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# The Unannihilable – Zygmunt Bauman as Analyst and Ambassador of Ambivalence<sup>1</sup>

Michael Hviid Jacobsen

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**Abstract:** In Zygmunt Bauman's work, ambivalence was a topic that recurred explicitly several times in his analyses of modernity and later liquid modernity. This was particularly evident in his book *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991). But ambivalence also appears as an underlying theme in later books on life in liquid-modern society. Moreover, Bauman's sociological perspective itself oozes ambivalence, and many of the topics he explored and embraced throughout his career – such as freedom, morality, immortality and utopia – are themselves fundamental expressions of ambivalence. In addition, Bauman always insisted that the world is not fixed once and for all, but that humans can challenge and change it, and in this way ambivalence is not an ailment to be cured but rather a fact to be accepted. This article explores the theme and leitmotif of ambivalence in the writings of Bauman. The article seeks to provide a concise presentation and discussion of Bauman's continuous engagement with ambivalence in order to show that sociology perhaps ought to take the topic of ambivalence more seriously than is currently the case.

**Keywords:** Zygmunt Bauman; ambivalence; sociology; modernity; liquid modernity

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## Introduction

Looking through the conceptual or theoretical toolbox of sociology, notions that frequently come up are “structure”, “role”, “socialization”, “modernity”, “interaction”, “system”, “stratification”, “order”, “social control”, “norms”, “identity”, “power”, “discourse” and so on (the list is obviously much too extensive to be meaningfully reproduced here). With each of their disciplinary backgrounds and theoretical underpinnings, all of these concepts have served – and indeed continue to serve – a useful function in allowing sociology (the self-appointed “science of society”) to describe and analyse the social world as it unfolds before the eyes of the practitioners of the discipline. However, perhaps one of the most useful – but often also overlooked notions – is that of “ambivalence”. Ambivalence has not been a major topic for sociologists – at least not if one looks through

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1 The author wants to take this opportunity to thank two anonymous reviewers for their useful comments on this manuscript, which assisted in its improvement.

the conceptual history of sociology. However, in sociological analyses ambivalence is always there between the lines, as it were, often indicated, but rarely explicated.

Ambivalence is part and parcel of our human-being-in-the-world. It is an integral part of our experiential and emotional realm, an ingrained aspect of our life choices and confrontation with society, a sort of annoying intermediary between hopes and the actually-existing reality. Ambivalence is a notion used to describe the mixed emotions and complex experience of being caught, as it were, between contradictory or conflicting poles (expectations, possibilities, choices, etc.) and the inability to have it both ways at the same time. Obviously, ambivalence has been there all along in human history. However, it seems as if we in modern times have on the one hand produced heretofore unparalleled amounts of ambivalence at the same time as we, on the other, have grown increasingly intolerant of the phenomenon and thus, through various measures, seek to problematize and to do away with it.

Nowadays, there is a sub-disciplinary interest in various emotions in sociology – not least within “the sociology of emotions” – interests expressed in studies of specific emotions such as trust, sympathy, love, hate, anger, pain, fear, and so on. However, it is rare that ambivalence figures alongside these emotions in encyclopaedic entries or overviews of human emotions. And perhaps there is indeed no well-defined or well-established “sociology of ambivalence” if one searches for this specific label. However, Zygmunt Bauman’s writings are among those that from a sociological perspective have most explicitly and critically explored the roots and consequences of ambivalence in modern social life. Even though Bauman does not qualify as an “emotions researcher” *par excellence*, he has nevertheless in his work dealt with a number of emotion-laden human experiences such as freedom, suffering, love, fear, nostalgia/retrotopia and ambivalence (Jacobsen, 2019). There are many different epithets pinned to the work of Bauman: “prophet of postmodernity” (Smith, 1999), “humanist Marxist” (Kilminster & Varcoe, 1992) or “ambivalent utopian” (Jacobsen, 2016), just to mention a few. But perhaps Bauman, more than anything else, was a clear-sighted analyst as well as a staunch defender and ambassador of ambivalence. Throughout his writings, ambivalence is always there – sometimes as an underlying theme and an almost subterranean presence, other times openly exposed to broad daylight, dissected and explored in detail.

In Bauman’s work, ambivalence was a topic that explicitly recurred several times in his analyses of modernity and later liquid modernity. This was particularly evident in his book *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Bauman, 1991). But ambivalence also appears as an underlying theme in later books on life in liquid-modern society (e.g. Bauman, 2000). Moreover, Bauman’s sociological perspective itself exudes ambivalence, and many of the topics he explored and embraced throughout his career – such as freedom, morality, immortality and utopia – are themselves fundamental expressions of ambivalence. In addition, Bauman always insisted that the world is not fixed once and for all, but that

humans can challenge and change it (Tester, 2004, p. 9), and in this way ambivalence is not an ailment to be cured but rather a fact to be accepted. This article thus explores the theme and leitmotif of ambivalence in the writings of Bauman. The article seeks to provide a concise presentation and discussion of Bauman's continuous engagement with ambivalence in order to show that sociology perhaps ought to take the topic of ambivalence more seriously than is currently the case.

### **Ambivalence as a sociological theme**

A thorough examination/inspection of the published literature confirms/reveals that the notion of "ambivalence" appears only infrequently in most sociology books. And yet, many sociologists nevertheless end up concluding their analysis of a given subject matter by insisting that their informants express ambivalent attitudes or that society as such is characterized by mutually contradictory tendencies. Many sociologists – from the authors of the "classics" of the discipline to contemporary scholars – have shown how society is constituted by a variety of different oppositional pushes and pulls that provide the basis for social confusion, tension, insecurity, uncertainty, indetermination and anxiety. Sometimes these pushes and pulls are themselves manifestations and expressions of ambivalence – other times they are its causes, still other times its outcome. Ambiguities and ambivalences are thus a primordial part and parcel of social life, but according to a number of prominent scholars perhaps of modern social life in particular (see, e.g., Bauman, 1991; Beck, 1992; Levine, 1985; Smart, 1999; Weigert, 1991; Ziehe, 1989).

Despite its originally Latin roots (*ambi* meaning "both" or "on both sides" and *valentia* referring to "strength" or "valence"), the actual concept of "ambivalence" is in fact a relatively recent invention. Originally, "ambivalence" was a notion that evolved within clinical psychology in the early decades of the 20th century with important contributions by Eugen Bleuler and later Sigmund Freud (see, e.g., Jacobsen, 2022). Freud, for example, related what he termed "emotional ambivalence" to the topics of taboo and incestuous relationships. In these early writings, ambivalence was thus often regarded as a personality disorder linked to schizophrenia or other psychological problems (much like what nostalgia had been throughout the 19th century) or it was linked to tensions in personal development within intimate relationships (Weigert, 1989, pp. 74–75). Like nostalgia, for example, ambivalence was during the course of the 20th century also relieved of its connotations of mental illness and the required treatment of its symptoms became a generic emotional notion covering a sense of having mixed emotions, experiencing contradictory feelings, being pulled in different directions or being unable to decide between alternatives. Although the notions of "ambiguity" and "ambivalence"

are closely connected and sometimes used interchangeably, they do not necessarily cover the same ground – the former mostly relating to the realm of cognition whereas the latter also involves an emotional and experiential phenomenon (see, e.g., Weigert, 1991, p. 17; Zielyk, 1966).

“Ambivalence” is thus a notion capturing the experience or feeling that life is seldom clear-cut, one-dimensional and unambiguous. There is always, it seems, something that annoyingly sticks out like a sore thumb, something that resists, something that provokes, something making unambiguous decisions, unquestionable choices, rock solid classifications and incontrovertible claims difficult. This is, at least sometimes, what we call “ambivalence”. Ambivalence opens up our eyes to the fact that the world is seldom as straightforward or uncomplicated as we might think. We sometimes want things that are incompatible or even in conflict with each other – such as freedom *and* security, immersion *and* superficiality, excitement *and* stability – or we are confronted with contradictory expectations. According to Neil Smelser, ambivalence is thus part and parcel of human life: “Human beings long and strive for both, but when they achieve a measure of either, the other reasserts itself. As in the nature of ambivalence itself, we want both sides at once, but cannot fully satisfy either side” (Smelser, 1998, p. 13). Double-binds, Catch-22s, cross-pressures, impossible choices and the like are archetypal examples of such ambivalent experiences.

But how may we initially begin to define this “ambivalence” as a sociological phenomenon? According to the *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, ambivalence is defined in the following manner:

Ambivalence denotes contrasting commitments and orientations; it refers to simultaneous conflicting feelings toward a person or an object; and it is commonly used to describe and explain the hesitance and uncertainty caused by the juxtaposition between contradictory values, preferences, and expectations. Lay-person use follows intuitive psychological explanations which refer to ambivalence interchangeably with personal hesitation, confusion, indeterminacy, and agitation. In contrast, sociological use suggests that although ambivalence is a bi-polar, subjective experience, its causes are social and hence understandable and predictable. True, most sociological uses of the term maintain its conflictual denotations, but this volatile experience is treated as the result of contrasting social pressures exerted on actors. (Yair, 2007)

From this definition it becomes evident that ambivalence can be viewed from a number of different perspectives, e.g. a lay-person perspective, a psychological perspective and a socio-logical perspective (we may add many other potential perspectives to these, e.g. theological, philosophical, neurocognitive, etc.). Depending on which specific perspective is applied, ambivalence takes on different meanings. For example, from a basic lay-person perspective, ambivalence mostly means a certain kind of tergiversation, uncertainty or indecision in situations of choice – as in the abovementioned examples. Here there is often no consideration about the causes or consequences of ambivalence. From a psychological perspective, ambivalence is more concerned with

how the individual cognitively and emotionally processes ambivalent experiences in his or her thoughts and doings, as well as dealing and coping with them. The sociological perspective places the causes of ambivalence outside the immediate reach and understanding of the individual, thus making the experience or feeling of ambivalence the outcome of structural or social contradictions that create contradictory pressures and confusion on the level of lived life. Between these different perspectives there are obviously certain overlaps and interconnections.

Although ambivalence in and of itself is not a longstanding sociological concern (at least not under this specific label), the *phenomenon* of ambivalence has interested sociologists since the dawn of the discipline. Looking at the great masters of classical sociology, Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Georg Simmel and Norbert Elias (just to mention the most “usual suspects”), ambivalence was indeed a recurring concern in their writings. Although the specific notion of “ambivalence” was perhaps only seldom (if at all) applied, the dense descriptions and depictions of individual and social life in the transitional phase from feudalism to industrialism, from small townships to urban metropolises, from traditional authority to rational bureaucracy, from household economy to blazing capitalism and from early modern to consolidated modern society contained their fair share of deep-seated ambivalences characteristic of a life uprooted and turned upside down by the relentless forces of modernization. To Marx and his contemporaries, ambivalence was almost a natural outcome of a social development that fundamentally turned its back on the past and something that increasingly characterized a life in which all that was previously solid suddenly melted into air and all that was sacred was gradually being profaned.

As a more specifically applied concept in sociology, ambivalence has an even shorter history than its original psychological use. For example, the notion of “sociological ambivalence” was coined in the early 1960s by Robert K. Merton and Elinor Barber (1963). What they sought to do with this concept was to point to the inner tensions and pressures associated with and experienced as part of the occupation of certain positions, and the achievement of statuses and roles in modern society (e.g. in the organizational bureaucracy). Merton and Barber suggested the notion of “core sociological ambivalence”, which they defined as “conflicting normative expectations socially defined for a particular social role associated with a single social status” (Merton & Barber, 1963, as cited in Weigert, 1991, p. 42). In this way, and from their functionalist perspective, certain positions, statuses or roles in society are steeped, as it were, in ambivalence, because they rely on and require their occupants to deal with often conflicting expectations and imperatives. For Merton and Barber, sociological ambivalence was not seen mainly as a problem, but rather a functional requirement for the effective and flexible enactment of organizational roles (see also Merton, 1976).

Andrew J. Weigert’s book *Mixed Emotions* (1991) provided another and more interactional, cultural and emotion-oriented view on how modern life increasingly creates

both a confrontation with and the need to manage and resolve ambivalences. Weigert (1991, p. 2) described ambivalence as “the temper of modernity” or “a modern form of life”, whereby he suggested that modern society in particular is characterized by the feeling of ambivalence, because it, as compared to traditional society, is a multiverse of pluralism, choice and the rise of institutions that make different worldviews and competing perspectives widely available and applicable. In earlier types of social organization, e.g. traditional and early modern society, ambivalence may also have been there but to a much less pronounced and problematic extent. According to Weigert, religious orthodoxy, traditional wisdom or claims to incontrovertible truths made feelings of ambivalence easier to tackle and often pre-empted the choices and dampened existential confusion among members of community and society (see also Weigert, 1989). However, the denizen of modern secular and pluralistic society – a society increasingly liberated from the shackles of the past – would instead have to confront ambivalence “cold turkey”, as Weigert noted, not least because “*modern culture does not effectively resolve ambivalence but increasingly generates it*” (Weigert, 1991, p. 21, original italics). The “escape from freedom” famously described by Erich Fromm (1941/1994) was perhaps more than anything else a flight from the modern pressures of ambivalence and ambiguity (Levine, 1985). In modern society, and even more so in what is sometimes called “late-modern” or “postmodern” society, knowledge, experience and evidence can be – nay, must be – constantly questioned and not uncritically accepted. There is always more to life than meets the eye. It was thus Weigert’s contention that modern society itself is one of the main reasons why ambivalence is spreading. This is a lead that is also followed by Zygmunt Bauman whose book on ambivalence – as we shall see later – was published the same year as Weigert’s. Writings by Donald Levine (1985) and Barry Smart (1999) have also zoomed in on the particularly modern roots and problematisation of ambivalence, insisting that moral dilemmas, ambiguities, paradoxes and ambivalences are part and parcel of social and human lives in times increasingly marked by choice, contingency, unpredictability and uncertainty. It is thus evident that for these writers, ambivalence is an experience that is particularly inherent in and almost institutionalized by modern society and in the way the modern mind-set organises and confronts the world.

## **Bauman and ambivalence**

Enter Zygmunt Bauman, who is one of the sociologists who has – implicitly and explicitly – devoted in-depth attention to the phenomenon of ambivalence. Throughout his writings, ambivalence is somehow always there either as a theme deliberately pursued in its own right (as in the 1991-book *Modernity and Ambivalence*, but also in his 1990 textbook *Thinking Sociologically* (Bauman, 1990) that provides many concrete ex-

amples of ambivalence as a fundamental feature of social life), or as an underlying and sometimes almost invisible phenomenon emanating, as it were, from Bauman's different analyses and interpretations (see Junge, 2008). In his work, ambivalence is both seen as a cause and a consequence of the existing cultural, social and moral arrangements. Moreover, in his writings ambivalence can be seen as a sort of iceberg – we can normally only see its tip, but beneath that visible tip there is an enormous bulk of underlying causes, hidden generative mechanisms, contradictions, tensions, paradoxes and dilemmas that significantly shape the conditions of human and social life.

Bauman can be (and has been) read in many different ways. In this way, his work is itself characterized by an unmistakable ambivalence and perhaps even inconsistency (see, e.g., Nijhoff, 1998) that makes it open to interpretation but also to criticism. For example, many interpreters have noted Bauman's somewhat gloomy and critical perspective on modern society (see, e.g., Carleheden, 2008), seemingly looking more at the dark side than at the potentially positive or beneficial opportunity-side of modernity – such as creating the foundation for political rights, the welfare state, democracy and so on. Others, however, rather regard Bauman as an optimistic writer always open to the possibilities not yet explored and the potentials still available and explorable to humans and society alike. For example, as Richard Sennett once suggested:

When you speak to Zygmunt, he's very optimistic. It's remarkable that at this stage of his life he is so engaged. He wants to know what is going to happen next year. He suggests that there is a real realm to navigate of personal responsibility, and that makes contact with young people. A lot of thinkers of his age think that the world has gone to hell in a basket – for example Adorno who, by the end of his life, didn't seem to like anything. But Bauman's work doesn't read like that, it reads like – make it better! (Sennett, as cited in Bunting, 2003, p. 20)

My own many meetings throughout the years with Bauman support this latter view – he never struck me as a defeatist nor as an Adorno-type pessimist. But on the other hand, Bauman was always keen to point to the problems and challenges that confront individuals and societies alike. I think it is safe, and not least accurate, to say that Bauman's work deliberately contains both sides – the critical *and* the descriptive, the gloomy *and* the optimistic. In all his writings, Bauman espoused an understanding that society and human life as such are always to a large degree a constant and difficult trade-off between opposite demands, values or principles, some of them potentially good, others less so. Life *is* ambivalent. Moreover, it was Bauman's contention that sociology itself is an inherently ambivalent discipline, not only because it can look in many different directions, rely on different worldviews and adopt different perspectives (theoretical and methodological), but also because sociologists are interpreters of a social world that itself is complex and difficult to capture – and they are themselves part of that world. As he thus once stated in interview:



Whether it is praised or castigated and condemned, [sociology] is always considered very much like, in simpler societies, blacksmiths were: people who were sort of alchemists, who sit astride the normal barricades which ought to be used to keep things apart. (Bauman, as cited in Kilminster & Varcoe, 1992, p. 209)

This “sitting astride barriers” that sociologists do (like the blacksmiths of the past) is exactly an attempt, with all means available, to capture the complexity and ambivalence of the world – not to overcome it or do away with it, but to uncover it, investigate it, understand it. As Bauman insisted in a later interview, now looking back on his own work after a long life in the service of sociology: “I do not remember being particularly excited by the desire to reconcile the irreconcilable or separate the inseparable: fairly early did I accept the endemic and in-excisable ambivalence of human condition” (Bauman et al., 2014, p. 34). Ambivalences, double-binds, dialectical oppositions and irreconcilable binaries are not extraordinary occurrences or temporary aberrations on the otherwise smooth and predictable surface of social life and social development – they are rather its very constitutive essence. There are always – at least – two sides to social reality: it is multidimensional, multifaceted and complex, and what appears on the apparent surface level is not necessarily a mirror image of what grows at less accessible and hidden levels and vice versa, where many of the deep-seated ambivalences grow and proliferate. This is the reason behind what I have elsewhere (Jacobsen, 2017, pp. 265–269) called Bauman’s “methodological ambivalence” – his view that ambivalence itself, for better *and* for worse, is a constitutive aspect of human and social life. It is this view that we shall seek to specify in the following.

### **Ambivalence as arch-enemy**

Bauman’s most direct and detailed engagement with the idea of ambivalence is found in *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Bauman, 1991). His most well-known book is undoubtedly *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Bauman, 1989), which earned him several international awards. *Modernity and Ambivalence* was, at least in the chronological sequence of Bauman’s writings, actually the successor of *Modernity and the Holocaust*, but it could be read as a predecessor, because it outlines some of the general principles underlying the process of modernity, which ultimately culminated in the Holocaust. The book provides an account of how and why ambivalence became a problem in and for modern society. According to Bauman, modernity is fundamentally a gigantic reason-based ordering project – not unlike the description of modernity in the famous thesis on “the dialectic enlightenment” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/2002) – reflecting an overall ambition to bring about order to a backward premodern world regarded as a natural wilderness that now requires human intervention, organization and cultivation. Bauman elsewhere described this as a transformation from “the gamekeeping utopia” of pre-

modern society – in which man [*sic*] was only a sort of warden or custodian of the God-given worldly garden – to the “gardening utopia” of modernity (later recast as “solid modernity”), in which a much more active and tinkering mentality prevails. Modern man [*sic*] simply cannot leave the world as it is – it has to be transformed and improved. The “gardener” (one of Bauman’s many metaphors – this one inspired by the work of Ernst Gellner) is concerned with ordering and structuring and turning the natural human habitat into a socialized and controlled environment capable of providing a bulwark against unpredictability, insecurity, indeterminacy and obscurity. One of the main tasks of the “gardener” is to uproot the weeds (natural as well as human) and create a beautiful and inhabitable “garden” (society) based on rational principles (in legislation, in administration, in architecture, in social control, etc.). Modernity swore to bring about clarity, enlightenment, transparency and progress to the world. Armed with the promises of science, technology, social engineering skills and a universalizing ambition, the “gardening mentality” set about transforming the existing chaos into a triumphant realization of modernity’s utopian ideals (Bauman, 2011, p. 29). In this way, modernity was obsessed with creating order and avoiding chaos at all costs. In *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Bauman described this modern ordering obsession, which permeated language, culture, science and politics alike – as follows:

Taxonomy, classification, inventory, catalogue and statistics are paramount strategies of modern practice. Modern mastery is the power to divide, classify and allocate – in thought, in practice, in the practice of thought and in the thought of practice. (Bauman, 1991, pp. 14–15)

The reason for this ordering obsession (but also, as it turned out, its main problem) was that there are certain objects or groups of people who do not fit the binary categorizing and organizing principles of modernity – objects or groups that somehow sit astride the barriers intended to keep things apart, objects or groups that are neither/nor but both/and at the same time, objects and groups that ooze ambivalence and thus trouble and danger. According to Bauman, modernity is haunted by “mixophobia” – the horror of mixing. Everything has its rightful separate place and should not be mixed or combined, which would create disorder and confusion. Those objects and groups that represent mixing – and resist modernity’s inclusionary and exclusionary strategies – are to be kept at the margins.

This mixophobia was an integral part of the widespread xenophobia of modern society. Jews, as we shall see later, served as one of the archetypal incarnations of an ambivalent group in European history – neither enemies nor friends, nationless and thus also easy targets for persecution and pogroms (Bauman, 1991, pp. 107–159). They were the very incarnation of Georg Simmel’s idea of “the stranger”: someone who arrived yesterday and stays today. More generally, Bauman mentioned the generic figure of “the stranger” (Jews included) as a primary target of modern society’s crusade against ambivalence. Obviously, Bauman’s interest in the figure of “the stranger” was preceded

by the writings of Robert E. Park and Simmel, themselves eminent analysts of the ambivalences associated with modern life. According to Bauman, as well as Park and Simmel, the stranger oozes ambivalence, marginality and indeterminacy – being “in” the place but not “of” it. Strangers are, as Bauman observed, “the people who do not fit the cognitive, moral, or aesthetic map of the world” (Bauman, 1995b, p. 1). It was thus his contention that the presence of strangers in modern society arouses confused and ambivalent sentiments (Bauman, 1995a, p. 18). The stranger simply cannot be trusted, because he/she is unfamiliar and whose loyalties have not yet been proven. Modern culture itself creates strangers and is inhabited by them (think of the large modern metropolises with their compact melting-pots of different groups of people), but it also tries to control them so that they do not “contaminate” and threaten the coherence and order modernity rests on. Some strangers, however, are stranger than others – the potentially dangerous strangers who cannot be contained and controlled. Modernity sought to administrate cohabitation and risk-manage contact with strangers such as the Jews. On the one hand, some strangers were successfully incorporated and assimilated through so-called *anthropohagic* strategies/policies, whereas others were expelled, evicted and exiled by the use of *anthropoemic* strategies/policies (Bauman, 1995a, pp. 179–180). Here Bauman draws on the anthropological notions developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1955/2012) to show two different ways of dealing with the ambivalent – “devouring/digesting it” or “throwing it up”. The strangers themselves, such as the Jews, also tried to resolve their own ambivalent situation by either turning into *parvenus* or accepting their fate as *pariahs* (Bauman, 1991, pp. 144–145). In sum, modern society found it difficult to accept strangers and other categories of people who did not fit the preconceived categories and binary positions that the modern mind operated by – something that later also came to characterize postmodern society’s treatment of immigrants and refugees (see e.g., Diken, 1998). It is thus Bauman’s contention that modernity’s incessant fight against ambivalence and ambivalent groups was an attempt to get rid of “the waste products” that called the very promises of the modern ordering project into question, but in the end the heaps of waste remained and kept growing exactly due to the ambition to annihilate it:

If modernity is about the production of order, then ambivalence is *the waste of modernity* ... Ambivalence is arguably the modern era’s most genuine worry and concern, since unlike other enemies, defeated and enslaved, it grows in strength with every success of modern powers. (Bauman, 1991, p. 15)

Bauman’s argument is thus that the modernist quest to do away with ambivalence was already from the outset a self-defeating endeavour – a battle that simply could not be won, albeit not for lack of trying. Trying to eradicate ambivalence was similar to trying to escaping or outrunning one’s own shadow – quite impossible. Ordering itself breeds ambivalence.

## Annihilating the ambivalent

As mentioned above, in *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991) Bauman was concerned with trying to show how ambivalence with modern society increasingly became a problem seeking a solution. It turned out that “The Final Solution” was one of the attempts (indeed the most radical attempt) to deal effectively with the imagined problem posed by the ambivalent population of the Jews in Europe. In Bauman’s critically acclaimed book, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), he outlines – from a sociological and semi-historical perspective – how the extermination of the Jewish population in Europe was made possible in a modern, rational and seemingly civilized society. The book is the chronological predecessor to *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991), but – as previously mentioned – in many ways it is actually a concrete exemplification and illustration of modernity’s incessant fight against ambivalence that *Modernity and Ambivalence* subsequently described in more general terms.

The book *Modernity and the Holocaust* seeks to understand the murder of millions of Jews not as an unexplainable deviation from the path towards modern society, but rather as a culmination (and test) of the potentials that modernity contained – potentials made possible by modern bureaucracy, technology and science dangerously coupled with an ideological frenzy stemming from an anti-Semitic hatred of the Jews. All of this, as history showed, culminated in the attempt to annihilate the Jewish population of Europe – and with its six million victims it was an attempt that came ominously close to completion. Even though the Nazi regime in many respects neither represented modernity nor relied on the reason-based enlightenment project often associated with modernity (just think of the Nazi party’s spectacular glorification of the past and its nostalgic longing for the values and traditions of yore), it nevertheless shared with modern society a deep-seated aversion towards the ambivalent and a desire and determination to minimize and/or annihilate it with the means available for the task. In many ways there was an eerie normality about the way modern society approached this task. In his book, Bauman thus cites Henry Feingold’s chilling comparison of the death camps of the Holocaust with the production system of the factories of modern industrial capitalism:

[Auschwitz was] a mundane extension of the factory system. Rather than producing goods, the raw material was human beings and the end-product was death, so many units per day marked carefully on the manager’s production charts. The chimneys, the very symbol of the modern factory system, poured forth acrid smoke produced by burning human flesh. The brilliantly organized railroad grid of modern Europe carried a new kind of raw material to the factories. It did so in the same manner as with other cargo. In the gas chambers the victims inhaled noxious gas generated by prussic acid pellets, which were produced by the advanced chemical industry of Germany. Engineers designed the crematoria; managers designed the system of bureaucracy that worked with a zest and efficiency more backward nations would envy. Even the overall plan itself was a reflection of the modern scientific spirit gone awry.

What we witnessed was nothing less than a massive scheme of social engineering. (Feingold, as cited in Bauman, 1989, p. 8)

*Modernity and the Holocaust* contains many detailed and thought-provoking insights into the insidious processes leading from the initial definition of the Jews as a problem (as vermin) via the stripping of their rights, their persecution and social isolation, their forced incarceration in ghettos and concentration camps, their killing in the gas chambers to the smoke rising from the crematoria chimneys. Many historical, structural, technological and ideological factors played a significant role in all of this. For the purposes of appreciating Bauman's perspective on ambivalence, however, it will suffice here to say that the main reason why the Jews ended up as the victims of genocide was that they were seen as the very essence or embodiment of the ambivalence that modernity (and in this specific case the Nazi regime) could not accept. In addition to this, they were as a nationless people already known as "ideal" historical scapegoats, as well as being unable to "return home" or appeal to the assistance and protection of external parties.

*Modernity and the Holocaust*, without resorting to the use of the specific notion of "ambivalence", is quite informative when it comes to understanding why some – albeit a minority according to Bauman (1989, p. 117) – of the Jews cooperated, under the most extreme coercion and facing death at any time, with their persecutors instead of openly resisting (an insight that might perhaps also be indicative of why the majority of the ordinary German population and even most *Wehrmacht* soldiers did not protest or intervene,) and how it was thus possible to exterminate so many human beings so effectively and so invisibly. In one section of the book, Bauman writes quite extensively – and controversially – about what he describes as "the solicitation of cooperation of the victims" (Bauman, 1989, pp. 117–150). As he shows in this section, the Jews – for example those working in the *Judenräte* or the *Sonderkommando* – were placed in a fundamentally ambivalent situation, however with seemingly only one option available: to cooperate, either with the purpose of saving, albeit temporarily, as many as possible or with saving oneself. In reality, there was often really no choice. For the Jewish victims, the apparent choice was thus between cooperating (and perhaps securing one's family or surviving oneself for perhaps only a few more months) or facing certain death (the latter often being the outcome anyway). Extending this insight to groups of perpetrators or ordinary Germans, for at least some of the perpetrators the choice was between taking part in the atrocities or risking personal repercussions (for themselves and their families), and for the passive German civilian onlookers the choice was between helping the victims or turning a blind eye to what happened to them (thus embracing the innocence of "not knowing"). Ambivalence was all around – the deep-seated and desperate ambivalence between morality or survival, between active involvement and disobedience or personal safety, between "helping thy neighbour" or basic self-preservation. This ambivalence was in many cases resolved – although not always without

serious doubts and desperate soul-searching – because the alternative (refusing, resisting or protesting) was regarded as a potentially deadly choice. As Bauman (1989, p. 122) insisted, it was exactly this ability of the modern, rational bureaucracy that the Holocaust rested on in that it exhausts and annihilates the actual choices of the actors. *Modernity and the Holocaust* is indeed a dark book, because it depicts some of the intricate processes and accompanying ambivalences that lead to inhumanity and ultimately the destruction of millions of people in the Holocaust – in a modern age regarded (and regarding itself) as the apex of civilization. It is also an illuminating book, because it details how ambivalence was constructed and managed at the structural and individual levels. Finally, it is also a hopeful book, because it describes how some – perhaps not “many” but “some”, and often at a high personal cost – decided actively to intervene and defend the right to ambivalence when helping the Jews or refusing to passively accept their definition as different/deviant, their dehumanization and their ultimate destruction. As Bauman thus stated towards the end of the book: “Evil is not all-powerful. It can be resisted. The testimony of the few who did resist shatters the authority of the logic of self-preservation. It shows it for what it is in the end – *a choice*” (Bauman, 1989, p. 207, original italics). The resolution to the question of doing good versus doing evil (or doing nothing) may seem to be fundamentally ambivalent, but in Bauman’s view it is, in the end, always a matter of choice.

In many ways, Bauman’s critical analysis of the modern quest for order culminating in the Holocaust atrocities has certain similarities to and overlaps with Norbert Elias’s (1939/1994) description of “the civilizing process” which is also a story of how modern society and the modern quest for order and civilization as a by-product produced its own fair share of decivilization – not unlike Bauman’s observation that modernity’s quest for order paradoxically produced the preconditions for the rise and growth of ambivalence (Burkitt, 1996). For example, as was aptly observed by Richard L. Rubenstein and John R. Roth in their work on the shattering impact of the Holocaust on human civilization: “Civilization now includes death camps and *Muselmänner* among its material and spiritual products” (Rubenstein & Roth, 1987, p. 324). In *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Bauman insisted that in his work on the Holocaust as a culmination of modern society’s war against ambivalence he was interested in understanding the rationalization of evil (Bauman, 1989), whereas Elias in his work was much more concerned with a detailed description of the civilization of manners and the rise of certain emotions (such as shame), not least due to a centralization of state administrative powers throughout the course of many centuries. To summarize, Bauman (and to some extent Elias as well) provided a socio-historical perspective on how ambivalence crept to the core of the problem of order in modern society. Ambivalence was not only a problem to be solved – it was itself a problem (indeed a paradoxical problem) arising out of the very problem-solving activities. Bauman and Elias both show how social life is always about trade-offs, when something is gained and obtained, something else is simultane-

ously lost. In this way, ambivalence is here to stay and we may either decide to combat or embrace it. Bauman ended *Modernity and Ambivalence* as a sort of bridge to his later 1990s writings on postmodernity by expressing some hope that postmodernity, contrary to modernity, would be better able to embrace rather than simply reject ambivalence (Bauman, 1991, pp. 231–279). As it turned out, however, postmodernity promised more than it could deliver, and Bauman eventually towards the end of the 1990s gave up on the “postmodern perspective” with which he had become wedded and instead developed his critical diagnosis of “liquid modernity”.

## **Liquid-modern ambivalences**

By the turn of the 20th century, Bauman invented a new terminology with which to capture contemporary society. Increasingly dissatisfied with his longstanding but perhaps not entirely involuntary association with the so-called “postmodern perspective”, he instead introduced the vocabulary of “liquid modernity” with its concomitant notions of “liquid times”, “liquid life”, “liquid love”, “liquid fear”, “light capitalism”, etc. (as well as the counter-notions of “solid modernity”, “heavy capitalism”, etc.). This did not mean, however, that Bauman abandoned his “postmodern writings” from the 1990s, but rather he took them into a new direction now armed with a new catchy and critical terminology. One might perhaps even suggest that the book *Liquid Modernity* (2000) marked a terminological shift rather than a significant change in the content or substance of his work. One of the key concerns in Bauman’s (2000), by now widely publicized, analysis of “liquid modernity” was the disclosure and diagnosis of the many paradoxes and ambivalences created by the increasing liquefaction of contemporary modernity. Obviously, all societies and all historical epochs, in one way or another, produce patterns of ambivalence or paradoxes on the social, interactional, psychological and emotional level. As such, paradoxes, dilemmas, contradictions, discrepancies, inconsistencies, chasms, ambivalences, pressures and inner tensions are endemic to most societies most of the time. According to Bauman, solid modernity was, as we saw above, haunted by the paradox of ambivalence – for example, he showed how the quest for order so incessantly pursued by solid-modern society ended up producing overwhelming amounts of ambivalence and with it also incomprehensible amounts of human suffering (Bauman, 1989, 1991). But liquid modernity also produces its own fair share of paradoxical life-circumstances and ambivalent outcomes.

As Matthias Junge has suggested regarding Bauman’s engagement with ambivalence since his “liquid-modern turn”: “In *Liquid Modernity*, we lack a definition of ambivalence and find instead a discussion of the emergence of insecurity, uncertainty and risk” (Junge, 2008, p. 49). True, in Bauman’s “liquid-modern writings” from 2000 onwards, he ex-

plored and elaborated on the transformation of the social landscape that is now increasingly characterized by processes of individualization and globalization – processes that tear society apart from the inside and outside and which simultaneously result in the rise of new forms of poverty and pathologies, as well as securing the continuation and solidification of global patterns of social stratification and inequality known also in solid-modern society (see e.g., Bauman, 1998a, 2001). Uncertainty, insecurity and unpredictability now prevail and become endemic. Liquid-modern society is increasingly characterized as a consumer society with its winners and losers – a society in which everything can now be bought and sold. The losers in the liquid-modern consumer game are the so-called “flawed consumers” and the “wasted lives” who are expelled from taking any part in the game for simple lack of resources (Bauman, 1998b, 2004, 2007). This situation is exacerbated by the dismantling of the universalistic version of the welfare state in favour of a more limited means-tested version (it is important to stress here that Bauman was writing from a British-American perspective), meaning that all the miseries and misfortunes that now befall the individual become a personal responsibility (Bauman, 2001). Adding to this situation, liquid-modern society is a society haunted by widespread fits of fear and eruptions of anxiety within many different areas of social life (Bauman, 2006), and with the rise of the so-called “TINA Syndrome” (the acronym for “There Is No Alternative”), liquid-modern life is for many – and particularly the less fortunate groups – experienced as a sort of inescapable trap.

It is Bauman’s overall contention in his post-2000 writings that liquid modernity has not solved the problem of ambivalence nor attempted to annihilate it from the face of the earth as was the (however futile) strategy of its solid-modern predecessor. With the retreat of the State as an active agent in the organization of national as well as international affairs and with the decline of the universalistic ambitions of creating and maintaining order all everywhere, ambivalence is no longer regarded as the arch-enemy that must be fought and defeated at any cost. Contrary to its solid-modern predecessor, liquid-modern society has allowed the problem to float freely, not trying to provide large-scale solutions to the presence of ambivalence. Ambivalence is certainly still there (in some cases even more so than before) but it is no longer a societal problem to solve. Ambivalence, it has been thoroughly individualized and privatized like everything else. “No more salvation by society”, as Bauman frequently – and critically – quoted Peter Drucker for stating (just as he critically cited Margaret Thatcher’s claim that “There is no such thing as society”). It is therefore now up to the hapless individuals themselves in a thoroughly individualized consumer society to find viable solutions to the problems confronted – and often problems that they have not themselves created or caused but simply have to live with (Bauman, 2001). As Bauman thus remarked, the task of the liquid-modern “artist of life”, who now needs to perform the difficult balancing act between socially produced contradictions, constraints and ambivalences and individually-experienced outcomes under increasingly precarious condi-



tions, is to create their own more or less stable platforms for consumption, success, happiness and meaning, since these are no longer provided by the societal collective (Bauman, 2005, 2008a). It seems as if the notion of “damned if you do and damned if you don’t” captures the innate ambivalence characteristic of liquid-modern life. The overall problem of ambivalence itself has become insolvable – if it ever was solvable – not because it has grown bigger or more acute as such, but simply because no one (no agency) is capable any longer of solving the puzzle of ambivalence or interested in doing so. In the few cases where active engagement with ambivalence is in fact required – for example regarding the treatment and management of the groups of “human waste” (immigrants, refugees, social welfare recipients, the homeless, etc.) – society resorts to the same tried-and-tested policies and strategies that were used in solid-modernity: criminalization, finger-pointing, victim-blaming and marginalization.

### **Towards a sociology of ambivalence**

Zygmunt Bauman’s writings have now attained the status of the immortals of the discipline of sociology. Today, Bauman’s work ranks among the key contributions to contemporary social theory, particularly his writings on the Holocaust, globalization and liquid modernity which are among the most frequently cited. Throughout *all* Bauman’s writings, ambivalence has been there as a sort of shadowy and implicit existence, but sometimes – as in *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Bauman, 1991) – stepping out of the shadows and thus showing us that ambivalence is there as a major moving force of social life. Bauman not only analysed ambivalence – in his writings he continuously defended the ambivalent as a valuable category (and an inescapable phenomenon in social and human life) and served as a moral spokesman for those groups of people who were deemed ambivalent, expendable and useless or who were voiceless – the Jews, the strangers, the flawed consumers, the “weeds” and the human waste, the losers of liquid-modern life, etc.

As some commentators and interpreters have pointed out (see e.g. Best, 2013; Nijhoff, 1998; Rattansi, 2017), perhaps there are some identifiable inconsistencies, certain inaccuracies, some omissions and a number of weaknesses in Bauman’s perspective. Some of these may be attributed to his special interests and the inability to write about or cover everything. Some of them may be due to the particular way he was working and writing, belonging to a type of critical and interpretative sociology that was not excessively preoccupied with solid empirical documentation or with providing “proof” for all statements or analyses. However, some of them may simply also mirror the many inconsistencies, unpredictabilities and paradoxes of social and human life in general. Bauman was painfully aware – not least from his own personal experiences

living as an exile for almost half a century – that social and human life always contain a fair share of ambivalences confronting the individual, ambivalences that require a careful and critical analysis, ambivalences that cannot be captured or resolved by applying seemingly sophisticated statistical methods or systematic models of social life. Bauman once in hindsight reflected on the gradual development of his own perspective from his younger years, in which he embraced the idea of an all-encompassing system that could explain and contain everything (orthodox Marxism), to the maturation of a more nuanced, critical and less dogmatic view that life is much more complex, unpredictable, ambivalent, and thus unlikely to fit into one iron-clad logically conceived system of thought:

I came to believe that the non-sequiturs, ambiguities, contradictions, incompatibilities, inconsistencies and sheer contingencies for which human thoughts and deeds are notorious should not be viewed as temporary deficiencies not-yet-fully-extinct or not-yet-completely-exterminated on-the-road-to-perfection – nor trigger the streamlining/systematizing/ordering zeal of [the] philosophical mind. They are rather the crucial, constitutive features of the human modality of being in the world, and for a genuine dialogue between that modality and sociological reflection to emerge and continue sociological analysis needs to attune itself to their ubiquitous and perpetuate presence. They need to be given full recognition (the residence permit they neither need nor would ask for) and treated with respect, instead of being devalued, derided and condemned. (Bauman, 2008b, p. 235)

Embracing the contingent, ambivalent and unpredictable modality of life is simultaneously bold and brave but also runs the risk of being regarded as inconsistent, quixotic, unsystematic, pursuing the fragmentary and giving in to whimsical ideas or utopian pipedreams. Moreover, it also makes it difficult to provide a simple or clear-cut answer to the classic “what comes first” question: the individual or society? Whom/what is the moving force behind social change – and ambivalence? Many years ago, Zdzisław Walaszek wrote of Bauman’s work – long before he became “Bauman” the internationally acclaimed sociologist – that “his image of an individual appears to be a fiction, an identity existing independently of human experience that is inevitably structured by role expectations. His epistemology resembles Marx’s theory that the world is objectified in practical consciousness; with its emphasis on man’s obligation to make his own world” (Walaszek, 1977, p. 346). True, this may indeed seem paradoxical and even inconsequential – that humans are free to make and re-make their own lives but nevertheless need to confront a world that appears not only alien but also robust and unchangeable. However, this is a classic Marxist position: that man [*sic*] is free to make decisions but not under conditions of his [*sic*] own personal choosing. Despite Bauman’s showdown with orthodox and dogmatic Marxism already during the 1950s and early 1960s, and his brief flirt with structuralism in the 1970s, he continued to stick to this basic understanding throughout his career, just as the classic Marxist notion of alienation also continued to work as a subterranean presence throughout his career.

This understanding is thus a continuous part of Bauman's critical perspective that maintains that the world is a perplexing place full of ambivalences, dilemmas, paradoxes, schisms, contradictions and so on, which it is up to the individual to find solutions to – but they cannot be resolved once and for all. There is always insecurity, tension and anxiety associated with such a life – but there is also the freedom to make a difference and to do good (Bauman, 1993). Bauman once critically labelled conventional sociology a “science of unfreedom” (Bauman, 1988, p. 5), by which he suggested that sociology had mostly been concerned with exploring those aspects of life (actions, norms and values) that are somehow controlled by external social/societal factors or providing a vocabulary (e.g. “culture”, “ideology” or “tradition”) that captures the intricate ways in which the social/societal delimits individual freedom of choice by de-randomizing it. This is also the main reason why Bauman throughout his career remained a valiant opponent of those perspectives (functionalism, behaviourism, positivism and later also orthodox economic deterministic Marxism and structuralism) that willingly pre-empt the choices available to the human beings whose lives they describe and analyse.

Just like his predecessors – the giant social thinkers Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Georg Simmel and Norbert Elias (and so many others) – Bauman's work qualifies as an analysis of the innate ambivalence characteristic of modern society and modern life. Bauman, however, not only analysed ambivalence but defended it and embraced it. He made it a trademark of his writings as a mirror-image of the world he observed and aspired to understand. In his work, Bauman has shown that ambivalence is not an enemy to be fought, not a problem to be solved, not something to be annihilated or eliminated from the face of the earth. Even if we tried to fight it, solve it or annihilate it, the outcome would be its expansion and proliferation into every nook and cranny of social and human life. Although ambivalence is annoying, it is also a marker of freedom. Ambivalence is an integral part of the human-being-in-the-world that must be recognized and embraced. In the end it is perhaps what makes us human and makes our lives an unpredictable puzzle.

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### Nieusuwalna – Zygmunt Bauman jako analityk i ambasador ambiwalencji

**Abstrakt:** W pracach Zygmunta Baumana problematyka ambiwalencji raz po raz wyraziście zaznacza swoją obecność w analizach nowoczesności, a następnie płynnej nowoczesności. Wprawdzie szczególnie poczesne miejsce zajmuje ona w jego książce *Modernity and Ambivalence* z roku 1991 (wyd. pol. *Wieloznaczność nowoczesna. Nowoczesność wieloznaczna*, 1995), lecz wątek ambiwalencji przewija się także w późniejszych książkach Baumana poświęconych życiu w społeczeństwie płynnej nowoczesności. Co więcej, socjologiczna perspektywa przyjęta przez Baumana jako taka przepojona jest ambiwalencją, a wiele zagadnień, którymi pasjonował się i które zgłębiał w całej swojej twórczości – na przykład, wolność, moralność, nieśmiertelność lub utopia – same w sobie ucieleśniają ambiwalencję. Bauman zawsze podkreślał, że kształt świata nie jest niezmienny czy ustanowiony raz na zawsze, a ludzie mogą podważać go i przeobrażać. Ambiwalencja zatem jest nie tyle bolączką, którą należałoby leczyć, ile raczej faktem, który trzeba zaakceptować. Niniejszy artykuł poświęcony jest tematyce ambiwalencji jako lejtymotywowi pism Baumana. Autor pokrótce kreśli i omawia ciągłą refleksję Baumana nad ambiwalencją, aby wskazać, że zagadnieniem tym socjologia być może powinna zająć się z większą uwagą niż dotychczas.

**Wyrażenia kluczowe:** Zygmunt Bauman; ambiwalencja; socjologia; nowoczesność; płynna nowoczesność

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