

RESEARCH PAPER

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SHIFTING FROM BUSINESS TO ART: ZYGMUNT BAUMAN AND THE INTELLECTUAL CHALLENGE OF MODERNITY

Accepted: 15 Dec 2017

UDK: 1Bauman, Z.

1:94:316.7

The paper examines the writings of Zygmunt Bauman from the perspective of intellectual history. It argues that the knowledge Bauman produced is fundamental to the cultural history of modernity, because his understanding is structured by that cultural history. This becomes clear when we focus on Bauman's statements concerning the impact of capitalism on individual life, and zoom in on a shift in thought symptomatic of the cultural history of late capitalism: from the concept of "life-business" to the concept of the "art of life". This shift from business to art as the principal norm-driving element is indicative of a cultural history that has arrived at the aestheticisation of society. In order to grasp the shift, the paper will first define late capitalism or late modernity as understood by Bauman. Second, it will describe the effects of late modernity on the individual way of life. Finally, the discussion will go beyond Bauman, reading "the art of life" he promotes towards the end of a long intellectual journey not only as a reflection of the ongoing process of the aestheticisation of society, but as an encounter with it.

Key words: Bauman, intellectual history, modernity, aestheticisation of society, the art of life

WHICH CAPITALISM? WHICH MODERNITY?

According to Zygmunt Bauman, we are currently undergoing a transition from organised to liquid modernity – a process in which the social forms (structures) that limit individual freedom dissolve. Institutions are loosening their control, and accepted patterns of behaviour are rapidly losing shape. This liquefaction of social forms inevitably becomes self-conscious, and the state of their non-existence as a frame of reference for human action and

long-term life strategies is accepted, thus becoming normalised. Bauman speaks of the separation and imminent divorce of politics from power, and of the loss of political control.

The eradication of social systems, which provide stability, leads to an erosion of collective action. As Raymond L. M. Lee points out, the concept of liquid modernity implies “a sense of rootlessness to all forms of social construction” (Lee 2005: 61), and it is this that undermines the social foundations of solidarity. The concept of “community” as a term for the totality of a population living in the domain of a sovereign state sounds “increasingly hollow” (Bauman 2007b: 2). The reduction of political control exposes the unprotected individual to the uncertainties of a goods and labour market in which only temporary forms of cooperation and teamwork are strategically meaningful. “Project” and “network” become key words. And as the labour market turns into liquid forms of cooperation, society as a whole is increasingly understood as a network, and not as a stable structure. In other words, society is perceived and treated as a matrix, consisting of random connections and separations and an infinite abundance of possible permutations. In such a society there is no need for long-term thinking, planning and action. The dissolution of fixed structures leads to a series of short-term projects and episodes not only in political history, but also in the life of each individual being. Life no longer means development in the sense of maturation, career advancement, or progress, but is fragmented, leaving the individual to pay the price for a social constellation that s/he did not produce, but of whose origin and existence s/he is not entirely innocent. The individual of modernity seeks increasing levels of freedom and emancipation, meaning that, simultaneously, solid forms of coexistence and security vanish.

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What Bauman calls liquid modernity includes those theories of contemporary society that revolve around the concepts of risk, experience and creativity, because although life in liquid times is necessarily risky, it is also creative and exciting. In his 1986 book *Risikogesellschaft* (a core text of contemporary sociology, about the social dimensions of the postmodern) Ulrich Beck assumed that we were moving towards a new modernity. Since then, defining the new has become a real challenge for those who dare to contemplate the theoretical understanding of contemporary society. Therefore, Beck understood his conception of risk society explicitly as an attempt to further define the prefix in the term “Postmodernism”, whereby the attempt itself was seen as a contribution to mitigate the “Verunsicherung des Zeitgeistes” (Beck 1986: 13). A decade later, another great attempt to

understand the new modernity followed: Gerhard Schulze’s *The Experience Society* (Original 1992, English translation 2008), a much more relaxed reading of postmodern times. Schulze shifted the focus from the risks to difficulties arising from the experience orientation of his contemporaries, and their relentless search for happiness. Only recently did this experience orientation, and thus the aestheticisation of everyday life, that Schulze described become the starting point of the newest sociological reading of postmodern society – the society of aestheticisation described by Andreas Reckwitz in *The Invention of Creativity: Modern Society and the Culture of the New* (Original 2012, English translation 2017).

Although Bauman includes the concepts of risk, experience and creativity in his conception of liquid modernity, he shifts the weight towards the latter. He can therefore be seen both as an observer of a society increasingly defined by the radical process of aestheticisation, and as a player within this society. In order to comprehend both aspects – Bauman’s positioning of modern society and his viewpoint within it – we must return to the beginning of the second modernity. For Bauman, as for the other theorists mentioned, this starts with the disappearance of the old order of industrial society or, as Bauman calls it, the melting of solids. To clarify, Bauman considers the melting of solid forms a general characteristic of modernity. But since the second half of the twentieth century, it has reached a new level. In *Liquid Modernity*, Bauman writes, that the “ ‘melting of solids’, the permanent feature of modernity, has therefore acquired a new meaning” (Bauman 2000: 6). What has almost completely melted in this liquid modernity is the belief in a goal-oriented, orientation-giving, and therefore also action-guiding development. If it contains any notion of improvement and meaningfulness at all, this has shifted from the domain of the state to that of the individual. Therefore, the modernity with which we are dealing today is, according to Bauman, an individualised, privatised version, in which people must try to orient themselves, and bear the responsibility for their wrong decisions:

No more great leaders to tell you what to do and to release you from responsibility for the consequences of your doings; in the world of individuals, there are only other individuals from which you may draw examples of how to go about your own life-business, bearing full responsibility for the consequences of investing your trust in this example rather than in another (Bauman 2000: 30).

Bauman ultimately invests his trust in the artist of life, but he has not yet reached this point in the 1990s. Rather it is the concept of life-business that

captures his valuation of individual life in late capitalism. To understand this concept, we have to understand the ambivalence of late modernity: on one hand, the disappearance of solid forms and rigid orders allows us enormous freedom. On the other, however, liquid modernity leaves us in a state of uncertainty from which we cannot escape: life can be lived in any and all directions, but never reaches a goal. Bauman speaks repeatedly of running in *Treibsand* (quicksand). Whether an individual is right in the freely chosen and self-responsible shaping of his or her life, and whether we lead real, good, and beautiful lives, we cannot know for certain because the former basis of such judgments has vanished into the sands of liquid modernity.

4 Today, individuality stands for the autonomy of the individual, both as a right and as a duty. Only the duality of the right to be an individual, and the necessity of being one, can explain what Bauman calls the individualisation race. All of us are involved in this costly process, which is directly bound to the dissolution of class barriers. Bauman summarises this development by drawing attention to a “embourgeoisement of the proletariat” and a “proletarianization of the bourgeoisie” (Bauman 2000: 25).¹ These processes have mobilised and de-socialised society to a degree that enables and motivates the race for individual uniqueness. The society in which the individualisation race is unceasingly run is one of consumption. According to Bauman, individualism today is as consumer goods were to industrial society: a fetish, i.e. a completely human product to which superhuman authority is attributed by forgetting the human origins and human activities that created it. It is not coincidental that the pattern of consumption converges with “the aestheticization of everyday life” (Lee 2005: 71). As David Roberts shows, we have to focus on “the progression from the culture industry (Adorno) to the aesthetic economy (Böhme)” (Roberts 2003: 83) in order to grasp the spirit of contemporary capitalism and culture.²

Bauman does not address the role that art plays in the fetishisation of individualism, but he points in the right direction, drawing attention to the late 1920s and the beginnings of the change from industrial society

¹ It should be noted that Bauman does not provide any empirical data to support his narrative of modernity. As Richard Kilminster and Ian Varcoe point out, Bauman “prefers a high level of generality, is highly reflective and, for the most part, deploys empirical data only selectively and suggestively” (Kilminster and Varcoe 1996: 5).

² For a definition of aestheticisation and a description of the process of the aestheticisation of society, see Reckwitz 2017, especially the chapter “Aestheticisation and the Creativity Dispositif: The Social Regime of Aesthetic Novelty”.

to consumerism. It is no accident that the 1920s in Europe were the high point of art, and of the Bohemian culture. From within this culture, the fetishisation of individualism was promoted and observed. Bauman believes that contemporary observers have barely noticed this process. The only exception is Siegfried Kracauer, who, observing behaviours in Berlin in the early 1920s, identified the youth and beauty craze as a consumer opportunity, grounded in the fear of not being able to survive in the labour market. According to Bauman, the behaviours attested to by Kracauer have since spread like forest fire. The attributes required for customisation can be purchased in the department store and shopping mall, as the individual prepares himself for the tremendous task of a consumerist life shaped by the permanent attempt to fight upwards. Thus an individualisation that grew from an opposition to conformity and non-freedom becomes a new corset: the fetishism of individuality, which disguises the purely commercial reality of consumer society.

Yet it was not just Kracauer who was watching and reflecting on this new life under the conditions of capitalism, but a whole host of cultural critics, in particular Walter Benjamin in his Arcades project. Stressing the dream time of capitalism as the other side of the culture industry, Benjamin anticipated Guy Debord's society of the spectacle (Roberts 2003: 85). Furthermore, it was Benjamin who extended “the concept of the culture industry from commodification of culture to the culturalization of the commodity” through its investment with symbolic meaning and through the aestheticisation of both consumption and everyday life (Roberts 2003: 87). If we dig deeper into the metropolis of the 1920s, we can see that it was not just the salaried masses who were living a new life, but, to a greater extent, the Bohemians who, as a minority, were already living the liquid life of our times. The life of the Bohemian was a precarious one, lived under conditions of constant uncertainty. As I have shown elsewhere in greater detail, these city dwellers with aesthetic ambitions anticipated the second modernity in that they accepted the challenge of modernity: confronted with problems of orientation and control, and oscillating between exciting adventure and paralyzing confusion, they collectively took (and thereby shaped) the road to the art of life (See Magerski 2015: 134–211).

Bauman followed the Bohemian theory much later on, in a humble way involving the shift from life-business to the art of life. However, in his critical road to the art of life, Bauman engages in the same struggle: trying to orient himself among a growing number of alternative readings of an ever changing modernity, he navigates his way through the myriad

possibilities in the relentless intellectual movement, trying to recognise and interpret useful information and signals in the flood he encounters. After a long and risky life threatened by existence itself, Bauman vacillates between the ambivalent feeling of critique and affirmation, finally opting (in an academically secured observational position) for a cautiously affirmative interpretation of late modernity.

FROM THE LOSS OF IDENTITY TO THE ART OF LIFE

6 To reiterate a crucial point: liquid modernity, as Bauman understands it in 2000, is an individualised society. Late capitalist society is highly ambivalent. On one hand is the free individual, released from social ties and obligations. Bauman states that “[m]en and women are fully and truly free, and so the agenda of emancipation has been all but exhausted” (Bauman 2000: 22), and that “[m]ost of us, the residents of the late modern or postmodern world, are in this sense as free as our ancestors could only dream of being” (Bauman 2001a: 44). The dream of freedom, of a life beyond constraints and boundaries, has been realised in liquid modernity. But, on the other hand, there is uncertainty about freedom, and a growing discomfort among the free and emancipated, since the price of individual freedom is precariousness, instability and vulnerability. Bauman bundles these features of contemporary life, and calls them “uncertainty” – a factual state as well as a negative feeling, which swells as freedom grows. In order to clarify his intent here, Bauman uses the German word *Unsicherheit*: “a much more complex discomfort, which includes uncertainty and unsafety alongside insecurity” (Bauman 2001a: 44).

The venue in which Bauman sketches the features of contemporary life is the city: “City and social change are almost synonymous. Change is the quality of city life and the mode of urban existence. Change and city may, and indeed should be defined by reference to each other” (Bauman 2003: 104). The aforementioned problems of orientation and control are directly related to the city. To reach his destination, the city dweller must choose his path from a growing number of alternatives. That is why Bauman defines the city as a “place of pleasure and danger, of opportunity and threat” (Bauman 2003: 223). Here, the anthropological condition of community has to prove itself, because it is the city in which the human ability to live with risk and accept responsibility for its consequences is tested. “The survival and well-

being of *communitas* (and so, indirectly of *societas* as well)”, Bauman writes, “depend on human imagination, inventiveness and courage in breaking the routine and trying the untried ways” (Bauman 2003: 73).

Facing his own assessment of the condition of man and of liquid modernity, Bauman seems uncertain of how to position himself. No doubt uncertainty is the price of freedom, although one does not exist without the other. Man demands freedom *and* security, and thus fixes his desire on two aims that are difficult to reconcile. “We cannot be human without both security and freedom; but we cannot have both at the same time and both in quantities which we find fully satisfactory” (Bauman 2001b: 5). Confronted with this dilemma, the man of liquid modernity becomes the builder/creator/former of his own life. Bauman interprets the builder with the logic of economy: life in liquid modernity is life-business. In his attempt to combine the apparently mutually exclusive, but nevertheless indispensable goals of freedom and security, the individual is constantly faced with situations in which he is compelled to compromise. In this context, Bauman speaks of “trade-offs”, i.e. situations in which one must balance freedom and security, with the knowledge that any profit on one side equals a loss on the other. “The perfect balance between freedom and security,” says Bauman, “is perhaps a logical incongruence and practical impossibility, but this is a most powerful way to seek ever better formulas for trade-off” (Bauman 2001a: 42). Instead of hoping for a recipe to resolve the dilemma, one must be reconciled to an infinite search for an improved formula for finding this balance.

But how can this be? Why is there no uprising, no revolution against the ongoing process of deregulation and privatisation, of outsourcing and precariousness? According to Bauman, there is no doubt that all societies are increasingly facing permanent economic and social inequality. Yet, watching the individual search for balance from his standpoint as a faculty member, Bauman concludes that risk (defined as a real existential threat), seems to have vanished in liquid modernity. “Freedom”, Bauman comments rather laxly, “does not feel too risky as long as things go, obediently, the way one wishes them to go” (Bauman 2001b: 22f). This is precisely why the individual in late capitalism prefers freedom; late capitalist society, seen through friendly eyes, is not a battle, but a playground. In the paradoxical constellation of “the society of mass individualization” (Roberts 2003: 86), life is no longer about changing the rules of the game, but rather about the right to participate in it.

If we understand society as a game, we reach a crucial point: the transition from a capitalist society to an aestheticised (and aestheticising) one. This

transition occurs in “the age of contingency for itself, the self-conscious contingency” (Bauman 2001b: 301), and as such, the age of self-conscious contingency is also the “age of community”, or rather that of inventing and imagining community. Because society, with the unmaking of rigid orders, recognises itself as being made and thus creates the conditions for the possibility of new social forms. As a result, new social forms are desired, sought, imagined and invented. According to Bauman, however, these communities can no longer be stable, since the urge for individual freedom undermines a true and binding community; the shared understanding that is indispensable to a deeply supportive community is lost. Bauman believes that such an understanding involves more than a negotiated consensus. Moreover, it should be self-evident, and thus quiet:

Community can only be numb – or dead. Once it starts to praise its unique valour, wax lyrical about its pristine beauty and stick on nearby fences wordy manifestoes calling its members to appreciate its wonders and telling all the others to admire them or shut up – one can be sure that the community is no more [...] (Bauman 2001b: 10).

8 He continues: “From now on, all homogeneity must be ‘hand-picked’ from a tangled mass of variety by selection, separation and exclusion; all unity needs to be made; concord ‘artificially produced’ is the sole form of community available” (Bauman 2001b: 14).

This is the “aesthetic community” (Bauman 2001b: 15), and according to Bauman it is generated by problems of identity and linked to the entertainment industry and the spectacle. Bauman denies that it involves any ethical liabilities and long-term commitments. As fashions lacking any genuine obligations, aesthetic communities are seen as superficial phenomena. This is made clearer by the term “cloakroom communities” (Bauman 2001b: 199), which describes fleeting communities that come into being with a common aspect, or for a common purpose. “Cloakroom communities”, Bauman writes, “need a spectacle with appeals to similar interests dormant in otherwise disparate individuals and so bring them together for a stretch of time” (Bauman 2001b: 199).

This harsh judgment is based on the concept of identity that Bauman pushes emphatically between the concept of the individual and the concept of community. Consequently, he neglects the fact that, as is the case with Georg Simmel and the form of mode or money, the form of identity is a double-edged sword. The early sociology of culture recognised that the construction of identity is just as characteristic of modern man as it is

hopeless. That residents of late modernity still attempt to undertake this construction does not change the insight. Even Bauman agrees, stating that “[i]n a liquid modern setting of life, identities are the most common, most acute, most deeply felt and troublesome incarnations of ambivalence”. Or, critically, in “our fluid world, committing oneself to a single identity for life, or even for less than a whole life but for a very long time to come, is a risky business” (Bauman 2004: 89).

The solid forms have melted and there is no way back. The idea of identity by birth was superseded by that of identity through work, but neither is salient today. Instead, in contemporary Western societies one can change identities as required, or, as Bauman states frankly: “Identities are for wearing and showing, not for storing and keeping” (Bauman 2004: 89). But if this is so, then isn’t the aesthetic community an adequate social form for “the new spirit of art and capitalism” (Roberts 2012: 83–97)? If today, as Bauman states, all unity needs to be *made* and the “artificially produced” is the sole form of community, why shouldn’t we invest our trust in a form as empty, liquid and binding as money? Or, more boldly, could we not argue that, in this age of contingency, a seemingly playful society can solve the daunting task of identity formation by declaring the problem a matter of aesthetics? Bauman leads the way.

9

THE ART AS LIFE STRATEGY IN LATE MODERNITY

As previously stated, Bauman’s path to art was not a straight one. However, in 1995 he had made a clear shift in that direction, when, under the title *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* he explored different modes of life, such as the vagabond, the pilgrim, the flaneur, the tourist and the player. Although at times Bauman considered the refugee to be the prototype of liquid modernity, he ultimately turns to the form of life modelled under the pressure of growing individualisation.³ Life is treated as an endless walk, and the movement as a purpose unto itself. But while the pilgrim walked with some seriousness, this was lost on the flaneur. As Bauman points out,

³ “Perhaps”, Bauman wrote in 2003, “the time will arrive for discovering the avant-garde role of the present-day refugees – for exploring the taste of nowhereville life and the stubborn permanence of transience that may become the common habitat of the denizens of the global full planet” (Bauman 2003: 148).

flaneurism grew from being the pastime of a small class of well-to-do men of leisure to "a middle-class occupation" (Bauman 1995: 151). According to Bauman, a whole section of the middle class now directs its attention to external phenomena and objects for the sole purpose of inner experience, and ideal (non-material) enrichment. The tourist also fits that pattern, appearing as a "conscious and systematic collector of experiences" (Bauman 1995: 213), and thus as a man of aesthetics from whose perspective the world's purpose is to excite and please. As he maintains, "[t]he world of the tourist is completely and exclusively structured by aesthetic criteria." (Bauman 1995: 157). We come even closer to art when observing the player. From his point of view, the world is not an aesthetic one, but is instead a fellow player. As such, it is ruled neither by law, nor by lawlessness. What the world has to offer is neither order nor chaos, but simply more moves. Through the eyes of the player, the world is personalised. It is anthropomorphised, or, more precisely, a quality is attributed to it in which seemingly contradictory tendencies are brought together.

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In other words, the world is a playful counterpart – a perspective that brings to mind Friedrich Schiller's aesthetic education on man, and its assumption that man is a real human being only when he plays. Beginning with a political analysis of contemporary society, Schiller observed that people cannot transcend their circumstances without education. His vehicle of education was art, which can liberate individuals from their constraints and excesses. Through aesthetic experience, Schiller asserted, people can reconcile their inner antagonism. But while the inner antagonism Schiller had in mind was one between sense and intellect or nature and reason, Bauman contemplates on the antagonism between man as individual and as a social being. Nevertheless, Bauman subtly recommends a sort of aesthetic education in the mid-1990s, when he emphasises that his essays on postmodern life aim, above all, to elucidate the dangers and possibilities inherent in the postmodern condition.⁴ Appealing to Cornelius Castoriadis, Bauman describes the postmodern constellation as one to which chaos and contingency have forcefully returned. Together, they now burst into our lives as a sign not only of defeat and bankruptcy, but also as a reminder of the ridiculous arrogance of our ambitions and efforts. Disorder and contingency appear naked, "perhaps for the first time so obvious and for

⁴ Bauman's use of metaphor and literature in general, as reflective of the postmodern condition, go beyond the scope of this paper. For further details, see Bauman 2016 and Blackshaw 2005: 52–80.

so many people to see” (Bauman 1995: 49). Moreover, life itself is now undressed and exposed in its groundlessness. What remains and is applauded is “the beauty and joy of being, the only reason for real freedom” (Bauman 1995: 49). According to Bauman, enjoying the beauty and joy of being means a pleasant life, and living such a life has become the sole duty of the “postmodern citizen” (Bauman 1995: 167). The role of politics and the state is reduced, and all that remains is the obligation to provide the postmodern citizen with everything necessary for such a life.

The contrast between the postmodern and modern individual could not be sharper. Under modern conditions, individuals were constructed as producers or soldiers, and thus played those roles – roles that, in turn, provided the patterns and evaluative criteria for the formation of individuals. The postmodern individual, on the other hand, is mainly constructed as a consumer and a player. The latter is a new role model, which pushes the individual into a constant search for new experiences and events. As a unique actor, the individual is characterised by spontaneity, mobility and flexibility and, although never fully balanced, can retain a semblance of balance by shifting between self-sufficiency and ambition. Yet, in Bauman’s 1995 comparison between the modern and postmodern individual, criticism of the postmodern way of life seems to predominate. In his critique, all four forms of life (vagabond, flaneur, tourist, player) merge into one entity as “together and only together they capture the complexity and the inner aporia of the postmodern identity process” (Bauman 1995: 252). In his essays on postmodern forms of life, Bauman seems hesitant to say whether the avoidance of any binding identity is the focal point of the postmodern strategy for life, or the formation of an identity. On one hand, the “fear of under-determination” whips individuals into frantic efforts to form and assert themselves, forcing them into the never-ending struggle of self-formation. On the other, individuals are afraid of any determinateness, and prefer non-binding bonds.

In my view, the reason Bauman struggled so hard to come to terms with the postmodern condition in the 1990s is because he (still) paid too little attention to art. Given the history of his own discipline, this lack of consideration of aesthetics is surprising. As Bauman points out, sociology is “the self-consciousness of modern society, as it was codified around the turn of the century” (Bauman 2007b: 181). This self-consciousness, however, was created by Max Weber and Georg Simmel, both keen observers of art, the artist, and groups of artists. At this point we should remember that a substantial portion of early cultural sociology was based on a close study of

symbolist poet Stefan George's circle. The observation of aesthetics and aesthetic tendencies prepared the ground for a sociology that established itself as the self-consciousness of modern society and its culture. It is no coincidence that the beginning of the rise of aesthetic individuality also marked the start of the sociology of modernity (Lichtblau 1996: 178–202). An aestheticisation of society set in, initiated by art breaking through its boundaries and ceasing to be watched by critical observers. The rise of the aesthetic individual can only be understood against the background of the social and cultural history of the twentieth century.

Here, again, the imaginary community of the Bohemian plays a special role, because the conceptualisation of the artist as social figure undergoes a drastic revaluation around 1900. "Next to the image of the hungry artist were associative images emerging in which the admiration for a fully lived individuality and for an unconventional life beyond any norms found its medium" (Ruppert 2000: 188, trans. mine). Going beyond Bauman and focussing on the socio-cultural history of the twentieth century, we could say that a significant part of the urge for freedom and risk-tolerance practiced by the modern artist spilled over into its middle-class audience. Failure was increasingly expected and accepted, shaping bourgeois life. This is not to say that there has been no fear of social descent since 1900, but that fear was overtaken by the fear of an insufficient life: one that suffered from a lack of freedom and therefore a lack of creative individuality (See Magerski 2015: 121–133).

Here we return to Bauman, who on various occasions writes of a new and improved postmodern defect as a failure to attain the shape and form one was supposed to take. Which form is unimportant; the failure is to take the form desired, or, to enter the domain of the artist, to fail to be both formable clay and a perfect sculptor. No doubt what Bauman has in mind is the fear of failing to shape his own life as a work of art. Just like the understanding of life as a game, the idea of life as a work of art leads back to the *Kunstepoche* (romanticism). The early romantics, however, were well aware that such a life must remain a life in fragments, since forming it is an infinite process. As Roberts points out, "the self-critique of romanticism from Goethe to Kierkegaard documents the inescapable and self-destructive ambiguity of the quest for the authentic self, authentic experience and authentic feeling" (Roberts 2003: 93). This is why life in the sense of early romanticism is not a completed work of art, but remains essayistic, and thus knowingly and willingly an attempt. As such, it lay dormant within the Bohemian culture,

and now celebrates its rebirth in a world that, according to Bauman, has itself become fragmentary and episodic.

Bauman finally joined this culture when – after a long intellectual journey that went beyond not only the tragedy of the Holocaust, but also the portrayal of solid modernity – he published his small book, *The Art of Life*, in 2008. Briefly and entertainingly, he presents the artist as life’s adequate strategy in postmodern times. The life of the artist is the answer to the “existential dilemma” (Lee 2005: 67) caused by a liquidity that is more than a condition of contemplation: it needs to be addressed practically. We could argue paradoxically that Bohemian culture is the crystallised form of liquid modernity, accompanying the modernising process as what Lee calls a “kiss of death from within” (Lee 2005: 67). Lee’s “charmed circle of progress, sophistication, growth and completeness” in the context of dilemmas of development, (Lee 2005: 67) was already broken by the life of the artists at the end of the nineteenth century. Roberts remarks that this Bohemian subculture of artists and intellectuals, defined by their antagonistic relationship to bourgeois society, became “a marker of the ‘new economy’, variously labelled the creative, the cultural or the aesthetic economy” (Roberts 2012: 83), but this does not undermine the crucial role of this historical subculture. On the contrary, the evolution of the Bohemian from subculture to lifestyle underlines the cultural contradictions and the complexity of capitalism we (still) have to address.

The same applies to cultural and social theory. Facing the contradictions and complexity of a modernity he tried to file under the concept of liquidity, Bauman declares that all of us, “men and women, both old and young, are – of the conviction that life is an art, an object of art that we can or must design – individually persecuted and seduced to accept the risks inevitably faced by the artist” (Bauman 2008: 82). In a globalised ephemeral modernity, art and the art of life have become the prototype for the future: a significant shift in intellectual history, underlined by a final quotation from Bauman:

A person’s life *is* inevitably a work of art, provided it has a free will and can make its own decisions. For they have consequences and leave traces, however much one denies their meaning and seeks to obscure their influence, by trying to relate everything back to the overpowering pressure of external forces, which compel him to say “I have to” instead of “I will” (Bauman 2008: 87).

To confirm: there is no teleology in Bauman’s work of which aesthetics was a necessary destination. If there is a romanticism at work in his writings, it is as anxious as it is relaxed. Since living is praxis not a simple condition,

the art of life is not itself aesthetic, but the art of living is existential. It is about making free choices; hence sociology is an art of living.

However, this is a reading of Bauman, rather than an attempt to trace a trajectory. In this reading, sociology itself is captured (or recaptured) by the aestheticisation of society. "The job of sociology", Bauman claims in 2000, "is to see to it that the choices are genuinely free, and that remains so, increasingly so, for the duration of humanity" (Bauman 2000: 216). Bauman has fulfilled this aim by turning social theory towards aesthetics – a shift that can be seen as significant in the new cultural spirit of capitalism. Almost inevitably, the "shift to liquidity" (Lee 2005: 63) is followed by a shift to art. Bauman's assumption that sociology is the self-consciousness of modern society allows us to say that the self-consciousness of contemporary society is a cultural sociology, founded at the end of the nineteenth century, which has now come full circle, in its assessment of art as the principal norm-driving element of society (Reckwitz 2017). It is against this background that Bauman's intellectual journey can be read not only as a reflection of the ongoing process of aestheticisation, but also as a manifestation that fits into it.

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