

STRANGERS AT OUR DOOR¹

by Zygmunt Bauman

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Book Review

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Bauman is one of the world's best-known contemporary sociologists. He lived a long life, having passed away recently (b. 1925, d. 2017). He was born and trained in Poland, having lived in the USSR between 1939 and 1945. In 1968 he left Poland, to become a resident in the United Kingdom. From 1971, he was Professor of Sociology in the University of Leeds. Having started as an unknown Polish sociologist, he became worldwide known from the 1990s. His concepts of "solid" and "liquid modernity" became famous. When he died, he was part of the pantheon of modern sociology.

His conception of science is rather interesting. In the later stages of his life, he admitted that some of the best insights about human behaviour come from other sources than arid scientific papers (an idea that no young scholar may dare to confess).

In an interview to a Brazilian journal, he said: "I remember getting from Tolstoy, Balzac, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Kafka, or Thomas More much more insight into the substance of human experiences than from hundreds of sociological research reports. (...) Daily dealing with statistical averages, types, categories and patterns easily makes one lose sight of the human experience" ("Entrevista com Zygmunt Bauman", *Tempo Social*, Vol.16, No.1, 2004).

¹ Cambridge, Polity Press, 20 May 2016. ISBN-13: 978-1509512164

Bauman's conception of sociology is also singular. His first main source of inspiration was the work of Karl Marx – what is no surprise, given his initial training in Poland. But he also gained knowledge from a less impactful sociologist – Georg Simmel. He said: “(...) the two truly interesting social scientists of modernity and even today extremely topical were Marx and Simmel” (id. *ibid.*). Interestingly, while Marx left a legion of followers – scientists and politicians –, Simmel was never able to create a systematic theory nor disciples.

He started to write about modernity from the end of the 1980, with books such as *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989) and *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991). He defined “solid modernity”. According to him, “Solid modernity was, indeed, also the time of heavy capitalism - of the engagement between capital and labour fortified by the *mutuality of their dependency*. Workers depended on being hired for their livelihood; capital depended on hiring them for its reproduction and growth. Their meeting-place had a fixed address; neither of the two could easily move elsewhere. (...) The time horizons of heavy capitalism were long-term” (*Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2000, p. 145-146).

From the mid-1990s he addressed the reality of contemporary societies, or “liquid modernity” - *Liquid Modernity* (2000) and *The Individualized Society* (2001). For him, and other leading sociologists of the epoch, as Ulrich Beck, the many changes that have occurred gave birth to a new era, characterized by more individualization, freedom and deregulation. He wrote: “Today, everything is temporary. That is why I have suggested the “liquidity” metaphor to characterize the state of modern society: like liquids, it is characterized by the inability to maintain form. Our institutions, frameworks, lifestyles, beliefs and convictions change before they have time to solidify into customs, habits and truths” (“Entrevista com Zygmunt Bauman”, *Tempo Social*, Vol.16, no.1, 2004).

In liquid modernity, “liquid fears” also arise. Whilst in solid modernity, risks were well known – the Cold War being among them, in liquid modernity threats were more vague and scattered. They included pollution, climate change, globalisation, job insecurity, and terrorism, amongst others.

It is under this latter context that *Strangers at our door* was written. Published in 2016, it is one of the very last of Bauman's works and shows how attentive he was to the challenges of his time. In 2015, Europe was undergoing what is considered to be its major migration crisis since the 2nd World War. In the wake of the conflicts following the Arab Spring, in the Middle East and North Africa, coupled with many conflicts spreading through other parts of the world, and also the huge income gaps worldwide, hundreds of thousands of refugees and other migrants tried to reach Europe. Estimates indicate that more than one million irregularly arrived by land and sea in 2015.

The book starts by setting the stage of this crisis: “TV news, newspaper headlines, political speeches and tweets used to deliver foci and outlets for public anxieties and fears are currently overflowing with references to the “migration crisis” – which is overwhelming

Europe and portending the collapse and demise of the way of life we know, practice and cherish. (...) The impact of the news from that battlefield comes close to causing a veritable 'moral panic' (p. 1).

Bauman argued that migration and refugees were not new in Europe's history: "Refugees from the bestiality of wars and despotisms or the savagery of famished and prospectless existence have knocked on other people's door since the beginnings of modern times. For people behind those doors they were always, as they are now, strangers. Strangers tend to cause anxiety precisely because of being 'strange' – so fearsomely unpredictable, unlike the people with whom we daily interact and from whom we believe we know what to expect" (p. 8).

What is the solution to the migration crisis and the growing anxiety? According to Bauman, it is not separation, but connection. Instead of detention centres and walls, we should look for dialogue. As he writes, "We must seek occasions to come into a close, daily and increasingly intimate contact – hopefully resulting in a *fusion* of horizons (...). Humanity is in crisis – and there is no exit from that crisis other than solidarity among humans" (p. 18-19). And he adds: "Whatever the obstacles, and however immense they might seem, conversation will remain the royal road to agreement and so to peaceful and mutually beneficial, cooperative and solidary coexistence simply because it has no competitors and so no viable alternative" (p. 116). Interestingly (for a former Marxist), Bauman cites Pope Francis in this same subject.

The book is a small one, consisting of short and intertwined essays about the theme: 1) Migration panic and its (mis)uses, 2) Floating insecurity in search of an anchor, 3) On strongmen's (or strongwomen's) trail, 4) Together and crowded, 5) Troublesome, annoying, unwanted: inadmissible, 6) Anthropological vs. time-bounded roots of hatred. Given the advanced age in which Bauman wrote it, his work is the proof that he was attentive to the world outside him and had yet something to say.

The major strength of the book is the clear, solid and insightful observation of one of the most prominent challenges of Europe at the first decades of the 21st century: the migration crisis. It contains a very interesting approach to the theme, regarding the causes, reaction of the public opinion and role of political actors, as well as moral challenges placed to our societies. Also deserving praise is the theoretical coherence of Bauman's reflection, his intellectual versatility and cross-disciplinary views, and, last but not the least, the aim of building a good sociology for a good society. In sum, this is a must-read book.

However some weaknesses must also be noted. The most prominent is the evidence carried out by the author. Although we know about his preference for good insights, instead of published science, the book seems too much based on media reports. Although the crisis was lively at the time, the reliance on the media may produce biases that sociology should avoid. Furthermore, the policy recommendations that can be derived from the book are rather limited. The claim for solidarity and dialogue is worth mentioning, even though it is more akin to religion than to policy.