

# INTIMATIONS of IMMORTALITY

---

*John Armitage*

Zygmunt Bauman (born November 19, 1925), the Polish sociologist, philosopher, and *Cultural Politics* editorial board member, who died on January 9, 2017, at the age of ninety-one, was one of the most important cultural and political theorists writing in English over the past fifty years. He had an astonishing span of analysis, which took in everyone and everything from Michel Foucault, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean Baudrillard to class (1972), culture (1973), socialism (1976), hermeneutics (1978), freedom (1988), and sociology (1990, 2013a). This breadth, combined with a strong and probing critical intellect, constitutes the most exciting thing about reading Bauman.

This special section of *Cultural Politics*, comprising ten short articles, aims to offer a compact and clear homage to the work of Bauman and to remind ourselves why he remains vital to our understanding of contemporary cultural and political studies. If we want to retain a sense of why Bauman continues to be significant and of the influence he has had on cultural politics, we might be well advised to hold in mind simultaneously two of his many important concepts: ambivalence and postmodernity (see Bauman 1987, 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1993, 1995, 1997). For many, Bauman remains the world's foremost advocate of the idea of ambivalence, and his work on postmodernity has been one of the single most influential examinations of that cultural and political phenomenon. Anybody working on these two topics will most likely be engaging with the thought of Bauman.

277

*Cultural Politics*, Volume 13, Issue 3, © 2017 Duke University Press  
DOI: 10.1215/17432197-4211205

Ambivalence is our contemporary cultural condition based on the ostensible freedom crowded about today the world over and concerned with our apparent inability either to examine our own cultural pleasures and political seductions or to alter the coerciveness and control implicit in the world in which we live. Bauman's analysis of ambivalence has been enormously influential in numerous fields of cultural and political philosophy and has had a specific impact in sociology, cultural, and political studies; fuller definitions and analyses of the idea of ambivalence can be found in the articles by Douglas Kellner and Keith Tester.

Postmodernity, on the other hand, is the concept Bauman often used and significantly developed to explain the logic of the shift from modern to contemporary or postmodern culture and society. Postmodernity is the sociocultural structure or, to Bauman, the contemporary period of consumption in which a large amount of increasingly luxurious goods and services are currently being produced, distributed, and consumed (Armitage and Roberts 2016). Bauman's application of the language of postmodernity sees seduction employed to portray the sociocultural structure of luxurious goods and services in the early twenty-first century and modernity employed to depict the work of ordering and mastering, organizing, institutionalizing, and managing produced in earlier centuries to expel our dread of disorder and our own demise, even to the point of committing monstrous crimes against humanity, such as the Holocaust (Bauman 1989; Bauman and Raud 2015a). Bauman (2000, 2004a, 2006) made a great many attempts to define and redefine postmodernity more accurately than this—as the traditional normative discourse of modernity in crisis, as “liquid modernity”

or “liquid times”—and the articles by Sean Cubitt and Dennis Smith in this special section clarify these cultural patterns of control and identity in more detail.

In both these crucial areas, Bauman's (2001a, 2001b) work on fundamental cultural change and political control in consumer societies has been centrally and persuasively engaged with the subjugation of the individual and the production of subjectivity. Among his most celebrated works are *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991), *Intimations of Postmodernity* (1992a), *Postmodern Ethics* (1993), *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* (1995), *Postmodernity and Its Discontents* (1997), *Work, Consumerism, and the New Poor* (1998a), and *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (1998b), all powerful elaborations of an ambivalent cultural criticism of the contemporary state of modernity and morals, labor, unproductive lives, shopping, destitution, and innovative studies of postmodern society and its seductions that set the terms of the contemporary political debates over preferred models of human behavior and autonomy, the postmodern self, consumption, modernity, surveillance, and other technologies of suppression (Bauman 1999, 2004b, 2007; Bauman and Lyon 2012; Bauman, Bauman, Kociatkiewicz, and Kostera 2015). These two accents of ambivalence and postmodernity in Bauman's work do not signify any change in interest. As the articles by Mark Featherstone and Mike Gane demonstrate, Bauman's searching investigations of postmodern paradigms of identity are really only the expansion of his enduring concern with the ambivalence inherent in our once certain beliefs in the purposefulness and the occasional laboriousness of modern reason, ordering, and planning.

It was not as a theorist of ambivalence that Bauman first came to fame; his

early major works were concerned with elites and praxis, with utopia, and with the epistemological problems of the social sciences. Yet his radical understanding of cultural change and political life derived from and almost always related to an ambivalent or liquid viewpoint on postmodern culture and society that was never unbending regarding alternative social systems based on something other than luxurious consumption, and his appeal is in no way restricted to those who share his cultural and political beliefs. In everything Bauman (2011, 2013b, 2016, 2017) wrote on subjectivity, on our progressively momentary and loosening sociocultural ties, it is first and foremost the range of his work (e.g., new global discourses of inequality involving high levels of social injury) that sparks our interest in the cultural and political forms of the present period. However, as the articles by David Lyon and Kevin Robins reveal, ultimately it is the suppleness of Bauman's critical approach to our growing distrust of strangers, of the freedom of movement, and of the tyranny of the market economy, as much as the astuteness of his (2013b) insights into surviving postmodern transformation and separation, obligation, and contemporary community, safety, and anxiety, that has gained him so extensive an academic and public audience and that will continue as intimations of his immortality.

### References

- Armitage, John, and Joanne Roberts. 2016. "The Spirit of Luxury." *Cultural Politics* 12 (1): 1–22.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1972. *Between Class and Elite: The Evolution of the British Labor Movement: A Sociological Study*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1973. *Culture as Praxis*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1976. *Socialism: The Active Utopia*. New York: Holmes and Meier.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1978. *Hermeneutics and Social Science: Approaches to Understanding*. London: Hutchinson.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1987. *Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Post-modernity, Intellectuals*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1988. *Freedom*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1989. *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1990. *Thinking Sociologically*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1991. *Modernity and Ambivalence*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1992a. *Intimations of Postmodernity*. New York: Routledge.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1992b. *Mortality, Immortality, and Other Life Strategies*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1993. *Postmodern Ethics*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1995. *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1997. *Postmodernity and Its Discontents*. New York: New York University Press.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1998a. *Work, Consumerism, and the New Poor*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1998b. *Globalization: The Human Consequences*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1999. *In Search of Politics*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 2001a. *The Individualized Society*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 2001b. *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 2004a. *Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 2004b. *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 2006. *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 2007. *Consuming Life*. Cambridge: Polity.

John Armitage

- Bauman, Zygmunt. 2011. *Collateral Damage: Social Inequalities in a Global Age*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 2013a. *Does the Richness of the Few Benefit Us All?* Cambridge: Polity.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 2013b. *What Use Is Sociology? Conversations with Michael Hviid Jacobsen and Keith Tester*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 2016. *Strangers at Our Door*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 2017. *Retrotopia*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bauman, Zygmunt, Irena Bauman, Jerzy Kociatkiewicz, and Monika Kostera. 2015. *Management in a Liquid Modern World*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bauman, Zygmunt, and David Lyon. 2012. *Liquid Surveillance: A Conversation*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bauman, Zygmunt, and Rein Raud. 2015. *Practices of Selfhood*. Cambridge: Polity.

---

**John Armitage** is professor of media arts at Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton. His most recent works include *Virilio for Architects* (2015) and, coedited with Joanne Roberts, *Critical Luxury Studies: Art, Design, Media* (2016).