science – the theory that the science could be the vehicle of the emancipation process. As Lyotard says we are no more able to lean on theories like this. Namely science – what was the cornerstone of the legitimation of knowledge – losing its unity. And all new sub-discourse forms have created its own authority and what came into existence nothing different than fuzzy networks of language games. We are all now prisoners of our own language game. So knowledge losing its traditional meaning. That is why Zygmunt Bauman can consider the function of the intellectuals as a problem.

Jacques Derrida goes farther when he states that even authority itself vanished. Derrida² – just like Lyotard – feels strong uncertainty against the western civilization. This takes shape in his works as the question of text. Our texts are free in the cultural space. They can come together and split, the author can not oblige the one and only meaning – the interpretation is free. Deconstruction – the method or strategy which is the outcome of Derrida's Heidegger interpretation – lays on the negation of the definite meaning. The world of deconstruction (the world of Derrida) becomes the world of contingency.

Even the social theory is not an exception: and eventually Zygmunt Bauman realizes that the social-theorists have to abandon the dreams of the formation of society.

¹ *La condition postmoderne*, 1979

² Lásd: Derrida, J.: *A disszemináció* (Jelenkor,1998), illetve Derrida, J.: *Grammatológia* (Magyar Műhely, 1991)

Jean Baudrillard³ provocative writings are especially accurate analyses of the post-modern condition. Today we live in the scenario of hiperreality – says Baudrillard. Vanishes the difference between the thing and its representation, and what remain is the simulacrum. In the simulacrum the sign is losing the connection with the marked things. To investigate the difference between real and not-real, moral and immoral, true and false become meaningless. Furthermore society loses its significance: vanishes in the gap between instrumentality and culture. What remains is the individual identity.

Max Weber modernization-theory considers acceptable the process in which the life becomes the area of the rational approach. Here is the goal of the rational calculation is the rational society. It means legitimate fighting against the traditional culture, and science and knowledge became the very core of the society. In this frame design and control denote modernity. The bureaucracy is the embodiment of the rationalizing process. But this tendency finally could be inhuman.

Rational societal spacing is a critical point of the socio-historical works of Michael Foucault.⁴ The tools of discipline are the tools of the rationalizing process. The rational life form becomes the universal form of life. And the universal life is uniform life – without (irrational) individual significance.

That's why the central question of the post-modern thinking is: how define the dangers hiding in the modernization as rationalization. The answer of the postmodern thinking is disappointment. Understanding that the process of modernization generates secondary products: damages. And no effort is enough now to explain the situation, as seen Lyotard or Baudrillard.

But there are some thinkers who think modernity is not a transcended period. Jürgen Habermas⁵ calls modernity unfinished project. Modernity has its weak points

³ Lásd például: Baudrillard, J.: Az utolsó előtti pillanat (Magvető,2000), Baudrillard, J.: A Rossz transzparenciája : esszé a szélsőséges jelenségekről (Balassi - BAE Tartóshullám -Intermedia,1997), Baudrillard, J.: Simulacra and simulation (University of Michigan Press, 1994)

⁴ Foucault, M.: Fegyelmezés és büntetés (Gondolat,1990)

⁵ Habermas, J.: A modernség: befejezetlen program (in.: Válogatott tanulmányok / Atlantisz, 1994.), Habermas, Jürgen: A társadalmi nyilvánosság szerkezetváltozása (Osiris, 1999.), Habermas, J.: Legitimációs problémák a modern államban (in.: Válogatott tanulmányok / Atlantisz, 1994.), Habermas, J.: Válságtendenciák a kései kapitalizmusban (in.: Válogatott tanulmányok / Atlantisz, 1994.)

but it is less dangerous than to alternate the modernizing aspects. The tribal emotions are so dangerous ones that we need modernity to protect ourselves. A communicative theory can help to handle the problems and side-effects of the modernity.

The point of Zygmunt Bauman diagnosis is that the crisis in the culture, politics (community, moral, and ethics) and individual identity are symptoms. Actually at the end of the twentieth century we are witnesses of the birth of a new kind of society. If post-modernity means anything at all, it is the arrival the consumer society – suggests Bauman. This transformation means nothing else, than consumption gets in the cognitive and moral focus of the society. The modern focus points (as the discipline, the control, and design) lost their significance. Seduction becomes the main tool of the societal spacing progress.

Bauman's program tends to interpret the process of this spacing: the changing in the meaning of space and time, knowledge and culture, politics and identity.

1. *Post-modernity as change in intellectual self-understanding (gamekeeper, gardener, interpreter)*

Bauman's notions on modernity are expose the process where the intellectual elite wanted to spread the uniform knowledge to every member of the society and hence terminate the disturbing colourfulness of the autonomous life-worlds. The intellectual wanted to create ordered world, like a *gardener* wanted to take care society. Doing so, the intellectual offer the foundation of the universal reason. But when the universal become suspicious, the trend is changing: the local, regional, particular would be value. Post-modernity in this context means plurality of cultures and life-worlds. Since the knowledge has meaning only in the context of particular life-worlds (in the frame of given tradition or culture) there is no independent science or knowledge would be able to choose among the parallel life worlds. Bauman argues that in the plural postmodern world just one function remains for intellectuals – that is the interpretation: to promote the inter-cultural discourse.

2. *Post-modernity as the problem of Others – Postmodernity and community (U-topia, globalizing war, neo-tribe, cloakroom community, carnival community)*

The premodern world used myth to legitimate authority. Myths systematize and derivate from some original act the existing world, and the societal world within. When the natural everyday activities become part of administrative actions, the myth is no more required to operating society. Moreover the intellectuals (in the name of the enlightened reason) mount an offensive against mythical thinking. But after this transformation – in the modernity – the political institutions need a new form of legitimation: this was a cultural crusade, as Bauman says. Instead of the unreflected tradition argument (social knowledge) and rational worldview serve as tool – for example philosophical systems or advanced religions. (See Lyotard - grand narratives) Grand narratives similar as myths as far as their aim is legitimate the social and political institutions and routine. But grand narratives aimed the future: they are projects. But as Bauman says – today we live in a society which can not believe in projects. That is why a postmodern society needs new form of legitimation – less expensive and less apparent but more efficient form. In the consumer society – where human beings need goods to solve problems from the biological self-preservation to the identity building – the primary tool of legitimation is consumption: the dependence on consumer market (more precisely on the goods provided by the consumer market).

3. *Post-modernity as individual way of life, (Strange, Pilgrim, Nomad, Tourist, Vagabond)*

Postmodernity – in Bauman's notions – transforms the identity building efforts into problem. In the early period of the modernity the system of the identity-patterns had collapsed. And as the tradition had been loosened its strength, also collapsed the network of the social relationships. The myth was frame hard enough to guarantee the strength of the identity patterns. But when myth becomes questionable (thanks to the effort of the intellectuals and the grand narratives) the identity building becomes problem. The grand narratives serve as firm ground for this issue. The philosophical or religious systems were orientation points which instruct the individual

identity builder (what to do and what don't). And when finally the grand narratives have loosened their appeal, the ground or orientation point vanished also. So what to do today? The identity building is still a problem. In the consumer world we can observe new identity building strategies which are close connection to the logic of the consumer market. Individuals can build their own identities according to communities which show the characteristics of the market: they are flexible and they are organized around the transient attention and self-devotion. The quasi-infinite communal (cultural) pluralism offer possibilities for those who can take it, who are compatible with the market logic. At the same time have to be globally and locally able to observe the processes and to grab the possibilities. The postmodern person has to become the receiver of the momentary messages. New role – or new function – in the frame of a new world.