Book Review

Born Liquid: Transformations in the Third Millennium

Zygmunt Bauman and Thomas Leoncini
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"Real dialogue isn't about talking to people who believe in the same thing." So said Polish social theorist Zygmunt Bauman in 2016 a year before his death when discussing social media. Few texts are a greater testament to the innate power of dialogue in stimulating new knowledge than *Born Liquid*. This compact book, comprising less than 100 pages, contains a series of edited exchanges between Bauman and Italian journalist Thomas Leoncini on a wide range of contemporary social issues which exemplify the enduring relevance of Bauman's 'liquid modernity' thesis. Leoncini was born in 1985 making him sixty years younger than Bauman and thus never having experienced life in a 'solid' world. This book, therefore, provides a heuristic guide through which diverse social themes may be explored by millennials or Generation X (those born between 1980 and 1994) on the one hand, and the 'silent generation' (people who lived during the Second World War and the depression which came in its wake) on the other. The dialogue, captured by email, explores a diversity of topics including tattoos, beards, plastic surgery, the irrationality of evil, bullying, the desire/love continuum and online dating.

Born Liquid is refreshingly different from existing social theory texts in that it uses the principles of Socratic dialogue to explore our transition from modernity to postmodernity. Using crystal clear prose, both authors recognise the innate power of rhetorical devices in rendering complex and enduring issues more accessible to a wider audience. The exchanges enshrined in 'Born Liquid' are rich, persuasive and intimate, inviting the reader to frame everyday issues in a new way. With each assertion comes, to use the words of sociologist Tom Burns, "the shock of recognition" (Burns, 1958, p.218). But the discussion extends far beyond a mere litany of well-chosen anecdotes. Instead, the dialogue is punctuated with references to seminal writers such as Simmel, Levi Strauss, Goffman, Zimbardo and Augé which serve to reinforce the gravitas of the text. *Born Liquid*, therefore, is an innovative yet robust literary instrument to 'think with', a *nouveau lieu académique* with which a diverse readership may engage. As a reader, there is a sense of entering into a literary heterotopia, a guarded yet accessible world in which everyday ephemera occupies centre stage. However, to dismiss *Born Liquid* as a mere cultural census point would be misguided. The real purpose of this book is to emphasise how people of all ages occupy the same world simultaneously. As Leoncini reminds us, "generations define themselves in terms of their reciprocal existence" (p.93).

The book comprises three chapters and a postscript written by Leoncini. Each chapter is considered in turn below.

Chapter 1: Skin Deep Transformations: Tattoos, Plastic Surgery and Hipsters. Bauman and Leoncini start by considering how cultural shifts are represented corporeally, thereby becoming the agent through which the individual and collective story of humanity is 're-presented'. Leoncini reports the rise of tattoos in the USA and Italy, citing statistics from the Harris Poll 2016 and the Instituto Superiore di Sanita respectively. Significantly, in the USA, allegiance to political parties seems irrelevant in determining whether or not people elect to be emblazoned with permanent inked images. Building on this premise, Bauman suggests that strategies to boost self-identification have erupted to fill the void left by loss of 'community.' However, do tattoos serve in reality to reveal a group or even tribal identity rather than an individual representation of self? Significantly, research undertaken by Dr Stephen Crabbe of the University of Portsmouth found that tribal themes (notably symbols associated with Borneon, Maori and Hawaiian clans) are most favoured by UK residents, especially men (Crabbe, 2018). Leoncini suggests that the football pitch has become a stage for expressions of liquid modernity as the increasing prevalence of footballers' tattoos and 'hipster' beards distracts the viewer from the football match itself (pp.12-13). Bauman concurs that "tattoos signal... the intentional stability (perhaps even the irreversibility) of a pledge and the freedom to choose to mark the right to self-definition and its exercise" (p.14). However, arguably even Bauman underestimated the innate yearning of the human disposition to self-mark, especially when aided and abetted by the media. Strikingly, tattoo related television programmes in both the UK (*Tattoo Fixers* launched in 2015) and the USA (a rival show *Just Tattoo Of Us* was first broadcast later the same year) feature people whose poorly executed tattoos are scrutinised by a specialist team commissioned to create a new ink 'masterpiece', or in some cases to eradicate the original design entirely. Therefore, self-expression today may be construed as a moveable feast which satiates the disposable celebrity's appetite for fifteen (or even less) minutes of fame.

The authoritative dialogue then shifts emphasis to plastic surgery as a manifestation of an increasingly liquid society. Here, the importance of the body as a living diary on which peoples' changing liquid identity may be reconstructed as 'designs for life' is explored. Drawing on the work of French feminist anthropologist Frances Borel, Leoncini asserts that plastic surgery, "if used repeatedly, is the most violent form of self-mutilation, hidden under the cloak of official medicine" (p.17). Leoncini cites statistics from the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (APS) to show how since 2000, cosmetic reconstructions of the body for people aged 13 to 19 has increased by 1 per cent each year. Since 2000/01, APS data suggests that vaginal reconstructions have increased by a staggering 3,973 per cent, followed by buttock augmentation (252 per cent) then breast enlargements (89 per cent). As Bauman contends: "Consumerist economy thrives (indeed survives) thanks to the magical stratagem of recasting possibility into an obligation" (p.21). Today, social media and reality television provide two-dimensional platforms where this doomed search for the holy grail of bodily perfection as a means of boosting self-esteem may be paraded to a potential global audience. The USA TV programmes *Botched*, *Nip and Tuck* and *I Want A Famous Face* are cases in point. I did wonder if these corporeal modifications may be construed as a form of branding or self-mutilation as a slavish pursuit of the ever-elusive quest for the authentic self in today's liquid modernity.

Chapter 2: Transformations of Aggression[1]: Bullying. By exploring the propensity of men and women to inflict harm on one another, Chapter Two goes right to the heart of moral relativism. Bauman and Leoncini do not conspire to deconstruct the metaphysical concept of 'evil' *per se*. However, the dialogue foregrounds the prevalence of

malevolence in everyday life. The results are both profound and disturbing. Within the spectrum of aggression explored are acts of bullying using passive/aggressive techniques through to acts of first degree murder where 'disinterested evil' presides. Leoncini draws the reader in by referencing familiar names including Barack Obama, Madonna and Bill Clinton all of whom were bullied as children. He uses the concept of liminality (the ambiguity that occurs at a mid-point during a rite of passage) in which to contextualise the victimisation of others. We consider how victims of bullying undergo a metamorphosis as they experience firstly separation, then marginalisation and finally 'aggregation' where the victim experiences a reincarnation and assumes "a new, more complex social identity" (p.35) congruent with self.

Given the wealth of evidence, we can be in no doubt of people's ability to inflict harm on others. Seminal research undertaken by Stanley Miligram in the 1960s and Philip Zimbardo a decade later revealed how the presence of an authority figure and the specific circumstances in which people find themselves allows evil to rise to the fore. A chilling inclusion in Chapter 2 - and one which haunted me for some time afterwards - is the writers' exchange on the brutal murder of Kitty Genovese in Queens, New York in 1964. This atrocity was witnessed by 38 people, all of whom failed to intervene. Reflecting on the ensuing debate, Bauman asserts: "If I remember correctly, I hear for the first time the concept of the bystander, a person who witnesses evil being done but turns their eyes the other way and does nothing to stop it" (p.46). Bauman and Leoncini's exposition of this shifting moral compass challenges the Aristotelian concept of privation theory whereby evil is conceived as the absence of good. Rather, as Bauman contends: "evil has been fully and truly trivialised...doing evil no longer requires motivation" (p.51). Some 50 years on, in August 2019, the London Fire Brigade launched a new 'Think Before You Film' campaign which urged voyeurs to stop filming emergency incidences on their phones and call 999 instead. In both cases, bystanders fail to intervene but for different reasons - the modernist averts the eyes whilst the postmodernist films for posterity by posting on social media. Regardless, the net result for the victims in either scenario remains unchanged.

Chapter 3 Transformations of Sex and Dating: Declining Taboos in the Era of Finding Love Online. The final chapter shows how the internet may be construed as the epitome of liquid modernity, not least by providing the illusion of anonymity. The two writers explore selected technological innovations intended to mitigate mental health problems caused by over exposure to social media. Leoncini (p.70) describes the development of a virtual reality headset developed in Sweden which renders the wearer's own body invisible, but enables him/her to see and feel the objects surrounding them. Arguably, the most poignant theme which unites Bauman and Leoncini's dialogue is the contention that the internet is a tool of totalitarianism rather than an instrument of democracy. The ensuing dialogue evokes Mazzucato's (2018) thesis on 'digital feudalism' as a reminder that, to some extent, we have become the people who enslaved themselves through acquiescence to a technologically driven economy. In the words of Leoncini, "Often, we imagine our comments on social media to be like rivers made up of the same droplets of water...these droplets are similar but not similar enough" (p.59). Consequently, the echo chambers we create online, where our popularity is quantified in the form of 'likes', 'retweets' and 'sharing' of events, provide the fertile ground for polarisation rather than dialogue. In Bauman's words, "It (the internet) is widely used to build shelters rather than break down walls and open windows: to cut a 'comfort zone' for oneself out of the hurly burly disorderly world and its challenges to understanding and spiritual tranquillity" (pp.65-66). For Bauman (p.73), the values of security and freedom are prerequisites in preserving human dignity. However, web-based technologies have significantly compromised both values. When placed in the wrong hands, the online world has been used as a weapon of warfare without a soldier in sight.

By all accounts, Timothy Berners-Lee, the computer engineer who wrote the original code in 1989, had highly laudable intentions: to promote free and accessible information exchange on an obscure government portal. Crucially, three decades on, Berners-Lee is showing remorse for his role in making digital warfare an ever present danger. Having unleashed the genie, Berner-Lee's work today is, it seems, dedicated to stabilising the internet by writing software designed to restore control to individuals rather than corporations (Booker, 2018). Significantly, Berners-Lee's new programme is called 'Solid.' Had he survived to hear this proclamation, Zygmunt Bauman would no doubt have allowed himself a wry smile.

The dialogue then moves to the symbiotic relationship between love and desire in an increasingly liquid world. Leoncini cites the example of Nintendo's computer game 'LovePlus', launched in 2009, which enables people (the target audience being young heterosexual men) to create an ideal female avatar and then engage in a 'relationship' with this pixelated creation. The player is required to 'court' the avatar to reach further stages of the 'relationship.' What is also striking about LovePlus is that the female avatar will chastise her creator if he acts dishonourably by, for example, failing to turn up for a prearranged date. For Leoncini, love may be construed as centrifugal and desire as centripetal forces. "If desire wishes to consume, love wishes to possess. Desire is self-destructive but the protection that love weaves around the object of its love ends by enslaving the beloved" (p 75).

Bauman's narrative then ratchets up in intensity as he sketches his vision of cultural evolution verging on the apocalyptic in which "culture drifts spectacularly to its destructive side...with the intention to show, demonstrate and emphasize the volatility, frailty, the endemic instability and transience and the brevity of all cultural products' life expectancy" (p 81). Here again moral relativism rises to the fore, with Leoncini then showing how sexual promiscuity is reflected in increasingly flexible labour market behaviours. Poignantly, Leoncini's final sentence of the book is expressed as a question. He urges Bauman to consider whether polygamy is suggestive of a liquid love which may be traced back to early civilisation. "If this is true, then is liquid love a throwback to the origins of human sexuality?" (p.86). It is tempting to contemplate how Bauman would have addressed Leoncini's lemma. I could not help but speculate that Bauman would have rejected any socio-biologically based argument which advocated polygamy. Might he have pointed to the relevance of structure and agency in shaping human actions, allowing his readership to indulge in some cognitive dissonance in an ever changing world? Sadly, we will never know. On 9th January 2017, aged 91, Bauman departed into, in the words of his wife Aleksandra, "liquid eternity" (p.v).

Concluding Reflections

Born Liquid provides a much needed intellectual sanctuary in which the reader's sociological imagination may be unleashed using the neglected medium of dialogue between two writers separated by sixty years of age difference. But this book is much more than an intergenerational audit of the prosaic ephemera which feature in our shared and turbulent world. It is a salutary reminder of our need to be alert to the significance of everyday indicators of social, economic, cultural and political change. Viewing the world temporally across and between generations is highly instructive. Some of the cultural phenomena identified by Bauman and Leoncini will endure over time. Others will evaporate without a trace. Perhaps most importantly, *Born Liquid* alerts us to the perils of adopting a myopic view of the world in which we risk sleepwalking our way into a deeper, reflexive and fractionalised liquid hyper-modernity. Therefore, we should consider this book as part of our metaphorical armour to help negotiate what is most

likely to be an increasingly fluid if not gaseous future. As Bauman (2012, p.22) contended: "what has been cut apart cannot be glued back together. Abandon all hope of totality, future as well as past, you who enter the world of fluid modernity." After all, forewarned is forearmed.

Notes

[1] 'Aggression' is used in this review for clarity of meaning in favour of the original 'aggressivity' found in the text.

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