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AMBIVALENCE BEYOND MODERNITY
Rationalization and Morality in Bauman's Social Theory

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Abstract

This article focuses on Bauman's theorisation of ambivalence, with particular reference both to the link established between modernity and ambivalence itself and to the Baumanian conception of morality. Both of these thematisations are considered in relation to the ideas of the human being and humanity as a whole, which in turn are seen as historical and social categorisations at least potentially capable of opening up new possibilities for recognising the other. This constitutes an attempt to broaden Bauman's perspective by including an at least partly different assessment of the universal and universality.

Keywords

Bauman, Zygmunt; ambivalence; modernity; morality; rationalization.

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1. INTRODUCTION

> No binary classification deployed in the construction of order can fully overlap with essentially non-discrete, continuous experience of reality. The opposition, born of the horror of ambiguity, becomes the main source of ambivalence. The enforcement of any classification inevitably means the production of anomalies (that is, phenomena which are perceived as 'anomalous' only as far as they span the categories whose staying apart is the meaning of order) (Bauman, 1991, ed. 2007[5]: 61).

In the wake of Simmel's classic but by no means conventional sociological discourse (D'Alessandro, 2011; Giaccardi and Magatti, 2020), Bauman insistently evoked and explored the power and pervasiveness of ambivalence. The very metaphors with which he condensed his theorizing and insights, and of which liquidity is only the most famous, are proof of this (Bryant, 2013; Flanagan, 2013; Jacobsen, 2013a; Jacobsen, 2013b; Wolff, 2013). Proceeding to a juxtaposition between realities inevitably charged with opposing meanings, metaphor makes polysemy exponential and produces in the reader an effect of displacement with respect to the common sense and the taken for granted. And it is probably also because of his ability to evoke and explore the many ambiguities that Bauman spoke to a wide and non-specialist audience. Moreover, through his focus on ambiguity and plurivocity, this leading sociologist sought to blur, if not break down, the traditional boundary that divides sociology itself from literature and art (Bauman and Mazzeo, 2016; see Bordoni, 2019: 37-47).

However, this article intends to go to the heart of the matter, so to speak, and look at the Bauman theorist of ambivalence. In an extremely evocative way and with often very interesting and original results, Bauman did not merely analyse the ambivalence of things or take ambivalence as an explanatory criterion. He theorized on ambivalence itself as both a fundamental character of objective reality and as a dimension in which subjectivity and intersubjectivity are situated. Furthermore, Bauman's ambivalence is itself ambivalent. Who can say whether it is a condemnation or a resource? As much a part of life as death, it is both "discovered" by human thought and pre-existing to that thought. Ambivalence can certainly arise from social roles and undoubtedly permeates social action, but it can also be thought of as a dimension of freedom in which the individual finds him/herself in order to offer him/herself to others.

The originality of Bauman's conception has not escaped critics. In particular, this contribution is indebted to the analyses of Junge (2017), who has the merit of attempting a systematic treatment and, to this end, compares five important works by Bauman: *Culture as Praxis* (1973), *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991), *Postmodern Ethics* (1993), *Liquid Modernity* (2000), and *Wasted Lives* (2004)[1]. However, the perspective adopted here is, at least in some respects, different. While continuing to emphasise the centrality of ambivalence for understanding Bauman's social theory, an attempt is made to grasp the internal connections within this theory not by focusing on the differences in a number of Bauman's works, but by identifying two fundamental thematic cores relevant to the analysis of the object. And this for two reasons. Firstly, it is held that *Modernity and Ambivalence* encapsulates and develops the fundamental thesis expressed in *Culture as Praxis* that the cultural order is established by being measured against an unlimited number of possibilities of meaning, while already offering a vision of ambivalence as existential insecurity illusorily soothed by consumer society. Secondly, it is argued that *Postmodern Ethics*, overcoming the cautious optimism visible in the second part of *Modernity and Ambivalence*, should be understood not as a stage in Bauman's theorising that would be substantially overtaken by subsequent works, but as the essential point of reference for understanding the dimension of intersubjectivity as Bauman himself conceived it.

[1] In order to make my argument clearer, the following is the outline through which Junge (2017: 45) summarises his own analytical account of the different uses and meanings of ambivalence in the five Baumanian works mentioned above:

Work / Domain	*Culture as Praxis*	*Modernity and Ambivalence*	*Postmodern Ethics*	*Liquid Modernity*	*Wasted Lives*
Definitions of ambivalence	Ambiguity	Ambiguity/ Ambivalence	Ambivalence	Insecurity	Waste
Focus of attention	Cultural order	Social order	Moral order	Social processes	Social order
Origins of ambivalence	Ambiguity of meaning	Classificatory order	The Other	Modernity	Social bifurcation
Meaning of coping with ambivalence	Limitations of meanings	Authority	Repression	Opening chances for action	Secure the illusions of a consumer society
Intention	Necessity of order	Raise hope for change of an order	Deconstruction of moral rules	Risk analysis	Social criticism

Hence the choice made here to focus first on the theme of rationalisation, which subjects an ambivalent reality to categories, and then on the intrinsic ambivalence of the intersubjective moral dimension. By overcoming both a unilaterally objectivistic and a unilaterally subjectivistic vision, such a way of proceeding can, among other things, make it possible to account for both sides of the matter investigated. The ambivalence of reality, and of a reality that inevitably escapes the logical operations of categorisation, thus has its completion in the ambivalence that the human subject experiences when he/she seeks to identify him/herself and, above all, when he/she turns to another subject.

However, the following pages also start from the idea that a discourse on rationality should strive to consider the plane of logical processes as distinct or at least relatively autonomous from the plane of politics and history. This is above all because a given social order cannot be understood as a mere transcription of the logical order of a given society.

The logical order proceeds by separations and by unifications, now concentrating on what separates a singularity making it different from all the rest, now dwelling on what is common to several singularities. It is through this continuous work that the human mind establishes distinctions and, if you like, measures itself against the chaos and dense plurivocity of things, of all that is human and of the world. Moreover, the logical order certainly has a close relationship with the cultural order, but its separations and unifications do not ipso facto have the power to translate socially.

It is in this context that the construction of the idea of human being should be understood. It is not peacefully innate, nor is it intuitive. It is not enough to be in front of the other person in order to recognise him or her as a human being. Rather, the very possibility of such recognition depends not a little on historical-political dynamics that make the expansion of the idea possible, though certainly not automatic. It is therefore also in this sense that the following pages suggest thinking about the universal and first of all the universal concept of human being. It is not only or not so much a standard that excludes those who do not conform or, as in the case of Bauman's figure of the stranger, disavows rational logic and rationalisation by their very existence. It is also a logical space open, at least potentially, to the entire human race.

Of course, one cannot overlook the fact that such a proposal seems to clash with some of Bauman's peremptory claims. The reassessment of the universal in the following pages objectively distances itself from the accusation against universalisation that runs through *Modernity and*

Ambivalence, or even from the idea of the «universal recognition» of difference as the only acceptable «universality» (Bauman, 1991, ed. 2007[5]: 256). However, it is difficult to think that one can really recognise and perhaps value differences if one does not have a common substratum that allows one to grasp them without denying them, but also without hierarchizing them as more or less worthy.

However, there is nothing triumphalist in the proposal made here. From his reconstruction of the Holocaust to his denunciation of the injustices of consumer society, Bauman himself has convincingly shown us how dehumanisation is always looming and, therefore, how the boundaries of the idea of the human being can tragically shrink. However, it is precisely the universal concept of the human being that can allow a deeper analysis of the two thematic cores privileged here, namely rationalisation and morality.

Reviewing Bauman's thematization of the link between ambivalence and modernity, the first part of this article attempts to highlight some of the limitations that seem to be present in Bauman's own historical reconstruction. In particular, it will be argued that the Baumanian analysis, centred on the friend/enemy dichotomy as well as on the ineffability of ambivalent subjects, has some problems in taking into account configurations that are by no means secondary, which can be found especially in slavery and servitude. Consequently, in order to better account for the ordering logic at work in hierarchical societies, it will be proposed to expand the theoretical framework expressed above all in *Modernity and Ambivalence* by placing the opposition above/below alongside the opposition inside/outside (i.e. that embodied in Bauman's separation between friends and enemies).

A central theme for *Modernity and Ambivalence* is then considered: assimilation, treated by Bauman especially in reference to the vicissitudes of European Jews in the period before the genocide. Without wishing in any way to diminish the terrible peculiarity represented by the Holocaust, a parallelism will be attempted by taking into consideration the age-old subordination of women. The intention is to offer contributions to better frame the specific issue of the emergence of ambivalence.

The next part is devoted to the interesting and in many ways original idea of morality proposed by Bauman. It will be shown how much and at what levels the Baumanian morality is pervaded by ambivalence, which is thus gradually conceived as inextricably human in the highest sense of the term and not only and not so much as the effect of some kind of rationalisation, be it imposed by the modern state or self-

imposed by the post-modern individual. Moreover, it will be pointed out that Bauman did not limit himself to thinking of morality as opposed to the social, but also posed the problem of how to bring the moral and social dimensions together in some way.

Then, in the third part, an attempt will be made to propose an integration of Bauman's theory that leaves room for the idea of a universal capable of dealing with ambivalence and, therefore, of offering a contribution to human recognition and emancipation without stifling plurivocity and differences. This is especially so because such an idea could complement the Baumanian vision of intersubjectivity by highlighting the social preconditions that make the encounter with the other possible, without absolutizing the role played by social conformism.

Finally, the concluding remarks aim to recapitulate and clarify the considerations made with particular reference to the meanings that ambivalence can assume. The intention is to offer a contribution to a theory of ambivalence useful for a critical sociology. And it is hard to doubt that this goes in the direction of what Bauman advocated or tried to do with his work.

2. HIERARCHISATION AND DE-HUMANISATION

The first fundamental point of reference for this analysis is therefore *Modernity and Ambivalence*, a reconstruction that appears fascinating in its ability to stimulate the sociological imagination by linking past, present and future, but which also raises some concerns.

First of all, Bauman's references to the nature of the social bond that would have been typical of the pre-modern era seem excessively sweetened and even at times nostalgic. Indeed, it is true that *Modernity and Ambivalence* presents the pre-Hobbesian world, i.e. the world that had not yet posed the all-modern problem of order as unspeakable and essentially unthinkable because it was totally different from the world shaped by modernity (1991, ed. 2007[5]: 5-6). Nevertheless, Bauman's reconstruction speaks to us of a time of absolute innocence, in which consciousness had no way of experiencing either laceration or solitude:

> […] the individual of the pre-modern world did not experience *the absence of the experience* of isolation or alienation. He did not experience belonging, membership, being at home, togetherness. Belonging entails the awareness of being together or 'being a part of'; thus belonging, inevitably, contains the awareness of its own uncertainty, of the *possibility* of isolation, of the need to stave off or overcome alienation (1991, ed. 2007[5]: 6, footnote 3).

The above considerations seem to be suspended between Durkheim's and Tönnies' theses. On the one hand, thinking of a total fusion of individual consciousness within the collective dimension, they seem to take very seriously the Durkheimian idea of a society with mechanical solidarity in which the very presuppositions of individualisation are lacking. On the other hand, echoing Tönnies' famous distinction between Community and Society, they hint at a condition of unconscious privilege, in which members of the same community experience a sense of complete belonging[2].

However, what is more interesting here is the fact that the picture proposed by Bauman glosses over features and institutions that were by no means of secondary importance in pre-modern societies. One need only think of slavery, a practice that was not only present in antiquity, but was in fact formally abolished in 1865 in the United States, a country anything but backward. But we can also remember serfdom, abolished in Russia in 1861 and long practised or tolerated in various ways. And even if we do not want to think of the subjugated peasants in the still heavily agricultural countries, we cannot ignore the difficult living conditions that industrialisation imposed on the urban proletariat.

It may then be worth asking when modernity began. In this regard, *Modernity and Ambivalence* offers a fairly precise date. Modernity is said to have begun in the 17th century, thus fully encompassing frankly terrible chapters to which Bauman's survey devotes very little attention: slavery and serfdom, as just mentioned, but also the decimation of the American Indians and, on an even greater scale, the colonial rule exercised by European powers (Rattansi, 2020)[3].

It is true that one could point out that Bauman's object in that case was not so much the relationship between cultures or between races, but the presence of ambivalence within the various societies or states and, consequently, the policies historically put in place to combat ambivalence itself. However, even taking this into account, the picture is neither complete nor entirely convincing. To understand why, it is useful to

[2] It should be noted, however, that Bauman's reflections on the form of community are highly structured and manifold, in no way being reduced to the observation that can be extracted from *Modernity and Ambivalence*. See Bordoni, 2019: especially 61-66, 70-74, 112-115.

[3] Although there are some references to colonialism and imperialism both in Bauman's work as a whole and, specifically, in *Modernity and Ambivalence* (see, for example, 1991, ed. 2007[5]: 232-233), it is hard to deny that Bauman did not assign a real centrality to those aspects. For this reason, as well as for the almost total absence of references to gender inequalities, a sharp critic like Ali Rattansi (2020) has spoken of «serious consequences» that reduce the value of Bauman's social theory.

recall the triad of figures designed to identify the portion of societies in which ambivalence is found and concentrated:

> There are friend and enemies. And *there are strangers*. Friends and enemies stand in an opposition to each other. The first are what the second are not, and vice versa. This does not, however, testify to their equal status. Like most other oppositions that order simultaneously the world in which we live and our life in the world, this one is a variation of the master-opposition between the inside and the outside. The outside is negativity to the inside's positivity. The outside is what the inside is not (1991, ed. 2007[5]: 53).

The stranger escapes such an opposition – moral but even more so spatial – between inside and outside:

> The stranger undermines the special ordering of the world – the fought-after co-ordination between moral and topographical closeness, the staying together of friends and the remoteness of enemies. The stranger disturbs the resonance between physical and psychical distance: he is *physically close* while remaining *spiritually remote*. He brings into the inner circle of proximity the kind of difference and otherness that are anticipated and tolerated only at a distance – where they can be either dismissed as irrelevant or repelled as hostile (1991, ed. 2007[5]: 60).

It is understandable that readers' interest has been directed mainly towards the figure of the stranger. The latter is the real protagonist, the bearer of an ambivalence that undermines the social order, which, as in the tragic case of the Jews at the time of Hitler and the Second World War, comes to pay with his own life for his elusive indeterminacy. However, it may also be significant here to dwell at least briefly on the figure of the enemy. Not entirely convincingly, according to *Modernity and Ambivalence*, the enemy would be the one who stands outside, somehow beyond a certain solid barrier such as a state border. Yet this was not entirely true even before globalisation came to make every border uncertain and permeable.

Designating a total otherness with respect to those within, the category of the enemy can be – and has historically been – also addressed to people who shared the same portion of geographical and social space. Indeed, slaves lived alongside their masters, but were considered by the latter as beasts or, alternatively, vanquished enemies or descendants of defeated and subjugated enemies (Bodei, 2019). But the same can be said, at least in part, for the poor working classes. They were useful and in some respects comparable to work animals, but the privileged could also emphasise their abysmal distance from themselves by seeing them

as members of a different people, descendants of enemies to be kept under their rule. Such a meaning, for instance, could be assumed by Germanism when it saw the noble classes as embodiments of Germanic freedom and branded the unfree – i.e. the dispossessed and the working classes – as heirs of races inferior to the Germanic race.

If, in short, Bauman was right in speaking of cohesive groups defining themselves in opposition to all the excluded, his considerations can be enriched by taking into account the fact that, alongside the inside/outside opposition, the above/below opposition can also be extremely significant. In other words, it is also important to bear in mind the dynamics of hierarchisation whereby those in the highest position can either sever all human ties with their inferiors – ousting them from the human race – or separate themselves from others by branding them as enemies (enemies who may one day even become beasts).

3. FROM ASSIMILATION TO PRIVATISATION OF AMBIVALENCE

However, exclusion and dehumanization are only one side of the coin. There can also be a tendency towards assimilation and co-option within the group of the dominant. Exemplary in this sense was the history of the Jews reconstructed in *Modernity and Ambivalence*, where, however, Bauman himself acknowledged that the claim to assimilation was aimed at the better-off and educated members, less distant from the standard required by the hierarchical social order. The poorest and most socially disadvantaged Jews were not even offered the illusory and disrespectful way out of repudiating their cultural and religious distinctiveness.

In some respects, while fully recognising the tragic peculiarity of the Jewish history culminating in persecution and genocide, one can think of a parallelism with the offer to women of full participation in social and political life. Only the most educated and already better integrated women could hope to approach the circle of the privileged but, as the exponents of the most conscious feminism have often complained and still complain today, this admission was not and is never complete and in the end has always appeared – and perhaps still appears – potentially at least partly revocable.

This, incidentally, can lead us to enrich our idea of ambivalence. The mere fact of being able to give birth to human beings, including male human beings, made the dehumanisation of women very difficult. Thus, the hierarchical and, moreover, androcentric social order could only offer them two possibilities: exclusion in the form of complete submission, or partial and cautious inclusion, conditioned by the ac-

ceptance of rules and the suffering resulting from self-denial. While the first possibility was the only one, or at least that most used in times when the hierarchy was more solid and unbreakable, the second possibility spread later, until it became implicit at least in democratic contexts.

From this point of view, one can interpret the unfinished process of women's emancipation as a passage from a condition of total submission, in which the woman tended to coincide with the figure of an internal enemy to be dominated, to a condition of assimilation. And it is in this passage that the woman herself, from a non-problematic subject and totally framed in the relationship of domination, becomes a subject perceived as ambivalent: in part still not completely admitted or elevated to the highest rung, in part no longer completely excluded or kept in the lowest ranks.

It is a limbo to which the philosopher Hegel offers us an unintentional testimony. In language that is dense but rarefied when read from a sociological perspective, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* describes a sequence of cultural processes that, overcoming a relationship of pure domination previously perceived as natural, has led to the recognition that «both the sexes» are ethically significant being «diversities who divide between them the two differences that ethical substance gives itself» (Hegel, 1807, Eng. tr. 2018: 264). However, the memory of an idea of woman as an «internal enemy» (Ivi: 275) that, at least potentially, endangers the social and political order is still alive in Hegelian pages:

> By intrigue, the feminine – the polity's eternal irony – changes the government's universal purpose into a private purpose, transforms its universal activity into this determinate individual's work, and it inverts the state's universal property into the family's possession and ornament. In this way, the feminine turns to ridicule the solemn wisdom of maturity, which, being dead to singular individuality – dead to pleasure and enjoyment as well as to actual activity – only thinks of and is concerned for the universal (Ivi: 275-276).

The above passage is actually well known. Also on the basis of this, a not insignificant part of contemporary feminism has presented Hegelian philosophy as the most accomplished, and therefore most regrettable, systematization of patriarchal power. However, it would seem more correct to interpret Hegel's position as an expression of the shift from an idea of women as incurably inferior to an idea of women as elevable. It is true that in a hierarchical, masculine society the status of elevable tends to coincide with that of assimilable. However, one must bear in

mind that in that context the only alternative was inferiority, not respect for difference or the insignificance of difference itself.

From this point of view, the presence (and perception) of ambivalence could be interpreted as a state of tension that arises when an idea, specifically the idea of a fully worthy human being, reveals the mobility of its boundaries. Thus, someone for whom the idea itself was not considered applicable enters the range of possible and relevant meanings. While it remains true that every idea is also a categorisation and that the principle of hierarchization will tend to transform this passage into assimilation, it also seems plausible to think of ambivalence as a resource which opens up new possibilities. And the responsibility for the fact that these possibilities present limitations, even very serious ones, is not to be attributed to the idea or to categorisation, but to the reality of hierarchization. This means that the critique should not be directed so much at the categories, which are relative and mobile like any human product, but at the way and degree to which the categories themselves are employed or not.

Returning to the analyses that occupy an important part of *Modernity and Ambivalence*, the above observations do not detract from the tremendous and tragic peculiarity of the fate of the Jews. On the contrary, if possible, they make the authors' condemnation even harsher. In Nazi Germany, ideas were already available for thinking about the human being as such and humanity as a whole. This makes the process of racialisation and dehumanisation that led to the planning and execution of the genocide even more deplorable. Moreover, that terrible precedent can teach us that the idea of a fully worthy human being actually has boundaries that move in both directions: it can become wider but also, tragically, narrower. And this is precisely what happened in the heart of Europe in the case of the Jews, who suddenly passed in a few years from the ambiguous status of ambivalent and assimilable subjects to that of irredeemable enemies and, therefore, of no longer human creatures that could and should be physically eliminated.

In short, Bauman was right in portraying the Holocaust as an event that has nothing exotic or potentially unrepeatable about it. But this is not so much due to some dialectic of rationalisation per se, nor does it seem interpretable as an extreme outcome of the Enlightenment, according to Adorno and Horkheimer's well-known thesis, at least partly taken up by Bauman himself[4]. Rather, the Holocaust shows that humanisation

[4] For a discussion on the similarities and the distance between Adorno and Bauman, see Jacobsen and Hansen, 2020; Corchia, 2020. For some of my reflections referring in particular to the "dialectic" and vicissitudes of the Enlightenment as posited by Adorno and Bauman

can tragically give way to dehumanisation. However, this shift should not be understood as intrinsically linked to the state-form claim to establish order through the promulgation of norms.

Yet it remains true that the ordering logic of the state cannot fail to exercise a kind of reduction, and if you like, even violence towards the world. While «reality» and the human «experience» of reality itself are «essentially non-discrete, continuous» (1991, ed. 2007[5]: 61), every law and regulation reduce the variety of the world by arbitrarily introducing discrete jumps and sharp distinctions. But this was true at the time *Modernity and Ambivalence* was written, and is still true today. Thus, although undoubtedly suggestive, the analyses of the contemporary scenario presented especially in the last two chapters of *Modernity and Ambivalence* also raise some concerns. In line with a view of individualisation present in other leading contemporary sociologists as well, much of our behaviour and modes of consumption are there interpreted as strenuous and ultimately illusory attempts to seek points of reference to confirm our identity. Calling this dynamic the «privatisation of ambivalence», Bauman essentially argued that the struggle against ambivalence itself, once waged by states, has now shifted to a different plane, that of individual experience and practice. However, it should be recognised that «privatisation» is at best one of the trends. Indeed, states continue to be powerful agents of classification, often determining what is allowed and what is not, who can have a profession and who cannot, what language can be spoken or taught, who or what can be considered worthy or significant, and so on. Although globalisation has eroded many of these prerogatives, it is still hard to deny that the state enjoys a formidable symbolic power that allows it, in an infinite number of ways, to impose its only legitimate vision and to shape a not insignificant part of the cultural and social order (see Bourdieu, 2012).

A proof of this is the condition of migrants. The latter are not only the victims of a "moral panic" artificially fuelled and exploited by politicians (Bauman, 2016), but also subjects labelled with a state definition, that of "migrant", moreover divided into supposedly objective subcategories such as "regular" and "irregular migrant", or "economic migrant" and "asylum seeker". If the rules and their application change over time and labelling says little or nothing about the experiences and real intentions of the subjects to whom they are applied, how can one doubt the power of the state to arbitrarily impose labels with absolutely tangible consequences? Moreover, it is precisely the case of migrants, who are often caught between acceptance and rejection, that demonstrates that

respectively, see Susca, 2012.

assimilationist pressures continue, often combined with those processes of ghettoization on which Bauman himself has written illuminating pages full of pathos in the course of his intellectual biography.

The least that can be said is that Bauman, then a theorist of postmodernity, expressed a cautious but misplaced optimism. By tracing many, if not all, evils to the state form, he hailed the actual or presumed decline of states as the end of an ancient power of classification. But, in so doing, he glossed over how powerful states were (and still are today) both symbolically and materially.

4. THE INCURABLE AMBIVALENCE OF MORALITY

However, it is well known that Bauman himself problematised and abandoned much of the optimism that transpires in the concluding chapters of *Modernity and Ambivalence*. With the era of modern certainties over, inequality and exploitation seemed to him to be more alive than ever, sustained and amplified by the global market economy and the spread of a ruthless and indifferent consumerism. Also in reaction to all this, he deepened his interest in ethics and in the conditions that make it possible for human beings not to be reduced to the *homo homini lupus* of Hobbesian memory. Deeply inspired by the thought of Emmanuel Lévinas, Bauman thus conducted a twofold battle: on the philosophical side, he sought to oppose the Kantian idea of a moral law that is in some way certain and comes from outside, to which the subject would be obliged to submit, while, on the properly sociological side, he sought to overturn the conception of an intrinsically social morality expressed classically by Durkheim. The result is an interesting itinerary that starts from the moral impulse as a motive entirely internal to the subject and that, by emphasizing the aspects of choice and responsibility of the subject itself, provides a decisive and fascinating re-personalization of ethics. And, once again, his theorising is measured by ambivalence.

As seen by Bauman, in fact, morality is crossed by ambivalence at least on three levels:

a. Every moral situation is ambivalent. In particular, there is a lack of reliable points of reference. «Actions may be right in one sense, wrong in another. Which action ought to be measured by what criteria? And if a number of criteria apply, which is to be given priority?» (Bauman, 1993, ed. 2009[15]: 5). Lacking both external criteria on which to rely and laws to unambiguously establish which aspect is of priority, the individual is forced to act (or not act) relying only on himself or herself as a judge.

b. Humans are «morally ambivalent» (Bauman, 1993, ed. 2009[15]: 10; Bauman 1998: 17). They are not naturally good or intrinsically bad. Rather, and more realistically, they are capable of both good and evil. Consequently, «ambivalence resides at the heart of the "primary scene" of human face-to-face» and no human artifice can change this:

> All subsequent social arrangements – the power-assisted institutions as well as the rationally articulated and pondered rules and duties – deploy that ambivalence as their building material while doing their best to cleanse it from its original sin of being an ambivalence. The latter efforts are either ineffective or result in exacerbating the evil they wish to disarm. Given the primary structure of human togetherness, a non-ambivalent morality is an existential impossibility (1993, ed. 2009[15]: 10).

c. The Other is ambivalent. To a certain extent, the persons to whom the moral act may be directed always remain potential threats or, at least, enigmas that cannot be fully understood. This, too, is an assessment that is meant to be realistic:

> The Other may be a promise, but it is also a threat. He or she may arouse contempt as much as respect, fear as much as awe. The big question is, which of the two is more likely to happen? (Bauman, 2008, ed. 2009: 35).

Rejecting both Hobbes' anthropological pessimism and Rousseau's anthropological optimism, Bauman's morality *realistically* invites us to give the other a chance. Moreover, it is able to highlight how consumerism and widespread insecurity fuel fears, mostly unfounded, about the real intentions of others. Nevertheless, radical ambivalence remains and makes moral openness a risky, if not insane, act of love. No one who chooses to love someone can know whether he/she will be loved back, nor can he/she know the short- and long-term consequences of his/her choice.

It is true that, by bringing sociology and philosophy into dialogue, Bauman's discourse was not without its oscillations and, perhaps, contradictions. If his liquidation of the Durkheimian position was ultimately too drastic, he often appeared much closer to Kant's vision than he himself believed. Evidence of this is both his echo of Kant's theme of radical evil (Abbinnett, 2013: 113) and his latter years' invocation of a cosmopolitan law that would somehow oblige everyone to care for the dispossessed and desperate.

However, it is ungenerous to say that «Bauman fails to provide a sociological theory of morality» and that he merely formulated «a presocial conception of morality», without giving «an account of other

forms of ethical practice in the social realm» (Crone, 2017: 67). Rather, it is appropriate to attempt to grasp the significance of Bauman's long theorisation both as a whole and in its evolutions.

Indeed, Bauman's itinerary had a significant moment in the idea of a morality of neighbour and proximity expressed in *Modernity and the Holocaust*:

> Being inextricably tied to human proximity, morality seems to conform to the law of optical perspective. It looms large and thick close to the eye. With the growth of distance, responsibility for the other shrivels, moral dimensions of the object blur, till both reach the vanishing point and disappear from view (Bauman, 1989: 192).

It was a formulation that was evidently intended to reflect above all the absolute distance that the perpetrator (or potential perpetrator) can place between himself and his victim (or potential victim). However, that morality of proximity (and potential immorality of distance) is really only one formulation, which was followed over the years by others that also looked at the social dimensions of morality and the concrete possibilities offered to justice. And there is nothing strange or inherently contradictory about this, since responsibility towards others is objectively destined to remain an empty and impotent proclamation if it is not translated socially, i.e. into a moral and political stance.

Becoming increasingly aware of the link between morality and society, and thus abandoning the cautious optimism that had led him in *Modernity and Ambivalence* to prefigure a generalised shift from tolerance to solidarity, Bauman gradually came to give more and more importance also to the link between morality and politics. And it is also, and perhaps above all, for this reason that many of his pages focusing on the difficulties against which solidarity clashes can also be read as propositions of a sociology of political action (Giacomantonio, 2014: 31-45)[5].

Thus, in an attempt to summarise, I believe that any overall assessment of the inherently ambivalent morality conceived by Bauman must strive to keep two issues distinct: that of the relationship between moral-

[5] It is hard to deny that there are aporias and weaknesses in Bauman's sociology of political action (Giacomantonio, 2014: 43-44). However, we would like to stress here that Bauman has not, on the whole, absolutized the opposition between what is moral and what is social, and that, on the contrary, and especially in the works following *Modernity and Ambivalence*, he has tried to bring the dimensions of morality and sociality closer together, emphasising politics and political action.

ity and rationality and that of the relationship between morality itself and society.

Regarding the first aspect, there is no doubt that Bauman was not satisfied with the various past or recent attempts to ground morality rationally. From this point of view, his assimilation of the moral act to the act of love is by no means a vague romantic reverie. On the contrary, it is a recognition of the distance that separates selfish calculation from openness to the other, that is, of an at least potential irreconcilability that manifests itself even more clearly in the current crisis of instrumental rationality or rationality "with respect to purpose" as Weber understood it (Longo, 2005: especially 51-62, 106-115). In times like ours, in which the very characteristics of rationality are being deeply redefined, it seems even less plausible to think of a morality that is "solidly" conformable to a rationality that is in turn "solidly" utilitarian.

With regard to the second aspect, the general idea expressed by Bauman is that morality is not based on society (just as it is not based on reason), but fundamentally needs society to live and express itself. And this is not a secondary aspect, since the moral impulse, in order to be effectively such, implies at least a certain propensity to act.

5. A UNIVERSAL THAT ACCEPTS DIFFERENCES

Even if with some fluctuations, Bauman's conception of morality attempts to account for the relationship between morality itself on the one hand and society and its laws on the other (or, if one prefers, the relationship between micro-ethics and macro-ethics). Rather, the area in which it is weakest and where it could be enriched seems to concern the cognitive presuppositions upstream of the exercise of morality, which can be seen as presuppositions of choice and responsibility. How can one experience the moral impulse toward another human being if one does not have the possibility of thinking of the other as a human being? After all, alongside the process of adiaphorization that removes human actions from moral judgment, there is the question of the very conceivability of moral judgment on the part of the subject.

It can be assumed that this conceivability is ensured by innate categories that exist in the subject. However, this supposition seems implausible from a sociological point of view and, what is more important here, not much in tune with the way of theorizing of Bauman himself, who for decades in fact put various contributions and disciplines in dialogue with each other while striving to reason sociologically. Alternatively, one can consider that the logical and cognitive resources that a

subject can draw on in exercising (or not exercising) his or her morality should be placed in close relation to the overall social space and time that the subject can concretely experience. And, therefore, one can think of a moral impulse that is at least to some extent pre-social and intrinsically human, but which can take place within concrete conditions linked to systems of taxonomies and classifications that go beyond the individual. It is thus that it becomes possible to account for both the importance, also moral, of socialisation, and the crucial role that education can play. And it should be remembered that education was a subject in which Bauman himself was extremely interested (1967; 2012).

This second solution, which appears more convincing, however, calls into question an idea of the human being that refers to the universal, a universal understood not as an oppressive rule that denies peculiarities by logically or even physically excluding those who present themselves as different from a standard, but as a structure of thought that is open and capable of welcoming and taking on the multiform expressions of humanity. And this idea, by the way, is nothing entirely new. It may be worth recalling a sociologist who has reflected extensively on the dynamics of domination and hierarchy, such as Pierre Bourdieu (Susca, 2005; Susca, 2011: 145-149). Reasoning on the ambivalence shown historically by universalist ideas and assertions, Bourdieu distinguished between an aggressive pseudo-universal that provides support for exclusion and oppression and an authentic universal that can become a resource both for morally grasping the suffering of others and for transforming the awareness of injustice into a demand for emancipation of the dominated (Bourdieu, 1997; Bourdieu 1998). If it is indisputable that no one is safe from the danger of regressing towards the false form of the universal, it is also true that a distinction such as the one posed by Bourdieu can allow us to unmask many of the hypocrisies of Western ethnocentrism without abandoning ourselves to a relativism that is simple indifference towards the fate of non-Western subjects and peoples.

A similar argument can be applied when reasoning about the historically constructed relationship between the genders and the inferiority of the female component. In this regard, it cannot be denied that the universal has long nurtured an ideology aimed at defending male privilege. However, the awareness of this has not prevented an exponent of contemporary feminism of undisputed greatness such as Luce Irigaray from theorising a real concrete universal that is still waiting to be realised (1994). Nor would it be correct to think of Irigaray's as an isolated voice. Feminist thought has not only often noted that the idea of the

human being has for centuries excluded or only partially accepted female difference, but has also not infrequently stressed that it makes sense to strive for a universal finally capable of assuming concrete and differentiated contents (Agacinski, 1998).

If it is indisputable that many of Bauman's reflections have the merit of making the reader reconsider the indifference with which past and present times have looked or are looking at the condition of the suffering, it also seems true that Bauman's critique of adiaphorization can benefit from the idea of a universal laboriously elaborated in history. On closer inspection, this does not prevent us from thinking about moral choices made even against the most widely held social convictions. Rather, it makes it possible to link each moral choice with the possible sources of awareness available in a given historical period and cultural context.

This may also entail the opportunity to recover, at least in part, the inspirational ideas of the Durkheimian concept of morality so opposed by Bauman. Obviously, it is not a question of interpreting morality or God himself as mere emanations of the social bond, but of establishing some link between the values and acts of various individuals and the range of possibilities that have matured historically and are expressed in human society at large. In fact, neither societies nor states are totally separate from one other. For centuries at least, there has been a circulation of ideas and an exchange and contamination of values. Thus, although moral conformation imposed in one place may try to push people to believe or disbelieve in something, other beliefs or interpretations may well exist elsewhere.

The terms of the question posed by Bauman might therefore change, at least partially. The central objective could become the de-ethnicization of morality, i.e. the possibility for the individual to act morally with reference to human society and humanity as a whole. It is true that taking such a stance could put one in a dilemma: whether to stick to the principles of one's particular society or to violate its unwritten rules or even laws. However, posing moral questions in a non-ethnic way can also lead to political action to change the established rules or have different laws written. Moreover, de-ethnicization may keep the door open to the possibility of relativism. Take the considerations of *Modernity and Ambivalence* that hint at a common root of universality and relativism with regard to the condition and perception of the stranger:

> The stranger aims at the effacement of all divisions which stand in the way of uniform, essential humanity; this is the last hope he entertains to efface his

> own outsideness. To the native group, however, his thrust for universality means more than anything else a confrontation with the decomposing, corrosive power of *relativism* (1991, ed. 2007[5]: 84).

Overcoming the previously established *aut aut*, we could perhaps today try to hold together what were previously two opposites. In short, we could try to think of a relativistic universality that is finally capable of accepting differences.

Such an idea of the universal could be considered merely utopian. However, this would not deny its possible value and, moreover, would not lead to an incompatibility with Bauman's theoretical framework. As convincingly pointed out (Jacobsen, 2017; Jacobsen, 2020), Bauman himself did not reject utopia per se, maintaining rather an approach that can rightly be called "ambivalent". On the one hand, he rejected engineering utopias that claim to subject reality to rigid and inherently violent categories. But on the other, he believed that only a genuine utopian impulse could prevent us all from capitulating in the face of the inhumanity and too many injustices of our time.

Moreover, the proposal of a relativist universal need not to be understood only as a revival of utopia. In the midst of endless contradictions and often tortuous paths, the past and the present show individuals and collective subjects committed to expanding and enriching the idea of the human being as such. Without dreaming of a perfect world or wanting to be the bearers of the only truth, it is a question of choosing sides: with those who consider hierarchy and discrimination (whether based on race, wealth or gender) unacceptable, or with those who reaffirm this hierarchy and the resulting discrimination in word or deed. Despite a multitude of difficulties that cannot be denied, a possible path has already been mapped out. On 10 December 1948, therefore not long after the Holocaust and the end of the Second World War, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, declaring inadmissible limitations on freedom and dignity based on race, gender, social origin or other possible conditions. Are we to see in that event the triumph of universalistic oppression or rather the possibility of overcoming oppression itself by treasuring the idea of the human being that only a few years earlier had been atrociously denied by the Nazi executioners?

If properly understood and thought through with authentic reflexivity, a universalism that truly accepts differences can still guide and give substance to political action. After all, this was a guiding idea in the construction and unification of Europe as a political subject, a process that Bauman himself, while not explicitly posing as a public intellectual,

watched with attention and hope (Outhwaite, 2010). Making Bauman's legacy authentically alive can therefore also mean working for such universalism.

6. SOME CONSIDERATIONS IN CONCLUSION

Having reached the end of this survey, it may be appropriate to resume and clarify some of the considerations made. First of all, following an idea that is also present in Bauman, we can note how knowledge and culture actually tend to construct rigid taxonomies, trying to establish differences in a world that offers itself as multiform and variegated. This is an incessant work of systematization that has its own logical necessity and that makes human communication itself possible, but that should also be understood as a constraint and, at the same time, a resource for any criticism or *praxis* that transforms the existing.

In fact, reality as it manifests itself may well be different, both because it can be analysed from different points of view and because, above all, it is always produced with a good dose of arbitrariness and according to the convenience of the powerful. Already emphasized by Bourdieu with reference also to a series of case studies or historically produced fields, this perspective has been reaffirmed in more recent times. One might consider, for example, the conditions of criticism as posed by Boltanski, which are based on the idea that reality is constitutively and fortunately fragile and that social orders are always uncertain and susceptible to change (Boltanski, 2009). This does not mean that there is some historical or logical necessity to change for the better, but rather it reveals the two forces acting on classification: the one that imposes boundaries and the one that undermines and displaces boundaries.

Secondly, we can put forward the idea that the emergence and spread of an awareness of ambivalence can take on a positive significance. This is true not only in our time, which has fortunately abandoned many of its certainties and questioned many presumptions of superiority, but also with reference to the past of which, whether we like it or not, we are the objective heirs. If Bauman's portrait of modern societies in which states had completely centralized policies of containment and eradication of ambivalence seems implausible, the idea that totalitarianism is a total mobilisation that manages to permeate consciousness by establishing illusory dichotomies full of tragic consequences remains interesting and valid. However, even in Germany and under the harshest conditions of repression, there were people who rejected the certainties of the official ideology and, at times, even found the courage to con-

cretely oppose the dehumanisation of victims condemned to concentration camps and extermination. Following Bauman, we can believe that in them acted a moral impulse that the Nazi state was not able to extinguish, but we should also think that this impulse, far from being pre-social, kept alive a unitary conception of the human race socially and historically constructed and, fortunately, not completely annihilated by Hitler's regime.

Thirdly and lastly, I would like to conclude by at least partially embracing the realistic and painful optimism that this significant sociologist, beyond his merciless and sometimes apocalyptic diagnoses, has been able to demonstrate. If Bauman tried «to offer a "horizon of hope" in uncertain and ambivalent times» by relying now on critical sociology and now on a renewed socialism and a new utopian impetus (Davis, 2016: 28), we could all decide to hope also and precisely by virtue of the frequent appearance and reappearance of ambivalence.

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