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## **BAUMAN'S COMPASS: TOWARDS A SOCIOLOGY OF HOPE\***

by Mark Davis

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## Bauman's Compass: Towards a Sociology of Hope\*

by Mark Davis

**Z**ygmunt Bauman is one of the most prominent global thinkers of our times, frequently described as one of Europe's most influential sociologists. His work spans five decades and addresses such timeless aspects of the human condition as freedom, consumerism, responsibility, morality, identity, community, uncertainty, and love.

In his most recent work, Bauman has employed the metaphor of 'liquidity' to capture the dramatic social changes taking place in our everyday lives. In this way, he seeks to convey the increasing absence of solid structures that once provided the foundations for human societies. This new 'liquid modern' world of ours, like all liquids, cannot stand still and keep its shape for long. Everything seems to change – the fashions we follow, the events that catch our attention, the things we dream of and the things we fear. Not only are both powerful politicians and financiers deemed to be far beyond our reach, but there is also a fleeting and fluid quality to the immediate social settings in which we act out our identity-politics and seek new forms of human togetherness. For Bauman, these dramatic social changes call for a radical rethinking of the concepts that we use to narrate contemporary human experience. In this 'liquid modern' period of his work, Bauman has offered one of the most significant interpretations of human societies in the twenty-first century.

Alongside all of the accolades that come his way, however, there is a question that seems to follow Bauman as surely as if it were his own shadow: 'why are you so

pessimistic?'. Bauman himself has tended to vary his response to this question. At times, there are quite enough apologists for global capitalism that his more sombre reminders of its enduring faults are little more than a welcome balance to the discussion. More recently, however, when invited to reflect upon the future role and direction of a political Left, Bauman has been somewhat less prepared to accept that the label 'pessimist' adequately captures his position:

"If an optimist is someone who believes that we live in the best of all possible worlds, and the pessimist someone who suspects that the optimist may be right, the left places itself in the third camp: that of hope" (Bauman 2007).

Always open about his position as a deep-thinking and committed socialist, Bauman locates himself firmly within this 'third camp', that of hope. This is something that is often overlooked by those who are perhaps a little too quick to dismiss Bauman's account of 'liquid modern' society as too dark to offer much sought after enlightenment. Indeed, as we learn from Nicholas Fearn (2006), during the early 1990s the evolving New Labour party had flirted with Bauman's ideas, but believed his mood at that time was 'too downbeat at a time when things could only get better'. As we now know, they opted instead for Anthony Giddens as the sociological architect of the infamous 'third way', a project that Giddens himself has recently had cause to reassess (Giddens 2010).

In the short article that follows, I propose that Zygmunt Bauman's sociology has much to offer those who are currently seeking a new direction and a new sense of hope on the Left. I believe that many of the most compelling issues that we now face can only be understood through a sociological lens. Indeed, the relative lack of a genuine sociological literacy amongst many key decision-makers is running the risk of becoming a major impediment to effective policy making. Those who overlook Bauman's work, believing it to be

too pessimistic for progressive thinking about policy – and, to be clear, there are undoubtedly moments of very sharp critique throughout his work – are still too hasty to conclude that there is little to be gained from a thorough engagement with his work. Not only does his sociological framework of the 'liquid modern' provide a new conceptual language by which to reinvigorate the sociological imagination, his work is also driven by a firm commitment to a set of core principles that are informed by the value of 'hope'.

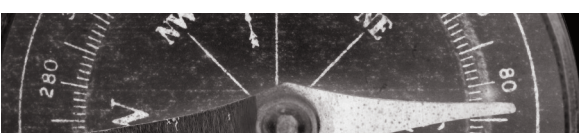
My central claim here is that by offering both a constantly striking critique of those social forces that have shaped our 'liquid modern' world, Bauman's writings provide us with an essential compass by which to find a new direction in our attempts to navigate the new century. Bauman's compass, constantly pulled between those moments of optimism and pessimism that are found throughout his work, always manages to find hope as its final destination.

### Beyond the Current Interregnum

'The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born' (Gramsci 1971).

The term interregnum is typically used to mark that period of acute uncertainty felt within a society during the constitutional 'gap' that is created by the transition from one sovereign ruler to the next. One of the most thought-provoking statements on the current state of human societies is offered by Keith Tester (2009). In a recent article that draws directly upon the above quotation from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci, Tester suggests that the various crises that dominate social life in the twenty-first century can best be captured by precisely this idea that we are living in a period of interregnum.

There would seem to be plenty of evidence to support Tester's insightful claim. Firstly, there are the various challenges to established models of representative democracy, most recently



demonstrated by the call from all sides for a 'new politics'. There are also the various propositions of different models of 'deliberative' democracy that are usually favoured at the European level. Secondly, there is the (perhaps not so) sudden uncertainty surrounding those neoliberal principles that have underpinned the free market system of global capitalism at least since the 1980s, and which are now thrown into such sharp relief by the global recession. Amidst the calls for a new 'age of austerity' – such as that being vividly acted out by the new century's own version of Greek tragedy – some are starting to think through the possibilities of a life 'after markets'. At least, they are prompted to try to invest markets with a greater sense of social responsibility than was apparent during the so-called 'happy globalization' period of the 1990s. As a result, co-operative models and the ideas of mutualism are enjoying something akin to a revival. Finally, there is the on-going challenge of seeking adaptive solutions to the threat of climate change. Taken together, these crises would seem to indicate that the twenty-first century is beginning with a dramatic stage of transition away from the established social, economic, political, and environmental certainties of the recent past.

Bauman himself, drawing directly upon Tester's article, re-imagines the concept of interregnum in such a way that it conveys much more than the routine process of transferring hereditary power between sovereign rulers. For Bauman (2010a), the concept is sociologically useful in helping to capture those seminal moments when an entire social order starts to fragment and to lose its authority, but unnervingly at a time when there is no new social order currently ready to take its place. In his terms, Bauman suggests that the very fabric of the once 'solid modern' social order is now melting away into a new 'liquid modern' era of uncertainty. Moreover, it would seem that there is currently no new 'sovereign ruler' (social order) made to the measure of the shared global challenges that we now face. If this is so, perhaps it is worth reflecting

upon precisely which 'old ruler' it is that has just passed.

If we are to follow the provocative diagnosis offered by the philosopher Slavoj Žižek, we find that the recently deceased 'old ruler' is none other than liberalism itself. This is perhaps an even more curious claim than Žižek had intended, given the recent 'liberal coalition' that has emerged in the aftermath of the UK General Election. In his challenging study, however, Žižek (2009) proposes that the first decade of the twenty-first century has seen both the political death of liberalism (represented by the events at the World Trade Centre in 2001) and the economic death of liberalism (represented by the Great Global Recession of 2008). These so-called 'two deaths' of liberalism have fostered a culture of acute uncertainty, prompting doubts about the legitimacy – and thus longevity – of current political and economic structures.

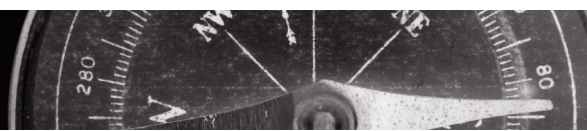
Few readers already aware of Bauman's account of 'liquid modern' society would doubt that we live in uncertain times. As the first decade of the twenty-first century draws to a close, individuals appear to be increasingly unsure of how best to go about the business of their everyday lives. At least a part of this difficulty would seem to be that throughout the 1990s, men and women were encouraged and so became accustomed to managing uncertainty as individual consumers. Whether it was over our job-security and the state of our personal finances; over our identities and the shape and strength of our personal relationships; our concerns over the future prospects of ourselves and those of our children; over perceptions of fear and crime in our communities; over our faith in politics and in the integrity of our political leaders and representatives; all of these uncertainties were managed primarily as individual consumers under the banner of 'shopping around'.

Set free – in hindsight, perhaps 'cut adrift' is more accurate – from those 'solid modern' structures of collective security that were once promised and guaranteed

by a 'social state', we increasingly hope (and now expect) to find solutions to our problems within those cathedrals of consumption that dominate our high-streets. Having largely ceased to act collectively as citizens who share common troubles, which were once brought to the fore in a public sphere of civil society that resided in that important space between market and state, the capacity to manage the acute uncertainties of the new 'liquid modern' world is now measured in terms of the freedom to choose as a consumer. The more choice as a consumer (i.e. the more resources one has, both time and money, as the essential ingredients for realising that choice in practice) the more able to negotiate (i.e. to shop around for the solutions to) the daily troubles and frustrations that are a part of our daily lives. The result is that consumer choice has become the all powerful meta-value of the 'liquid modern' world.

Given the crises we now face, however, this once apparently innocent practise of 'shopping around' to find a greater sense of certainty and well-being finds itself being fundamentally undermined in a confusing and rather contradictory storm of public indignation. Until very recently such a dominant and legitimate life-pattern to follow, or to aspire to follow, the consuming life has started to be targeted for blame as answers are sought to larger social and natural problems.

As Žižek (2009) highlights, leading public figures from all spheres of life have cited the root cause of our shared global problems as being the excessive greed and selfishness of individual consumers, who were seemingly incapable of exercising the necessary restraint and abstinence in the face of those miscellaneous bright delights of the global consumer dreamworlds. By placing the blame squarely upon the already heavily burdened shoulders of individual consumers, Žižek is at pains to stress, the existing global capitalist system is conveniently absolved of all responsibility, especially when judged by the subsequent response to the crisis (as, we might add, is



the system that protects the unseen actions of those 'hidden hands' of the global finance markets, whose speculative endeavours most assuredly played their part in the current predicament). As if targeting the blame at individual consumers in this way was not provocation enough, the global 'solution' to recapitalize the world's banking system, and the speed with which it was enacted, provided justification for still further worldwide exasperation. As Žižek (2009: 80) states:

"Saving endangered species, saving the planet from global warming, saving AIDS patients and those dying for lack of funds for expensive treatments, saving the starving children ... all this can wait a little bit. The call to 'save the banks!', by contrast, is an unconditional imperative which must be met with immediate action. The panic was so absolute that a transnational and non-partisan unity was immediately established, all grudges between world leaders being momentarily forgotten in order to avert the catastrophe".

Žižek's remarks are all the more striking when considered in relation to the events at the Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December 2009. In spite of the public statements before the conference took place, it managed to deliver little more than a weak outline of a global agreement that was reached amidst a revival of precisely those global grudges, particularly between the West and China, conveniently forgotten only months before in relation to the banks. Explanations for the failures at Copenhagen tended to focus upon the lack of time available due to the various laborious and obstructive bureaucratic procedures that had to be followed. Compared with the speed and decisiveness with which the global banking sector was saved from catastrophe, however, it is perhaps easy to see why both outcomes generated feelings of resentment around the world.

According to Bauman's (2010) recent analysis, the recapitalization of the global

banking system amounted to nothing less than the truly remarkable creation of a 'welfare state for the rich'. Assembled in an instant by immediately employing the full might of global states in order to protect the vested interests of an elite few, the legitimate daily demands of the many were once again simply brushed aside and left for another day. Furthermore, whilst the regular welfare state for the poor continues to be underfunded, left to fall into disrepair; or deliberately dismantled, no such fate awaited the banks, who promptly rewarded this worldwide display of benevolence by refusing to suspend its usual 'bonus culture'. As Bauman (2010: 22) explains

"The moment it was halted at the edge of a precipice by a lavish injection of 'taxpayers' money', TSB Lloyds bank started lobbying the Treasury to divert part of the rescue package to shareholders' dividends; notwithstanding the official indignation of state spokespersons, it proceeded undisturbed to pay bonuses to those whose intemperate greed had brought disaster on the banks and their clients".

Confronted with the full glare of the injustices and inequalities of the current crises, one might be forgiven for thinking that a pessimistic analysis of human social life at the start of the twenty-first century is entirely justified. If Žižek is right, however, and we have witnessed the 'two deaths' of liberalism, then perhaps it is also the case that the current interregnum presents as much of a cause for hope as it does for despair. Amidst the fallout from the combination of crises across the social, economic and political spheres, not to mention ever-growing ecological concerns, there is also an opportunity afforded by the sudden frailty of the neoliberal hegemony to rethink global societies in the enduring drive for greater equality, stability and sustainability around the world.

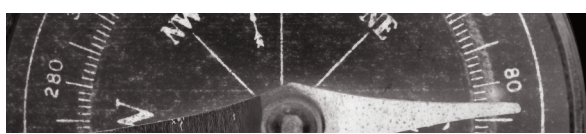
It is within this context that Bauman's sociology can be highly instructive. In spite

of the apparent pessimism that emerges in his account of 'liquid modern' society, Bauman has much to offer those looking for a new direction. His writings on socialism and utopia, which continue to inform his sociology, provide the basis for what I have chosen to call 'Bauman's compass'. This is understood as a particular way of orienting ourselves towards the present, rather than towards some distant and longed-for future, which allows us to ensure that we are better able to navigate the complexities and uncertainties of the current interregnum and to move hopefully beyond it.

### Socialism for a Sceptical Age

"Like the phoenix, socialism is reborn from every pile of ashes left day in, day out, by the burned-out human dreams and charred hopes. It will keep on being resurrected as long as the dreams are burnt and the hopes charred, as long as human life remains short of the dignity it deserves and the nobility it would be able, given a chance, to muster". (Bauman 2001: 155).

The concept of 'utopia' is held to be a fundamental and important aspect of Bauman's sociology (Beilharz 2000). His particular understanding of utopia, however, is informed by an ardent belief that, unlike the claims of astrologers, sensible sociologists know perfectly well that they cannot predict the future. Bauman's self-styled 'active utopia' is one that is defined by its immediacy, focused firmly upon the here and now, rather than gazing longingly at some distant horizon. This 'active utopia' is future-oriented only in the very precise sense that it serves to remind each of us that the future could be otherwise, that it could be better. After all, Bauman is only too aware of the dangers inherent in any and all attempts to set a blueprint for the 'good society'. The lessons of the 'solid modern' era revealed only too clearly the hidden totalitarian potential within such designs. Therefore, the frustration that is felt amongst those who want Bauman to lay out just such a blueprint for future action are thus missing



a vital point of his work. As Michael Hviid Jacobsen (2008: 227) has correctly observed

"Zygmunt Bauman's work is notorious for offering no nostrum, no wonder-cure and no social elixir against the problems confronting contemporary society. His apparent critical pessimism must rather be seen as a wake-up call to the world. He offers no neutral perspective on the world but a critical, counter-cultural, value-oriented and normative utopian vantage point".

Bauman thus remains focused upon disturbing the ease of our acquiescence to the existing injustices and inequalities of the present, in order to safeguard against the trap of ceasing to question the world around us. It is the Panglossian conceit that we already reside in the 'best of all possible worlds' that must be forever resisted (Davis 2008). In this spirit, Bauman (1999: 8) has remarked: 'I happen to believe that questions are hardly ever wrong; it is the answers that might be so. I also believe, though, that refraining from questioning is the worst answer of all'. By virtue of the possibility to imagine a better world, precisely because the present one is always not-yet-sufficient in meeting every human need, 'active utopias' provide a framework by which we come to realize that the world can be other than it presently is.

As a consequence of his refusal to entertain 'morally-neutral' analyses of society, preferring to embrace the world-changing potential of the sociological imagination, Bauman's notion of the 'active utopia' is one that offers a constantly critical – and so, apparently pessimistic – commentary on the present. Bauman's sociology confronts the awesome task of breaking through our common-sensical understandings of the social world in order to remind us that an alternative way of living together is within our capabilities. Revealing again his affinity with Gramsci, Bauman believes that human beings can themselves re-make the human world that they themselves have made. Bauman

is perfectly aware that, in the daily lives of men and women today, social processes often appear to be beyond their reach and thus unalterable. As such, his sociology is seen to offer up the idea of an 'active utopia' as a way of relativizing the present social world in order to point towards other potential futures. To develop these points a little further, it is useful to outline the four key characteristics that represent Bauman's (1976) understanding of the 'active utopia' of socialism.

Firstly, utopias serve to relativise the present by pointing both to historical contingencies and to future possibilities. This gives socialism its transformative dimension. Secondly, utopias are aspects of culture in which possible extensions of the present in relation to the future can be explored, driven by a sense of hope that human activity can make the world different, better. This gives socialism its creative dimension. Thirdly, and following on from this, utopias pluralize by generating competing visions of both present problems and future solutions.

This gives rise to competing images of the 'good society' and, crucially, engages individuals and social groups in questioning the direction of society through an on-going and active critique of the present reality. This gives socialism its critical dimension. Finally, as a result, utopias exercise an activating presence on the course of historical events, resulting in a tangible influence upon the actual direction of human societies. This gives socialism its practical dimension. Taken together, these four characteristics demonstrate Bauman's belief that the task of socialism is to offer an enduring 'living critique' of the present social world. This is evident from the following quotation, which implies quite clearly that at the precise moment socialism declares itself to have been accomplished, on Bauman's understanding, it ceases to be socialism. As he (1976: 36) explains

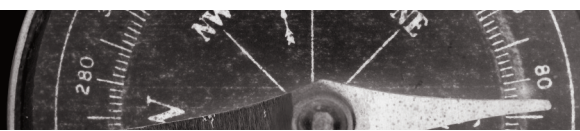
"Socialism shares with all other utopias the unpleasant quality of retaining its fertility only in so far as it resides in the realm of the possible. The moment it is proclaimed as accomplished, as empirical reality, it loses its creative power; far from inflaming human imagination, it puts on the agenda in turn an acute demand for a new horizon, distant enough to transcend and relativise its own limitations".

It is for this reason that Bauman has claimed that a truly moral society is one that never considers itself quite yet moral enough. As such, I propose that it is helpful to see Bauman's form of socialism as representing a 'standpoint' rather than an 'endpoint'. For Bauman, socialism is not a particular set of concrete social structures that follow a pre-determined blueprint that is to be instigated – as history has sadly so often demonstrated – at any and all costs. Socialism as an 'active utopia' is much more akin to a 'standpoint', adopting a constantly critical perspective towards the present social reality in order to confront its comfortable conceits and to reveal the darker side of any tendency towards triumphalism. Bauman's work offers us the important reminder that, for all the undeniable evils and injustices of 'actually existing socialism', one is right also to be far from satisfied with the current state of 'actually existing capitalism'.

### Towards a Sociology of Hope

To grasp fully the importance of Bauman's compass for helping to find a new direction beyond the crises of the current interregnum, I would like to close by considering his more recent statements on the role that socialism can play in meeting the challenges of the new century. For Bauman (2007), there are two core and non-negotiable principles that inform his particular understanding of socialism. Firstly, he suggests that it is 'the duty of the community to insure its individual members against individual misfortune'.

Secondly, that 'just as the carrying capacity of a bridge is measured by the strength of its weakest support, so the quality of a



society should be measured by the quality of life if its weakest members'.

These principles ought to provide the foundation for a self-assertive socialist standpoint from which to assess critically the hegemony of global capitalism, which Bauman charges with its 'twin sins' of wastefulness and immorality, evident in various forms of social and environmental injustice. Furthermore, these principles stand firmly against the restless neoliberal urge to privatise, and thus further to individualise, human fate. Bauman prefers instead to seek collective solutions to commonly shared predicaments. His two core principles are informed by an acute sense of collective justice, seeking out a humane and just society for all human individuals, constantly spurred into action by the knowledge that the task of making the world more hospitable to human dignity remains unfinished. The 'social state' – Bauman always preferring this term to the 'welfare state', as it 'shifts the emphasis from material gains to the principle of their provision' (Bauman 2007) – is one such arrangement of human togetherness that resists the drive to privatise human well-being. These principles imply that much more can be achieved collectively than individually in the pursuit of common solutions to shared social problems in the uncertain times of the new 'liquid modern' age.

In spite of the temptation to regard the current crises as a sound basis for pessimistic pronouncements, I believe it is also possible to regard the current interregnum as a vital moment of opportunity requiring a new sense of hope. In seeking to respond to the 'two deaths' of liberalism by striving to revitalise the progressive principles of socialism – principles made to the measure of the global challenges that face all humankind – it is necessary to pursue just such collective insurance policies issued in the name of a global community. Principled policies that people can trust and rely upon in cases of personal defeat or individual blows of fate are what ought to provide direction in the new century, in

order to offer a new hope beyond the current interregnum. This is certainly the direction in which Bauman's compass continues to point.

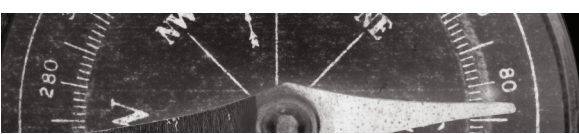
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whose goal is to debate  
and develop the ideas for a more equal  
and democratic world, then  
campaign and organise to help ensure  
they become reality.

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