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From Solid Modern Utopia to Liquid Modern Anti-Utopia?

- Tracing the Utopian Strand in the Sociology of Zygmunt Bauman

Michael Hviid Jacobsen

“A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the country at which humanity is always landing. And when humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of Utopias”

(Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, 27)

Where Do we Go From Here, Nowhere?

Utopia literally means ‘nowhere’. Most often, however, utopian thought and practice have pointed to a ‘somewhere’, a tangible and definable expression of the ‘nowhere’ and have often been presented as a positive mirror image (a *eutopia*) or a deliberately distorted and negative picture of contemporary reality (a *dystopia* or *anti-utopia*), the ‘here and now’, but today these previously flourishing ‘somewheres’ everywhere appear to be gradually dismantled, dissolving, or disillusioned. Thus, as Bruce Mazlish recently and poignantly pointed out, “utopian thinking, except in the form of messianic or fundamentalist aspirations, appears either to take other shapes or be in the tepid condition or non-existent” (43). His description of the vanishing or transformation of utopias is correct in as far as it pertains to the recent development in and destiny of social or political utopias because within literary or filmic genres such as science fiction or virtual reality, utopian ideas are indeed still very much made available by different agencies and individuals.

Therefore, the demise of utopia is primarily associated with the spheres of either politics or science, and particularly social science, which have become disenchanting in the process of ‘de-utopianisation’ and have lost the visions and utopias which for centuries guided the founders, pioneers and practitioners of these domains and pointed in the direction of ‘the common good’, the ‘just society’, etc. At the same time especially the social sciences may very well have lost their own *raison d’être* and the justification of its own practice in the process

The demise of utopia is, however, perhaps premature. Not everybody accepts this tragic disappearance of utopias and the limitations of mind, fantasy, ingenuity and creativity that underpins and is promoted by it. Polish sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman, whose books have sold better than most cookery or sexual guidance books in many parts of the European continent and for years have topped sales lists of academic literature especially in Europe, is one of those few and far between key social thinkers who refuse to allow utopian aspirations to wither away without pointing to the appalling effects this would have on thought as well as on social reality. Thus, Bauman states in one of his recent books:¹

The Utopias of yore stand condemned in the new global elite’s *Weltanschauung* and life philosophy. Their two most crucial attributes—territoriality and finality—disqualify past Utopias and bar in advance all future attempts to re-enter the line of thinking they once followed. ... ‘Utopia’—in its original meaning of a *place* that does not exist—has become, within the logic of the globalized world, a contradiction in terms. The ‘nowhere’ (the ‘forever nowhere’, the ‘thus-far nowhere’ and the ‘nowhere-as-yet’ alike) is no longer a place. The ‘U’ of ‘Utopia’ bereaved by the *topos*, is left homeless and floating, no longer hoping to strike roots, to ‘re-embed’. ... The utopian model of a ‘better future’ is out of the question. (*Liquid Modernity*, 236-39)

Bauman’s diagnosis, according to which thinking and imagination—due to transformation from a modern to a markedly postmodern or liquid modern world—has taken a U-turn from utopia being

firmly embedded in a *topos* to belonging to a spaceless and visionless desert, is indeed a sinister and sombre perspective. It is on the surface a pessimistic perspective pinpointing the problems posed by a globalised and individualised social world that has altogether forgotten to imagine alternative ways to organise itself and to think differently than what currently appears real and tangible.ⁱⁱ This tendency for passivity, indifference and defeatism that Bauman locates among politicians as well as ordinary people has for decades permeated the sociological discourse within which the tradition of ‘realism’ has found or usurped a new stronghold.

Realism is, without doubt, the worst enemy of utopianism. At the same time, any science dealing with realms of reality, in some form or the other, will have to accept realism unless facing accusations of metaphysical or idealist tendencies. Bauman is, however, not such a realist. Already early in his authorship in *Towards a Critical Sociology* (1976) he criticised what he regarded as the ‘science of unfreedom’ which especially realist understandings of social science promoted. These positions, such as Durkheimian and Parsonian sociology—hence his neologism ‘Durksonianism’—according to him had a tendency to naturalise the world, allow common sense to prevail and anaesthetise any kind of creativity, critical thinking and human ingenuity regarding the creation of a better or at least alternative world. Bauman’s own sociology has for almost half a century attempted to reappropriate this sense of alternatives on behalf of people and social thinkers alike and allow them to be expressed without fearing or facing ridicule and ostracism. In a vein similar to the utopian ideas expressed by German philosopher Ernst Bloch in *The Spirit of Utopia* (2000), Bauman, although his Marxist allegiances are more subdued, also proposes a sociology that can inform people about the possibilities and alternatives that are still open to them, the horizons not yet discovered and the uncharted territories (Jacobsen, “Ikke endnu”, 73-4). His utopianism, as this article will seek to demonstrate, is not overtly expressed but runs like an undercurrent throughout

his many books, all written within the field of sociology but with much more wide-ranging potentials than rigid or clear-cut disciplinary boundaries can capture.

Due to the aforementioned stress on realism, sociology, by purpose or by default, has gradually alienated itself from utopianism and what is generally regarded as unscientific speculations. In this respect, sociology has mirrored the changes in social reality very well indeed. The derogatory evaluation is often heard in contemporary society that someone's opinions or beliefs are 'purely utopian', hereby designating them as speculative or utterly unrealisable and unrealistic. This has been the case for quite some time (Hacker, 135). Utopian thought, instead of marking the epitome of abstract and elevated thinking as it did for many centuries, has now apparently turned into an embarrassment in the eyes of many people who are only looking for immediate or instant obsolescence as well as maximum impact, as Georg Steiner in his pithy aphorism in *Exterritorial* (1975) believed to be the sign of the times which he captured by the term "casino culture". Especially sociology and the other social sciences are in this respect notorious for their denigration of utopian thinking and their degradation of utopian thinkers. This tendency may well be regarded as a relic from the previous decade dominated by exponents of realism within prevailing traditions such as positivism and scientific Marxism. Neither had any positive sentiments left for utopianism, which for most parts of the twentieth century was devalued within the social sciences.ⁱⁱⁱ In this sense, Bauman offers sociology in particular and the social sciences in general a unique opportunity for rediscovering utopianism as a fertile ground for theorising as well as a way of re-forging the ancient link between theory and action, the *vita contemplativa* with the *vita activa*. Below I examine the presence and shifts in utopian sympathies throughout Bauman's more than thirty books since the mid-twentieth century.

The Long Road from Marxist Utopia to Liquid Modern Anti-Utopia

Bauman's sociological career started out as an insider critic of the communist utopia in Eastern Europe but prior to this he was, according to his wife's personal memoirs, actually a devoted and loyal member of the Communist Party (J. Bauman, 45). A change occurred in the mid-1950s as a result of personal persecution due to his Jewish background and due to accusations of subservient and counter-revolutionary attitudes again in the late 1960s. Purges on behalf of the Party led to his life-long exile in Leeds, England—a base from which he has written on matters of sociology, philosophy, politics, and morality. One of his first overt statements of utopianism appeared in a book published shortly after his arrival in England, *Socialism: The Active Utopia*, in which he made it clear that he supported utopianism as a 'relativisation' of the reality of the present through which one is capable of "exposing the partiality of current reality, by scanning the field of the possible in which the real occupies merely a tiny plot [that] pave[s] the way for a critical activity which alone can transform the present predicament of man" (13). Already here it is obvious that utopianism is for Bauman equivalent to change, transformation, possibility, transcendence, and critical activity and not stasis, order, rigidity, and structure. Understood in this vein, his utopianism shares some similarities with Victor W. Turner's description in *The Ritual Process* (1969) of the open-ended *communitas*—opposed to the *societas* demanding structure and order—as sources of togetherness bringing forth human spontaneity, self-constitution, experimentation, and transformation. In short, Bauman seeks to promote an understanding of what he terms an "active utopia", and for several years he placed his hopes for such an active form of human utopian striving under the auspices of socialism.

As Bauman indicated in the quotation above regarding the loss of utopian ideas and of physical *topos* in contemporary society, he is anxious to point out that our utopian aspirations have come under attack in recent years in the capitalist and consumerist West. However, he also became bitterly aware that the enforced communism and state socialism of his youth did not offer a

satisfying utopia either. Thus, Bauman's utopian strand, in which utopianism is constituted by creative human activity, has been part and parcel of his writings from the very early years as an 'organic' and 'legislating' intellectual in state socialist Poland to his later years as a 'free-floating' intellectual and 'interpreter' in the West (Morawski, 35), but his utopianism has nevertheless changed radically throughout this period. Therefore, one could wonder whether his variant of utopianism did not originally stem from a desire to escape exactly the enforced conformity of state socialism. Moreover, the reason why it persisted even after his successful escape from these regimes in the late 1960s could be interpreted as a consequence of disillusion from encountering the reality of postmodernity in the West, holding so much promise but unable to deliver. One could claim that his utopianism has persisted *because* the postmodern age turned out to be a pandemonium instead of the promised paradise. Whether this is the case or not is difficult to determine, but the fact remains that Bauman has not given up the hope that reality may be different from what it used to be and how it currently is.

Socialism, however, has been the breeding-ground for much utopian thinking throughout the last couple of centuries (cf. Ulam, Claeys). Utopianism runs like a leitmotif through most socialist writings and is even found implicitly in those so-called 'scientific Marxists' blatantly denouncing it. This socialist inclination for utopian ideas may also be the reason behind Bauman's own predilection for his variant of it, despite consequently expressing an aversion towards the social experiments launched in the name of state socialism or structural Marxism. In the middle of the nineteenth century Marx was angered by the so-called utopian socialists who in their transcendental consciousness were world-weary and exhibited a starry-eyed attitude towards the future horizons instead of focussing attention upon the urgent and necessary task of bringing about revolutionary change. His major attacks were directed at Pierre Joseph Proudhon and Mikhail Bakunin as much as against Robert Owen and Charles Fourier who with their combined anarchism and utopianism all

apparently forfeited the chance of making the capitalist order crumble. Bauman is not so much angered as he is worried by the fact that apathy and a spectator attitude among most people appear to be the widespread response to the troubles and difficulties faced daily by the new masses of downtrodden and marginalised poor. Being spectators instead of actors, passive instead of proactive, removes moral and political responsibility for the actions and atrocities perpetrated against these unfortunate groups of people (Bauman, *In Search of Politics; Society Under Siege*, 201-21). Bauman's utopia is, as a consequence, a version of the ancient Greek republican society, the *agora*, relatively similar to that proposed by Richard Rorty in his *Philosophy and Social Hope* (1999) as a source for 'social hope', where social duties and obligations go hand in hand with individual and collective rights as well as securing the fair distribution of material wealth. Bauman, though, is no advocate for the aristocratic underpinnings of the ancient republican practice—excluding women, slaves, and the indolent from participation—but nor is he opting for planned economy understood in its communist guise, although the welfare state's responsibility for the redistribution of wealth in his view is a prerequisite for a truly democratic and autonomous society. He is rather concerned with the creation of the self-constituted and autonomous society in which citizens actively engage in public and political life instead of retreating into their private fortresses constructed out of fear. In his description of the emergence of this new 'culture of fear', he often quotes Marx' metaphor of the moth, which, when the universal (or one could say global) sun starts setting, seeks out the comfort and warmth of the domestic lamp (Bauman, "The Moth Seeks Out the Lamp, 21). Bauman is very critical of the tendency for the construction of gated communities accompanying such occasional eruptions of collective fear, hysteria, moral panic, and omnipresent and free-floating anxieties.

However, before arriving in England in the early 1970s, Bauman's vision of utopia was markedly different than it is today according to his friend and colleague Stefan Morawski. He

claimed that Bauman at that time when working in Warsaw embraced a “Marxist worldview in the light of the utopian belief and hope that the Soviet Union was genuinely a country of justice, equality, freedom; that an ethnic pedigree really did not matter” (30). However, embittered by the experience of the Stalinist and anti-Semitic purges in the Polish academia throughout the late 1960s, this collectivist utopia was upon arrival in England ultimately disowned. Despite having dissolved his relatively orthodox roots to Marxist thinking many years ago, there is little doubt that his early training within this tradition has directed his attention to aspects fertile for utopian theorising. The utopian vein in his writings from the early years onwards can be seen in the fact that the two major tenets in his thinking, he claims, are respectively suffering and culture (Bauman in Kilminster & Varcoe, 2006). Utopia is central to both of these aspects—as relief from suffering and degradation and as the realisation of culture as a human and actively created domain of life instead of an enforced iron-cage. As Bauman is well aware, we are not all endowed with the same possibilities and life chances in the world. The life chances experienced by what he metaphorically terms a ‘vagabond’ are by definition extremely different to and incomparable from that of a ‘tourist’ (cf. Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, 240-42). The former is the label utilised by Bauman to characterise the miserable plight of the localised underprivileged people, whereas the latter signifies the possibilities and potentials available to the exterritorial elite at the top of the globalised human hierarchy. Throughout his many books, Bauman is persistently and categorically always taking the side of the weak, as the quality and standards of any society can only be measured and evaluated by looking at the condition of the weakest members.

Thus, for a considerable period of time he hung his utopian hopes exclusively on the ideological coat hanger, as it were, provided by socialism and Marxist, and later on a more humanistic variant of this ideology. Especially the ‘softer’ kinds of socialism—the humanistic variants sympathetic to the opening up of the human world and its infinite possibilities instead of

attempting to contain it within new modernist iron-cages—appeared to appeal to him after his arrival in England. As Keith Tester (2002) has illustrated, the majority of the sources Bauman draws upon in his own eclectic work are concerned with utopian visions ranging from, amongst others, the work of Antonio Gramsci via Albert Camus to Emmanuel Levinas. These writers are not socialists or Marxists in the traditional paradigmatic sense of the term, apart perhaps from Gramsci, but they nevertheless contain seeds of the just, fair, equal, and morally responsible society that socialism as an ideological discourse was able to monopolise throughout most parts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We must also not forget the inspirational contribution of Cornelius Castoriadis, the importance of Leszek Kolakowski or the equally important contributions made by members of the Budapest School in shaping Bauman's own ideas. For Kolakowski, for example, with whom Bauman had to flee the forced utopia of the socialist regime in Poland in the 1960s, utopia as a way of thinking is in principle a good thing, although fully-fledged utopias forced on reality and forged after some authoritarian blueprints or master plans often appear to turn into totalitarianism or authoritarian nightmares of state apparatuses trying to force progress on its right way (cf. Olson; Rouvillois). Once realised, as Kolakowski points out in "The Death of Utopia Reconsidered", utopias historically have a bad tendency to turn into dystopian or anti-utopian ambitions of perfectibility where humans are made to suffer for a dream of total order, purity, and submission. This view is similar to the analysis Bauman himself later provides within the realm of sociology. Both Bauman and Kolakowski in dialectical fashion transcend radical utopianism and anti-utopianism by proposing some sort of synthesis containing elements of both positions.

Thus, just like Kolakowski, Bauman also possesses an anti-utopian current alongside, or rather embedded within his sympathy for utopianism. This anti-utopianism is evident in the way he treats especially the erstwhile modernist hopes of creating a better society by way of rational

planning, the sequestration of individual creativity and freedom, and an annihilation of human difference:

The new, modern order took off as a desperate search for structure in a world suddenly denuded of structure. Utopias that served as beacons for the long march to the rule of reason visualized a world without margins, leftovers, the unaccounted for—without dissidents and rebels; a world in which, as in the world just left behind, everyone will have a job to do and everyone will be keen to do the job he has to: the *I will* and *I must* will merge. The visualized world differed from the lost one by putting assignment where blind fate once ruled. The jobs to be done were now gleaned from an overall plan, drafted by the spokesmen of reason; in the world to come, design preceded order. People were not born into their places: they had to be trained, drilled or goaded into finding the place that fitted them and which they fitted. No wonder utopias chose architecture and urban planning as both the vehicle and the master-metaphor of the perfect world that would know no misfits and hence of no disorder. (Bauman in Beilharz, *The Bauman Reader*, 195)

Modern utopias sought to dissolve disorder into order and annihilate ambivalence and strangeness in their relentless search for structure, symmetry, and neatness. Since both capitalism and socialism were children conceived in the cradle of the great project of modernity, they were both doomed to follow suit in this respect. This finally made Bauman doubt whether socialism could actually serve as the vehicle leading towards an alternative social order in which human culture was not alienating and naturalised and in which human suffering was at best eventually eradicated and, more realistically, was at least reduced to a bare minimum—although even such a minimum to Bauman would be unacceptable.

Utopia as the Critical Counter-Culture and Active Alternative to Capitalism

When Bauman more than a quarter of a century ago in *Socialism: the Active Utopia* declared that socialism should be understood as the embodiment of the 'active' utopia, his intention was to point to the transformative quality of this particular political culture instead of an inactive utopian doctrine that did not have any bearing upon the structuring of social reality. Such an active utopia was to offer the "luxury of unleashing the human imagination and leading it to the distant expanses which would never be reached if it were held down by the exactions of the political game" (Bauman, *Socialism: The Active Utopia*, 13). This active utopia was therefore supposed to serve as a counter-culture not only of capitalism in particular but equally of modernity in general. For long, Bauman saw the Left in general and socialism in particular as this counter-culture of modernity (Bauman, "The Left as Counter-Culture of Modernity"; "From Pillars to Post"; *Modernity and Ambivalence*). They grew up together, were victorious together, and eventually decomposed together. Already in the early 1980s Bauman saw his high hopes attached to the working class movement as the bearer of such an active utopia crushed by the assimilation of these potentially revolutionary forces by corporate capitalism (Bauman, *Memories of Class*) as well as by the Stalinist regime of Wojciech Jaruzelski crushing the *Solidarnosz* uprising in Poland. When Bauman in the mid-1970s expressed the hopes of socialism as an active utopia, socialism still proved a viable solution to many of the problems faced by modern capitalism such as 'legitimisation crises', suffering, exploitation and economic recession, but already in the early 1980s these hopes were crushed in the throes of death, culminating in the upheavals in Eastern Europe a decade later and the definitive dethronement of the state socialist projects.

These Socialist utopias were the only utopian aspirations ever in history and in large-scale to have been put into flesh instead of merely remaining words, as the ancient Greeks expected of their classical utopian aspirations, but they were ultimately 'upturned' as Noberto Bobbio aptly termed it by the forces of reality. In his 1991 study, Peter Beilharz showed exactly how many of 'labour's

utopias' such as bolshevism, Fabianism, and social democracy failed to deliver and bring about the promised mode of production where oppression and alienation altogether disappeared. His analysis is indeed inspired by Bauman's own work on the failed class project of socialism (cf. Bauman, *Between Class and Elite; Memories of Class*). This supposedly world-historical defeat of socialism, or the vulgar variant of it practised in the East, however, did not mean that Bauman surrendered his socialist convictions and utopian sentiments. On the contrary, they grew increasingly fierce and uncompromising.

Bauman's personal sympathies and values, though, are no longer exclusively socialist if understood in terms of the ideological monopoly of ideas. Rather, they appear to be more encompassing and universal humanistic values that especially the Enlightenment philosophers espoused despite his often outspoken critique of the excesses of the modernist heirs of the Enlightenment. As he stated in an interview conducted a decade ago about the utopian principles (of justice and self-assertion) guiding his work:

These principles stay with me all the time—If you call them socialist, fine; but I don't think they are particularly socialist, anyway. They are much wider than that. I really believe that communism was just the stupidly condensed and concentrated, naive effort to push it through; but the values were never invented by the communists. The values were there, much wider; they were western, Enlightenment values. I can't imagine a society which would dispose of these two values, ever. ... Once the ideas of justice and self-assertion were invented, it is impossible to forget them. They will haunt and pester us to the end of the world. (Bauman in Kilminster & Varcoe, 225)

Therefore, his utopian vision does not, despite his overtly expressed sympathies, rest solely on socialist assumptions, although he persistently claims that socialism is still very much part of his sociological life-project. This, on the other hand, does far from mean that Bauman has shed himself of his socialist sympathies and that he believes that socialism is altogether dead and buried. In a

more recently conducted interview he presents the following diagnosis of contemporary socialism: “Like the phoenix, socialism is reborn from every pile of ashes left day in, day out, by burned-out human dreams and charred hopes. It will keep on being resurrected as long as the dreams are burnt and the hopes are 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. And if it were the case, I hope I’d die a socialist” (Bauman & Tester, *Conversations with Zygmunt Bauman*, 155). His socialism is, however, not restricted to conventional ideological manifestos and traditions but it finds an equal amount of inspiration in those writers, literary or scholarly, in whose works a socialist sentiment runs like an inexhaustible undercurrent and emporium of insights.

Especially the ‘socialist’ ideas and notions found in certain varieties of French literary and postmodernist social thought whether academic or artistic—Camus, Castoriadis, and Levinas—appear to have inspired Bauman in a more utopian direction (Jacobsen, “Zygmunt Baumans ‘franske fornemmelser’”), although we must also remember the inspiration critical theory has provided for his project. Bauman’s variant of critical thinking is explicated as a way of looking at alternatives, just as conventional critical thinking has always attempted to transcend and look beyond the confines of capitalism. For example, his description of his understanding and use of critical theory clearly contains utopian undercurrents if not downright overtones:

Unlike other theories, critical theory will not be ... satisfied with the optimally faithful reproduction of the world ‘as it is’. It will insist on asking, ‘how has this world come about?’ It will demand that its history be studied, and that in the course of this historical study the forgotten hopes and lost chances of the past be retrieved. It will wish to explore how come that the hopes have been forgotten and the chances lost. It will also refuse to accept that whatever is, is of necessity; it will suggest instead that the structures be explored which perpetuate what is and by the same token render the alternatives unrealistic. It will assume, in other words, that until the contrary is proved, reality of some attributes of the world and

utopianism of their alternatives are both conditional on the continuation of some practices which, in principle, can be modified or altered. (Bauman, "Critical Theory", 280-81)

This is indeed a very poignant summary of the critical and utopian core in Bauman's own work, a self-description of the qualities of social thinking that he wants to stress either overtly or implicitly through his sociological practice. Bauman, though, is not a critical theorist *per se* as he refuses to wear the badge of allegiance of or represent any particular traditions or schools of thought. The utopian and also adversarial element immanent in many parts of critical thinking is, however, a key in understanding the utopian strand that Bauman pursues throughout his books whether he is writing a critique of modernity, the characteristics of postmodernity or attempts to draw attention to the liquefied contours of contemporary society. Especially his focus on the changed and altered social conditions for utopia has been a leitmotif in recent decades where his initial defence of Marxist modernity was followed by a merciless critique of modernity (Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters; Modernity and the Holocaust; Modernity and Ambivalence*), a proposal for some intimations of the postmodern era (Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity; Postmodern Ethics; Life in Fragments*), followed again by a critique of postmodernity and its habitat (Bauman, *Postmodernity and Its Discontents; Globalization; Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*), to contemporary illustrations of the contours of a liquid modern landscape (Bauman, *Liquid Modernity; The Individualized Society; Society Under Siege; Liquid Love; Wasted Lives*). Contained within these latter pieces of work, apart from their descriptive aspirations, is also a devastating critique of liquid modernity—especially because it seems even more hostile to utopias than the eras of modernity and postmodernity on the historical shoulders of which it is standing.

From Concrete and Solid to Ethereal and Intangible Utopias

Although Bauman as a critical social thinker is clearly inspired by and indebted to the Enlightenment values, he is at the same time extremely sceptical of their embodiment in actual and realised social projects. He cherishes the emancipating, egalitarian, communal and humanistic potentials present in European Enlightenment but fears the totalitarian tendency for order, control, submission, and supervision latently present. In this dualistic position, which is not marked by tergiversation but rather healthy scepticism and ambivalence, he does not stand alone within utopian literature. In the preface to his 1997-book *Breaking with the Enlightenment*, Rajani Kannepalli Kanth, for example, writes that “the twentieth century marks the grand culmination, and lofty ascendancy, of the high modernist impulse set in motion by remarkable forces, both material and metaphysical, unleashed by the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century” (xi). The utopian kinship between Bauman and Kanth is indeed obvious as their diagnoses both point to ‘remarkable forces’ of rationalisation and manipulation prompted by the protagonists of the Enlightenment project (cf. Bauman, “Sociological Enlightenment”). One of the major culminations of these remarkable modernist forces mentioned by Kanth as well as by Bauman was the creation and constitution of the nation state with its territorial boundaries and so-called ‘imagined community’ of a variety of culturally different people, as also Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities* (1983) originally and persuasively pointed out. The result of these modernist forces of manipulation and rationalisation amongst other things meant order to a world that was hitherto plagued by the spectre of strife, which was devoid of structure and marked by the prevalence of belief-systems either believing in the power of coincidence or in the worshipping of religious providence, etc. According to Bauman’s trilogy on the impact of modernity and modernisation on society, this new era encapsulated all these contingencies within its own iron-cage of rational, scientific, and technical expertise and discourse that in its obsessiveness sometimes ended in genocide and other inhuman atrocities (cf. Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters; Modernity and the*

Holocaust; Modernity and Ambivalence). The utopianism of the modernist ‘good society’ thus gestated certain unintended consequences and evil side effects that not only signalled its culmination but its own crumbling.

Whereas European Enlightenment was originally founded upon utopian principles concerning liberty, equality, and brotherhood, its apparent culmination in the last century has paradoxically also meant the disappearance of utopia and with it the demise of the original trinity of ideas. Modernity equally promoted utopia and crushed it—this is Bauman’s dualistic diagnosis; it sought to promote solid, totalising, lasting and stable utopias, at the same time as it was setting people free as individuals to pursue less concrete and more flimsy and fragmentary routes to utopian living. On these new and more free and self-limiting utopias, sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander recently noted: “In a plural society, utopias compete with one another. This is a good thing. It is what makes them self-limited, and it makes totalization, and totalitarianism, impossible” (581). At the same time, however, it also makes more lasting, committing and encompassing utopias unimaginable. When collective emancipatory politics (the so-called Politics with a capital P) nowadays is replaced by individual life politics (the so-called politics with a small p), the pluralistic utopias eventually come to undermine the previously solid variant (cf. Bauman, *In Search of Politics*). When the State—the nation state or the welfare state—surrenders its monopoly on power and welfare provisions to the market, the illusion of collective bargaining for the benefit of all citizens is once and for all disclosed by its consumerist counterpart either promising individual salvation or personal despair depending on one’s position in the new global disorder (cf. Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*). When the safety and security of nationhood is replaced by the insecurities, unsafety and insecurities of global living (what Bauman captures under the unitary German heading *Unsicherheit*), the idea of utopia as the common good gives way to utopia as an abstract castle in the air (cf. Bauman, *Globalization*). All of these social, political and economic transformations

mark the end of modernist utopia and their aspirations and dreams of streamlining humans and societies alike. Against this background Krishan Kumar stated that the solid utopias of yesteryear were “never simply dreaming” (*Utopianism*, 2), and Bauman captures the core obsessive concern of the demised solid modern utopias and their nightmare consequences when he states that they

were anything but flights of fancy or the waste products of the imagination. They were blueprints for the human-controlled world to come, a declaration of the intent to force that world to come, and the serious calculation of the means necessary to do it. ... A remarkable feature of modern utopias was the attention devoted to the meticulous planning of the environment of daily life. ... Utopian inventions were strikingly similar to each other bearing vivid testimony to the shared obsession that gave birth to all of them: that of transparency and unequivocal setting, capable of healing or warding off the agony of risky choice. (Bauman, *The Individualized Society*, 64)

These modernist utopias, oriented towards the unfolding future of humankind, were erected and drafted at a time when the world desperately craved and demanded order, when ambivalence, opaqueness and insecurity were to be fought at the borderlands of society as enemies eventually to be routed or slaughtered. Thus,

utopia was to be the fortress of certainty and stability; a kingdom of tranquillity. Instead of confusion—clarity and self-assurance. Instead of the caprices of fate—a steady and consistent, surprise-free sequence of causes and effects. Instead of the labyrinthine muddle of twisted passages and sharp corners—straight, beaten and well-marked tracks. Instead of opacity—transparency. Instead of randomness—a well-entrenched and utterly predictable routine. ... Utopias were blueprints for the routine hoped to be resurrected. (Bauman, *Society Under Siege*, 229)

In this fashion, solid modern utopias contained a certain core element of premodern routinised traditionalism, however this time spiced up with the rational order-making and supervising

obsession: “Utopia was a vision of a closely watched, monitored, administered and daily managed world. Above all, it was a vision of a predesigned world, a world in which prediction and planning starve off the play of chance” (Bauman, *Society Under Siege*, 230). The play of chance and the presence of fate in premodernity were in the modern utopian order annihilated and purity, clarity, and predictability took its place and came to constitute the unholy trinity of modern utopias. This trinity, however, was not religious or metaphysical but the product of the ingenuity, creativity and faculty of the people and guided by the means of science and reason. This trinity has now in a thoroughly secularised and individualised world-view transformed itself and has been dissolved in the hazes of a golden utopian past that cannot be retrieved or resurrected. We still believe in science and to some extent also in reason, but today they, as Karl Popper remarked, “rest of shifting sands” (*Conjectures and Refutations*, 34) due to outspread scepticism, uncertainty and competition among different expert systems (cf. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*).

On the overall, we have lost the grand narratives and illusions of modernity, as postmodernists all queue to claim. With the disappearance of these narratives we have also lost the compass and point of orientation for society and thus modernity’s belief in social engineering for the present as well as for the future—even in Popper’s more modest sense of ‘piecemeal social engineering’ (Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*). There is no longer anybody located at the control panel capable of or interested in steering the societal vessel clear of the multitude of dangers lying ahead—among the most terrifying dangers are the Scylla of globalisation and the Charybdis of individualisation. Using another metaphor, as Bauman is keen to do, the captain has evacuated the cockpit leaving the passengers entirely to their own individual destinies (Bauman, “On Globalization”, 38). Simultaneously, the idea of progress has demised and the interest in building a better future seems pointless. Since the mastery of the future, as Pierre Bourdieu declared, requires a hold on the present, and since this hold has vanished in contemporary society due to increasing

complexity, individual indifference, and a decline of institutional and political control, any genuine hope of planning or shaping the future must therefore be discarded (Bourdieu, *Contre-feux*). This appears to be Bauman's death sentence on the hope of modern utopias to be projected into the future. As mentioned above, however, utopias have not disappeared altogether—their morphological outlook and content has changed but changed radically from solid to so-called liquid modernity.

In his recent book *Liquid Modernity*, Bauman shows how the erstwhile solid aspects of reality have now been thoroughly and irreversibly liquefied and lost all shape and direction that previously guided society towards a better future. He conducts in-depth analyses of the impact of this process of liquefaction on central components of society such as community, individuality, work, emancipation, and time/space and he concludes that the liquid modern age does not constitute a fertile ground for the grand social projects of the solid modern utopian mentality (Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*). Instead of the certainty and predictability that previously surrounded these indispensable components and pillars of society, we are now faced with contingencies and uncertainties regarding the persistence of communal shelters, the in-built guarantee of individual rights, the durability of personal career options, the push and pull between freedom and ever new forms of control and surveillance, and the solidity of time and space. Also at the more intimate levels has life been liquefied regarding matters such as love, relationships, sexuality, etc. (Bauman, *Liquid Love*). These changes have a severe and deep impact on utopian aspirations and ideas that in liquid modernity are regarded as equivalents to predestination and collective control instead of individual freedom of choice and personal satisfaction. In short, in liquid modernity, utopias are generally regarded as relics from a shameful past we have finally been able to rid ourselves of.

Not only out there in social reality have the robust and solid utopias been undermined but also within social scientific discourses has the term 'utopia' fallen irreparably into disrepute—perhaps as

an almost synchronised response to the fate of the utopian phenomenon in the real world. Bauman himself is suspicious of the myopic understanding that as a consequence has determined the fate of the concept of 'utopia' within, for example, sociology:

I suspect that in our social-scientific usage all too often we unduly narrow down the concept of 'utopia' to the early modern blueprints of the good society, understood as a kind of totality which pre-empts its members' choices and determines in advance their goodness, however, understood. ... I am now inclined to accept that utopia is an undetachable part of the human condition. ... I now believe that utopia is one of humanity's constituents, a 'constant' in the human way of being-in-the-world. This does not mean that all utopias are equally good. Utopias may lead to a better life as much as they may mislead and turn away from what a better life would require to be done. (Bauman & Tester, *Conversations with Zygmunt Bauman*, 48-50)

Bauman's understanding and appreciation of utopia is therefore ambivalent. Utopias may lead to a better life but the danger always consists in the historical fact that utopia may also turn from dream into nightmare, from social bliss into social repression, from desirable ideal into disastrous reality. According to Bauman this ambivalence inherent in utopia is similar to the one present in many other key and equally "constant" aspects of social life such as freedom, culture, community, power, politics, globalisation, morality, etc. All of these social scientific concepts as well as human experiences on the one hand contain an opportunity side and a more sinister side on the other. Which of these is eventually realised is dependent upon human intervention and deliberation. Instead of proposing, as so many other scholars within the field of utopian studies, that utopia per definition is equivalent to something good, Bauman offers an understanding in which only we, the human beings destined to live out our lives in the world, can make sure and determine whether or not utopia will indeed become something beneficial or something undesirable; only we can point to and eventually realise the multitude of alternative visions of 'the good life'. Therefore, in Lyman

Tower Sargent's apt differentiation between the two broad strands of utopian thinking, "utopias brought about by human effort" on the one hand, and "utopias brought about without human effort" on the other hand (Sargent, "Utopian Traditions", 8-14), Bauman is clearly in favour of the former, as long as these utopias are not forced on people as heteronomous projects or designs. The utopias favoured by Bauman are thus of the sort people collectively and freely choose to realise and which they dismantle again whenever they no longer offer the comfort, security and satisfaction that initially prompted their transformation from idea into reality. Moreover, utopias, in Bauman's understanding, need not necessarily turn from intangible idea into concrete reality in order to have an impact on reality. As long as utopian aspirations penetrate thought and inform action, they will have consequences on the social world.

By offering such a re-definition of utopianism as an ambivalent experience and Janus-faced concept, Bauman is capable of salvaging some of the lost dignity of utopian thinking as well as pointing to the darker side of realised utopias. Thus, throughout the years he has moved from the somewhat narrow and conventional understanding to a much more nuanced and encompassing notion of utopia as part and parcel of the human predicament and condition without which we would stand naked and alone in front of the present radical social changes. In paradoxical fashion, this more loose and alternative understanding of utopia appears to be the only solid bulwark against ending either in the often inhuman iron-cages of modern utopias again or in the vertigo of relativity, individuality, and detachment of liquid modern de-utopianisation. Whereas the credo of the former era could be summarised as 'united we stand, together we fall', in the latter contemporary period it rather spells out a 'divided we stand, isolated we fall'.

From Collectivised to Individualised Utopias in Life and Death

The title of one of Bauman's most recent books, *The Individualized Society*, tells a comprehensive story in itself about contemporary society—a story about where we are coming from, and where we are heading. According to Bauman, who in his overall analysis follows in the footsteps of amongst others social historian Norbert Elias in his *The Society of Individuals* (1991), we have moved from the era of the great collective, political and social endeavours to individual, apolitical and anti-social life projects; from emancipation of the masses to individual salvation, from national unity to global fragmentation, from solidified modernity to liquid modernity (Bauman, *Liquid Modernity; The Individualized Society*). Elsewhere, with metaphorical clarity, he characterised this transition from collectivity to individuality as a transition from 'camps' to 'tribes' (Bauman, *Life in Fragments*) or from a focus on 'imagined community' to a focus on 'identity' (Bauman, *Community*). A general shift in human history has apparently taken place from the anonymous but united grey mass of people to the lonely but identifiable individual with his or her self-identity as the core concern of the life project, as also Anthony Giddens pinpointed in his *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991). This shift has been accompanied by a decline in collective, social, political and moral obligations and engagements, while, at the same time, utopian aspirations have become thoroughly privatised—together with fear, anxiety, action, morality, solidarity, and responsibility.

The Individualized Society constitutes Bauman's diagnosis of a society in which collective responsibility and the social and political institutions outliving the individual have been demolished or dismantled. This society is now instead constituted and inhabited by individuals living-with, but not living-for, each other, where *l'enfer, c'est les autres* and where our own routes to happiness seem more important than the public responsibilities and obligations. Our liquid modern society offers its members a colourful palette of choices, sensations, and options without which life would seem dull and without contours but which simultaneously divides, differentiates and fragments instead of combining, joining and uniting. In this sense contemporary society is pluralistic and not

autocratic as in the modern age. At the same time, it is not totalitarian in its traditional sense of the term but rather ‘globalitarian’, as Bauman indicates (*Society Under Siege*, 236). Pluralisation and globalisation offer problems for solid utopias but hold promises for more pluralistic, tacit and open-ended utopias. Jeffrey C. Alexander also captures this point very well:

Utopian conceptions inform and complement the kinds of differentiated and pluralistic social orders we inhabit today. For utopias to be ‘real’, it is enough that various conceptions of utopia do, in fact, animate the nooks and crannies, the spheres and subsystems, of such a social order. The reality of utopia does not (empirically), cannot (theoretically), and indeed should not (normatively) depend on its actual, that is complete, realization. (“Robust Utopias and Civil Repairs”, 81)

Thus, for utopia to be *real* now more than ever merely means that it should to some extent be thought of and be present in the back of the minds of individualised individuals or pluralistically oriented institutions. Utopia does not have to be realised, crystallised and materialised as a specific social order but it should, at least, be a latent possibility and active alternative to the present.

Although this liquid modern society is pluralistic, a view that Bauman certainly would support, it is still an open question whether it is also an autonomous society, as he, together with Castoriadis and Levinas, would like it to be. If Bauman in his earlier years wanted socialism to play the role of an active counter-culture of modernity and capitalism, as we saw above, today he wishes a morality of proximity and a responsibility for society’s weakest members to serve as the active counter-culture of liquid modern consumerism and its hidden heteronomous agenda disguised as an autonomous society.

Not only the life-course of people but also their bidding for immortality, the eternal mirror of man’s earthly existence, has according to Bauman been privatised and individualised throughout the last couple of centuries—a process increasingly intensified throughout the last few decades.

Previously, in premodernity, immortality was the sole privilege of writers and rulers whose deeds would go down into the annals of history and thus remain part of the collective memory for the future. At this time, also the religious notion of the ‘chosen people’ dominated, promising collective but still exclusive immortality. In modernity, this privilege was gradually democratised and subcontracted by the State to increasing parts of the population such as those soldiers and other heroes serving the common cause, the family, the nation, the race or the party. However, the immortality of the unique individual would drown in the particularity of the grander cause, for which he or she lived and died, or in the vast mass of people willing to die for it. Everybody was, for all practical purposes and intents, disposable and nobody apart from the great leaders lingered in collective memory for long. Today, these past routes promising symbolic immortality have been blocked once and for all and the new alternatives appear to be as individualised as they are insufficient and short-termed. All bridges leading to exclusive, lasting or collective immortality have effectively been undermined and those few leading to or promising individual immortality are overcrowded by lonely individuals desperate for their right to fifteen minutes of fame. Ultimately, nobody reaches immortal bliss because it is now, in principle, available to all (Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, 51-87; *Liquid Modernity*, 126-29; *The Individualized Society*, 238-50). With immortality out of the question—and being replaced by the less ambitious survivalism (Bauman, “Survival as a Social Construct”)—the entire life-span becomes over-loaded with expectations, high hopes and demands, which in turn leads to an instrumental view on how to squeeze the lemon in order, individually and immediately, to get the most out of it. This leads to fear, frustration and frequently erupting collective manifestations of hysteria and uncertainty where scapegoats and strangers in general are made to suffer for our lack of control of the future and of the present condition.

How does this apparently novel social condition, and the mentality accompanying it, relate to the issue of utopias? For centuries, utopian thought was guided largely by either religious or ideological ideas about the links between life and death, sins and deeds, the present and the eternal, rights and responsibilities, the individual person and the cosmic or collective order. These deep-seated and serious links are severed in the individualised society leaving utopian notions of a social alternative without solid anchorage—with the fearful and free-floating individual as their only point of departure and port of destination. Therefore, Bauman proposes that these indispensable links are re-established and that only a re-politicisation, re-moralisation, and re-institutionalisation of society can achieve this. Here the classical Greek republican *agora* serves as a central frame of reference and ideal in which the *oikos* (the private household) and the *ecclesia* (the public and political realm) can meet, ideas can be developed through undistorted communication, and constructive dialogue and problems relating to the well-being of the whole community can be solved (Bauman, *In Search of Politics*, 86-100). In a thoroughly individualised society, such collective republican aspirations oriented towards a betterment of the existence of everybody appear as relics from premodernity or modernity, as nothing but a waste of time, and leave lonely souls searching in vain for solidarity, community, commitment, and compassion.

The combined effort towards a re-politicisation, re-moralisation and re-institutionalisation of contemporary individualised and globalised liquid modernity envisaged by Bauman entails first and foremost a willingness to substitute the personalised and privatised ‘life politics’ focusing on the Self with ‘emancipatory politics’ directed towards the plight of Others. Hereby we would support the extension of political participation, democracy, liberty, and equality to ever larger proportions of contemporary society both on a local and national scale as well as on the global scene. Second, it means the penetration of a self-sacrificing moral responsibility and universal sense of obligation into every nook and cranny of the world—a moral responsibility that does not stop at one’s own

private doorstep and which does not stop short of offering help to the new liquid modern masses of marginalised, downtrodden and redundant people, the so-called human waste of our age (Bauman, *Wasted Lives*). Finally, it requires that political and social institutions capable of envisaging long-term visions, of undertaking continuous and collective commitments, and willing actively to undertake the endeavour be erected. Moreover, that these institutions build on the principle of democratic participation and the aspiration to transform people from *de jure* into *de facto* individuals. This would amount to a transformation of their social and political position by guaranteeing them formal freedom as well as positive rights with the accompanying opportunities and abilities to act according to their ambitions, desires, and dreams. These institutions should mirror the multitude and variety of human dreams and desires as well as reflect and allow for the many alternative routes towards utopia while refraining from authoritatively pointing to one narrow and straight path towards utopia.

The current individualisation of utopias can be interpreted optimistically, as many libertarian postmodernists have tended to do, or pessimistically, as many socially concerned modernists or critical theorists traditionally have showed a predilection for. Bauman, as well as other scholars working within a critical social and sociological position, have pointed to the constant tension between optimism and pessimism and placed themselves in an intermediary and somewhat ambivalent position. One of those contemporary scholars belonging to the same latter betwixt and between category as Bauman is Oskar Negt, the German social thinker, who has described how “social utopias have crawled into the individual; the quite overwhelmed individual must understand all chasms to society as creative possibilities for a recreation of objective conditions” (*Arbeit und menschliche Würde*, 621)[my translation]. Apart from posing new possibilities, this new situation also places a burdening yoke of endless reflexivity and vigilance on the shoulders of individuals enjoying the almost unbearable lightness of being. In the thoroughly individualised society, the

individual who, with Donald W. Winnicott's illustrative terminology from *Playing and Reality* (1999), is brought up to believe himself to be 'omnipotent', instead finds himself impotent and isolated. Bauman wants to show us how an unrestrained freedom of choice and insular individuality can liberate as well as crush our hopes and dreams. He wants to show us how anti-social and self-sufficient solipsism does not lead to individual salvation but to social suffering, how one-dimensional living makes us believe that there is no alternative, and how the demand for instant gratification and a life in the shadow of the eternal present is oblivious to past mistakes and problems as well as future possibilities and potentials. Here his variant of utopianism can point to some, admittedly sporadic, solutions for societies and individuals alike—together and not apart.

The Utility of Bauman's Utopia

After this documentation and delineation of the specific utopian strand and development in the sociology of Zygmunt Bauman, some tentative conclusions pertaining to utopian thought in general might be required. Years ago, Herbert Marcuse in his classic *Das Ende der Utopie* (1967) declared utopia as a historical dynamic dead and buried due to the apparent impossibility of fundamentally transforming the social world even though we possess the intellectual and material means to do it. He believed that a 'total mobilisation' of opposition against achieving such a potential utopian transformation was instigated by capitalist society. However, this burial of utopia appears to have been conducted prematurely. Utopia is not dead but it has itself undergone a radical transformation and even a proliferation in recent years. Bauman's sociology is merely one of these relatively novel utopian strands compared to the classical formulations and traditions.

One of the scholars who has attempted to categorise different traditions of utopian thought is Darko Suvin who differentiated between three main strands in his classification of utopian thought. First, he believed the major group to be constituted by what he termed "empirical or sociological

utopians”. This group generally consists of geographers, urban planners, politicians and scholars working within the fields of applied social science. Second, we find the so-called “fictional or literary utopians”, who are often found working within literary theory, women’s studies, ecological perspectives and science fiction genres. Finally, the intermediary position placed between this so-called “two-headed monster” is occupied by “utopian philosophy” (Suvin, “Locus, Horizon, and Orientation”, 124-26), and it is here in this latter category, I suggest, we locate the work of Bauman who, although he is a sociologist, does not belong to the first category normally the natural environment for sociologists. The reason for this intermediary positioning is that Bauman is not concerned with constructing concrete and erecting empirical utopias but instead he is interested in philosophically pinpointing the possibilities of an alternative social vision. However, this vision is not entirely fictional and unrealistic but instead requires that people in reality are willing actively to change their ways and in unison to alter the existing social arrangements into a more morally responsible and politically responsive situation. His utopian vision is, as mentioned above, an ‘active’ vision, which, if followed, would have radical repercussions for social reality as we now know it.

Thus, Bauman’s utopianism is much more implicit than explicit; he is neither ideologically one-sided nor does he swear allegiance to some utopian authority and tradition. As Robert Musil remarked in his marvellous novel *The Man Without Qualities* and which very well captures Bauman’s perspective on utopia more aptly than he himself has perhaps explicated: “A utopia ... is not a goal but an orientation” (Musil in Suvin, “Locus, Horizon, and Orientation”, 131). Bauman is, as mentioned, not alone in defending such an open philosophical utopian understanding or ‘orientation’ and his utopianism, as the above by no means exhaustive account has illustrated, consists of a mosaic of different impressions and inspirations from sympathetic social thinkers. For example, German philosopher Ernst Bloch, one of the vintage utopian thinkers, proposed some

similar points of view (cf. Jacobsen, “Ikke endnu”), as well as some of the key French social thinkers who with their insistence on resistance and the defence of human dignity, autonomy and alternatives also exposed a philosophical utopian orientation (cf. Jacobsen, “Zygmunt Baumanns ‘franske fornemmelser’”). Thus, the utopian element derives as much vigour and inspiration from the ‘French connection’ constituted by Camus and his literary focus on the ability to act differently, Castoriadis and his political vision of the truly autonomous society and the autonomous individual equally being a precondition for each other, and Levinas and his appreciation of the moral responsibility developed through human proximity, as to some of the major ideas advanced by critical theory or humanistic Marxism. They all share, in different guises and to different degrees, a concern with central utopian ideals—not as something heteronomous imposed on people but as a vision of the autonomous society in which individuals possess the positive freedom and the effective means of changing the prevailing state of affairs according to their own hopes, dreams and desires. In this fashion, Bauman’s utopianism is also an expression of what Danish philosopher Ole Thyssen in his *Utopisk dialektik* (1976) years ago, in a detailed study of utopianism, aptly termed “the integrated utopias” in which a utopian dialectic is embedded within different liberating theories and strategies but which in themselves do not draw a precise and definitive picture of a specific utopian future (*Utopisk dialektik*, 9-10).^{iv}

As mentioned above, Bauman’s utopianism is, however, not a purely speculative enterprise at the same time as it is not a solid political agenda or manifesto. In his intermediary position he also shares some similarities with the “utopian realism” advocated by Anthony Giddens (*The Consequences of Modernity*, 154-58). In spite of its apparent juxtaposition of contradictory terms, utopianism and realism, utopian realism nevertheless means an openness to the unrealised and immanent aspects of reality that through deliberate human effort and collective action could be realised and be consequential for contemporary social arrangements in much the same way as

Marx's classical version of critical theory. Despite claims that utility is not a suitable standard by which utopian notions should be measured, as they supposedly defy such quantitative and calculative logic, it must nevertheless be discussed to what extent Bauman's diagnosis and rehabilitation of utopian ideas *can* inform social action and have an impact on reality. Bauman's utopianism, although it is critical of any embodied materialisation of utopia, needs somehow to be carried out instead of merely remaining imagination, wishful thinking or dreaming. Thus, as he states in one of his most recent books, *Liquid Love*, in which he stands forth as a spokesperson for a 'global community', "imagination tends to turn into a tangible, potent, effective integrating force when aided by socially produced and politically sustained institutions of collective self-identification and self-government" (*Liquid Love*, 148). In this way we can see the contours of how his utopianism could have a transformative bearing upon liquid modern individualised, globalised and consumerist reality if social and collective institutions underpinning it were constructed and maintained. A change away from the widespread cynical, self-sufficient and consumerist ideology (or rather non-ideology) of neo-liberalism and free-floating economic globalisation demands solid political institutions which, on a world-scale, can diminish human suffering and promote universal values of compassion and moral responsibility. The modernist attempts at enforcing utopia often ended in the opposite—tyranny and human suffering—but if we altogether cease to imagine a different world, then the now liquefied modern reality will eventually end up being as solid as its historical predecessor.

In sum, Bauman's utopianism can be characterised as a 'tacit utopianism' together with the utopianism underpinning the works of the likes of pragmatist Richard Rorty, the aforementioned critical theorists as well as the described French literary writers and philosophers. They do not overtly defend utopias but do not refrain from voicing utopian ideas either. Moreover, Bauman does not utilise any special tricks, literary techniques or models of thought through which to express his

utopianism—it is a plain, unpretentious and down-to-earth variant where some element of dialectical thinking (and hence overcoming and transcending) is involved. Opposed to this tacit understanding and appreciation of utopia stands the more ‘overt utopianism’ in which one’s utopian convictions are openly expressed. In spite of their aforementioned utopian similarities, Bloch would, contrary to Bauman, belong to this camp because he would envisage a certain and somewhat closed state of affairs when utopia was eventually to be implemented (cf. Jacobsen, “Ikke endnu”). Bauman is very sceptical about such theorising that, due to some historical logic, requires concrete implementation and unfolding. Despite being relatively sceptical about the implementation and embodiment of utopias and their tendency to be parading as potential totalitarian ideologies in disguise, also Leszek Kolakowski is capable of seeing the possibilities inherent in utopias for human purposes when he cryptically remarked: “The existence of a utopia as a utopia is the necessary prerequisite for its eventually ceasing to be a utopia” (*Marxism and Beyond*, 92). Only by being presented by its proponents and protagonists as utopia, as something desirable immediately or ultimately to be realised, will tacit utopias paradoxically cease to be utopian. This is also Bauman’s understanding.

Many interpreters claim that Bauman’s books in recent years have been oozing of an increasing pessimism, which has meant that his utopian aspirations despite always holding out the torch of hope have come close to the apocalyptic exclamations voiced by many other contemporary social thinkers such as communitarians, critical theorists and concerned aficionados of ecological protection (cf. Jacobsen, *Zygmunt Bauman—den postmoderne dialektik*, 331-337; “Sociologi, utopi og modernitet”). Perhaps these two strands of thought, the utopian and the apocalyptic, have blended in the work of Bauman and of others, as Rumanian poet Emile Cioran sceptically suggested: “The two genres, utopian and apocalyptic, which once seemed dissimilar to us, interpenetrate, rub off on each other, to form a third, wonderfully apt to reflect the kind of reality

that threatens us” (*History and Utopia*, 98). Bauman’s utopianism is an expression of this third hybrid genre, this ambivalent attitude towards utopias as well as towards reality. He has often been accused of ambivalence, ambiguity, and tergiversation, which also necessarily relate to his notion of the desirability or undesirability of utopia. This tendency, however, is not so much a matter of Bauman’s own thinking as part and parcel of the nature of the social world in modernity as well as in later modernities. As Kwang-Ki Kim, in his recent book *Order and Agency in Modernity*, rightly observed:

Such ambivalence has often been held against one or another modern theorist, for example, as a symptom of personal confusion or inconsistency, but it now needs to be recognized that modernity is complex and multi-faceted; any insightful analysis, and especially any penetrating evaluation, should recognize and reflect this complexity. It is not a question of personal confusion about an unambiguous phenomenon, but a question of personal insight into a phenomenon which is in many respects ambiguous. (109)

Bauman’s sinister yet hopeful vision of a world emptied of concrete and totalitarian utopias but still leaving room for utopian ideas and imagination of alternative realities echoes the equally ambivalent view expressed by Karl Mannheim when he stated the sombre premonitions of a reality entirely deprived of the utopian spirit:

The complete disappearance of the utopian element from human thought and action would mean that human nature and human development would take on a totally new character. The disappearance of utopia brings about a static state of affairs in which man himself becomes nothing more than a thing. ... Thus, after a long tortuous, but heroic development, just at the highest stage of awareness, when history is ceasing to be blind fate, and is becoming more and more man’s own creation, with the relinquishment of utopias, man would lose his will to shape history and therewith his ability to understand it. (*Ideology and Utopia*, 236)

This quotation, to my mind one of the most central of descriptions and observations on utopia ever, also embellishes the end of the most comprehensive and monumental sociological delineation of and introduction to utopian and anti-utopian thought (cf. Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*). At the same time, it equally captures Bauman's heritage from and inheritance to sociological understandings of utopia. Bauman's utopian optimism, despite accusations of the contrary, is unassailable even in times of trouble and despite expressed pessimism from time to time, his optimism equals that of German Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who, awaiting execution in a Nazi concentration camp, stated:

Optimism is by its nature
not a goal for the present situation
but a life-force,
a force for hope when others give up,
a force withstanding setbacks,
a force that never surrenders the future to pessimism
but rather requisitions it for hope.

This lyrical extract captures the essence of the hope that a tacit utopianism can and must contain in times that are hostile to this kind of allegedly futile thinking. Here Bauman's vision can help us reinvigorate utopia—the nowhere—within sociology and perhaps even elsewhere.

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Notes

ⁱ Also Russell Jacoby, in a vein similar to Judith Shklar in her *After Utopia: The Decline of Political Faith* from 1957, recently pointed out the devastating effects of the loss of utopian ideals as well as the cause behind this loss when he stated that “world events and the *Zeitgeist* militate against a utopian spirit—and have for decades. ... Its sources in

imagination and hope have withered away” (*The End of Utopia*, 179). This diagnosis is similar to Bauman’s and to other concerned social thinkers of our time.

ⁱⁱ As Tester, one of the finest contemporary interpreters of the work of Bauman today, suggested: “Within his sociology, Bauman tries to show that the world does not have to be the way it is and that there is an alternative to what presently seems to be so natural, so obvious, so inevitable” (Tester in Bauman & Tester, *Conversations with Zygmunt Bauman*, 9). This is exactly the mark of distinction of Bauman’s sociology whether it is concerned with scientific dogmas constraining humanity in envisaging alternative modes of action (cf. Bauman, *Towards a Critical Sociology*) or in dealing with specific social arrangements obstructing the realisation or actualisation of such modes (cf. Bauman, *Socialism: The Active Utopia; Society Under Siege*).

ⁱⁱⁱ Even those scholars opposing positivism, Marxism, functionalism, behaviourism, and other major paradigmatic schools of thought within sociology throughout the last century were sceptical of utopianism. Dahrendorf, an exponent of conflict theory and critic of the dominant school of structural functionalism, in his famous article “Out of Utopia: Towards a Reorientation of Sociological Analysis” accused utopianism, when regarded as the construction of social order, of undermining analyses of social conflict and change and instead focussing on stability, status quo, harmony, uniformity, universal consensus, and the insular status of utopian communities. These so-called ‘structural characteristics’ of most sociological theories at that time hampered apparently an understanding of the changeability and instability of societies and overshadowed an appreciation of the role of conflict, Dahrendorf convincingly argued. Utopia, to him, was almost equivalent to a graveyard but he somewhat humorously admitted that “the difference between utopia and a cemetery is that occasionally some things do happen in utopia” (“Out of Utopia”, 117). However, the alleged utopianism of structural functionalism is miles away from the more philosophical utopianism of Bauman discussed throughout this article.

^{iv} Dialectical thinking has been an inherent part of Bauman’s work throughout the years in which he has been oscillating between the real and the possible, the hideous aspects of reality and the desirable possibilities. A certain sense of dialectical thinking is embedded within most of his concepts and arguments that allows for transcendence of the limitations of what is generally regarded as real, true, rational, and right. (For a more comprehensive coverage of Bauman’s special sociological dialectic, see chapters 5 and 7 of Jacobsen, *Zygmunt Bauman—den postmoderne dialektik*).