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Utopianism in the Work of Zygmunt Bauman
- Towards a Sociology of Alternative Realities

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Abstract

Utopia has been a concern of philosophers for centuries. For most sociologists, however, a preoccupation with such a theme has been regarded as scientifically redundant and as an unnecessary departure from reality. For them, sociology must deal with what is, not with what could be or ought to be. In recent years, the sociological theory of Zygmunt Bauman has been instrumental in pointing to the possibilities, for sociology as well as for society, in utopian thinking which, in his view, must lead to social action and a change in the current condition of what he terms liquid modernity. His theories, though, also contain an uncompromising critique of and challenge to conventional modernist understandings of utopia and he instead proposes a line of utopian thought pointing to alternative realities alongside or parallel to contemporary society. Only by proposing utopia as an open-ended vision of the good society or the common good can we escape the iron-cages of no alternatives, human suffering and precariousness, which Bauman regards as signs of the times, and replace them with a free, autonomous, and moral social order based on mutual responsibility and solidarity.
The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveller, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.

- Robert Frost
“We humans are only an ephemeral link in the chain of the live and the living; there are good reasons for the assumption that we are but a developmental phase on the way to becoming truly humane beings.

We are still allowed a little time to hope that this may be so”

- Konrad Lorenz, The Waning of Humaneness
A central defining characteristic of dominant parts of the discipline of sociology has for decades been its defence of objectivity, disinterestedness, value-neutrality and realism. Despite this, the assumption that things can in fact be different from what they currently are appears to be a key in the understanding and appreciation of the work of Zygmunt Bauman. One of the most widely read contemporary social thinkers and theorists, Polish-born and British-based Bauman has provided sociology with a new arsenal of concepts and analyses available for social critics dealing especially with the postmodern condition or what he more recently prefers to refer to as ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman 2000a). Moreover, he has provided one of the most comprehensive critiques of the project of modernity, especially when it was taken to extremes in utopian experiments and projects such as the Nazi Holocaust or the Stalinist gulags. Therefore, in his most recent book he states that “the urge to transcend is the most stubbornly present, nearest to universal, and arguably the least destructible attribute of human existence. This cannot be said, however, of its articulation into ‘projects’” (Bauman 2002a:222-223). In spite of his criticism aimed against these utopian attempts of modernist planning and social engineering, his own writings also contain clear undercurrents of utopian inspired thinking. This utopian tread, as it were, has been present ever since the early writings and can still be found in the latest books perhaps even more explicitly than earlier (Jacobsen 2003a, 2000d). Thus, his work is characterised by ambivalence towards utopias as towards so many other social phenomena such as freedom, modernity, postmodernity, community, work, etc.

Utopianism has often been posed as an attempt at escaping the real and concrete conditions unfavourable to individual or collective visions of the ideal or the good society. This also holds true in Bauman’s case where the iron-cages
of modernity and postmodernity have been attacked for their focus on coercion, heteronomy and conformity as opposed to freedom, autonomy and ambivalence. He is concerned with showing, instead, that nothing in the social and cultural realm, despite being presented as such, is natural, inevitable or subjected to a logic of necessity (Tester 2002b). As Keith Tester, one of the finest interpreters of the work of Bauman suggested: “Within his sociology, Bauman tries to show that the world does not have to be the way it is and that there is an alternative to what presently seems to be so natural, so obvious, so inevitable” (Tester in Bauman & Tester 2001:9). That is the mark of distinction of Bauman’s sociology whether concerned with scientific dogmas from realism constraining humanity in envisaging alternative modes of action (cf. Bauman 1976b) or in dealing with social arrangements obstructing the realisation or actualisation of such modes. Whether one wishes to term this ‘utopianism’ or not is naturally a matter of choice of vocabulary but in my mind there is no doubt that his ideas constitute a vintage example of utopianism when applied to social thought.¹

Being utopian or espousing utopian ideas does not necessarily mean that one is world-weary or lives in an illusion although this has often been the accusation raised against those scholars or academics attempting to present alternative visions of the social or moral order. Thus, almost half a century ago, the American political scientist and economist, Andrew Hacker, noted on the reputation of utopians within social theory:

It is no secret that the Utopian is not a respectable member of the company of political and social theorists. Of course, it must be acknowledged that his breed never was numerous […] There have, of course, been Utopian murmurings in a variety of writings ranging from Marxists to current-day followers of Adam Smith […] But all have been roundly attacked: attacked on the seemingly self-sufficient
grounds that the ideas and ideals which they ventured to espouse were ‘Utopian’ (Hacker 1955:135).

As a consequence, utopianism has frequently been linked to inferior kinds of scientific thought and has been relegated to the outskirts of sociological theory by derogatory descriptions and comparisons to useless activity or irrational waste of time. Actually, utopianism and the idea of an ideal state informs and motivates most human and even animal life (cf. Hufschmid 2001) and utopian thinking and theorising used to point to the noblest and most valued aspects of abstract philosophy as well as practical political statements, as was seen in the works of Plato and Aristotle, but this ancient understanding has in recent decades fallen entirely into disrepute. ‘Utopia’, a term that in today’s usage has lost almost any positive meaning, was in fact originally derived from the Greek by Sir Thomas More meaning ‘nowhere’ (outopia) at the same time as this nowhere offers something ‘good’ (eutopia) (Kumar 1990:1). Thus, it semantically refers to a non-place where things are good but simultaneously it connotes many different meanings of such as a land of milk and honey, a Shangri-La, a Garden of Eden never to be reached, always irritatingly and intriguingly beyond human touch but always lurking in the back of our minds and at least some of our actions. Whether located in an idyllic past, as Romanticists tend to do with their utopian ideals, or in a stage of future development towards which we can only strive through social reforms or revolutions, as Futurists have been known to do, utopia is never here and now. It is apparently a dream we hope only to dive into in order to escape the nightmare of reality.

Ever since its ancient Greek embryo, utopianism has been a key concern in political, philosophical and literary thought. Defining utopia or capturing it in one sentence is almost impossible. According to Karl Mannheim, one of the most prominent analysts of utopia within the discipline of sociology, utopia
stood for ‘all situationally transcendent ideas [...] which in any way have a transforming effect upon the existing historical-social order’ (Mannheim 1936/1976). The two key words here are, obviously, ‘effect’ and ‘existing’. Utopian thinking attempts to alter and substitute the existing understanding or designing of reality, as well as having an impact and effect on the way things are or ought to be run or drifting towards in the future. Transcendence and transformation are thus also key terms to be reckoned with when seeking an understanding of utopian thought – either the transcendence or the transformation of the present into something qualitatively better and often also quantitatively better.

Most of the attempts at theorising or visualising utopia have aimed at making the elusive and tantalising tangible and presenting a manifestation of ideal states and ideological imaginations. Jeffrey C. Alexander recently offered the following formal sociological definition of utopia by stating that “utopia refers to a normatively desirable model of a fundamentally different social order that is held to be regulative for both social thinking and social action alike” (Alexander 2001:580). This definition, despite being a relatively flexible one, does not capture all the possible understandings or derivations of utopian thought. The fact that utopian visions always contain something normative about them is certainly true but that they necessarily need to propose a ‘model’ is not always the case, if we by model understand a formal picture of reality and how it should be moulded. Moreover, utopian visions can either offer a positive picture of an alternative reality, pose a negative picture of contemporary reality or both as well as suggesting ways of transcending realised utopias (Tillich 1973). Depending on which of these pictures of utopia is being proposed, there are further differentiations to be drawn between various utopian strands.

Therefore, sometimes utopia was presented as an end state to be reached at the future highpoint of a linear and teleological development or it was in almost
circular or non-temporal fashion depicted as something futile and entirely un-reachable but nevertheless desirable for social order to strive for day in and day out in the meticulous doings of mankind. Where the one strategy believed in progress towards a future state, the other was content merely to live in the eternal present. Not only regarding the time-dimension, whether utopia is to be realised and implemented in the here and now or sometime in the indefinable future, can one distinguish between different variants within utopian ideas. Analytically, it is also possible to separate along other lines, for example regarding who is going to be the agent of change. As Lyman Sargent (2000) suggests, it is possible to distinguish between two broad strands of utopian thinking – ‘utopias brought about without human effort’ on the one hand, and ‘utopias brought about by human effort’ on the other hand. Where the one, in the apt terms of Cornelius Castoriadis (1997b), would be an expression of a ‘heteronomous’ attempt at realising utopia, the other is, on the other hand, an ‘autonomous’ attempt. Where human agents, in a responsible, free and moral fashion in the latter instance seek to change the world in order to make it more suitable for their collective purposes, superhuman powers in the former instance direct people through the workings of an ‘invisible hand’ or through other metaphysical means and sometimes by the use of coercive forces. Bauman’s utopian sympathy is clearly located in the former position.

This article will attempt to place the sociological writings of Zygmunt Bauman within these different utopian frameworks and point to the novelty and viability of his position. Social thought has throughout its history been overcrowded with utopian souls seeking shelter from reality in different types of anticipatory beliefs about future social arrangements. Some of these arrangements have been posed as ideological ideals to be striven for through actual revolutionary praxis while others have been represented merely as thought experiments that were too illusionary or imaginative ever to be implemented.
However, also a third option is apparently available where utopianism, perhaps in a somewhat untraditional fashion, can be seen as something immanent in reality, as an alternative and parallel path not chosen or discovered, something not yet realised but already present although either suppressed or repressed by the powers that be. Utopianism understood in this third sense permeates most of Bauman’s work from the early publications on socialism in the Soviet satellite states and its denial of diversity and dissent and suppression of human heterogeneity (Bauman 1966a, 1966b, 1976a, 1976b) to the latest pieces on the capitalist catapulted ‘liquid modernity’ and globalisation in which new forms of social stratification and individual isolation emerge alongside and often as a continuation of the old (Bauman 1998a, 1998b, 2000a, 2001a, 2001b, 2002a, 2003). Some sort of politically or more precisely morally motivated utopianism has been a major leitmotif in his more than a couple of dozen books published in English since the early 1970’s although it has always remained shrouded in a scientific sociological discourse, however soft and compassionate, dealing with very tangible social structures and real phenomena. Despite this, it is a passionate utopianism but never pathetic.

From Utopian Communism via Utopian Socialism to Critical Utopian Humanism

The aforementioned particular and indeed peculiar utopian aspect has been part and parcel of Bauman’s writings from the early years as a ‘creative’ or ‘organic’ intellectual in State Socialist Poland to his later years as a ‘free-floating’ intellectual and interpreter in the capitalist and consumerist West (Morawski 1998:35). One could therefore also ponder whether his utopianism did not originally stem from his desire to escape the enforced conformity of State Socialism? Moreover, the reason why it has persisted throughout the years even
after his escape, read expelling from, this regime in the late 1960’s could be interpreted as a consequence of the disillusion hitting him hard when encountering the reality of postmodernity in the West holding so much promise but being unable to deliver? Whether this is the case or not is difficult to determine but the fact remains that Bauman has not given up the hope that reality may be different from what is used to be and currently is.

The socialist background, however, has been the breading-ground for many utopian thoughts throughout the last couple of centuries. Utopianism runs like a leitmotif through most socialist writings (cf. Claeys 2000; Ulam 1973) and is even found implicitly in those writers blatantly denouncing it. This socialist inclination for utopian ideas may also be the reason behind Bauman’s predilection for his special variant of it despite consequently expressing an aversion towards the social experiments launched in the name of State Socialism or structural Marxism. Back in the middle of the 19th century, Marx was angered by the so-called ‘utopian socialists’ who in their transcendental consciousness were world-weary and exhibited a starry-eyed attitude towards the future horizons instead of focusing attention on the urgent and necessary task of bringing about real revolutionary change. His major attacks were directed at the anarchism and idealism of the likes of Proudhon and Bakunin as much as against Owen and Fourier who with their utopianism all forfeited the chance of making the capitalist order crumble. Bauman is not so much angered as he is worried by the fact that apathy and a spectator attitude is the widespread response to the troubles and difficulties faced daily by the new hordes of downtrodden and marginalised poor. Being spectators instead of actors removes responsibility, moral as well as political, for the actions and atrocities perpetrated against these groups of people (Bauman 1999, 2002:201ff). Bauman’s utopia is, as a consequence, a version of the republican society, relatively similar to that proposed by pragmatist Richard Rorty (1999) as a source for ‘social hope’,
where duties and obligations go hand in hand with rights and the fair distribution of material wealth. Bauman, though, is in no way whatsoever an advocate for the aristocratic underpinnings of the ancient republican practice - excluding women, slaves and the indolent from participation - but nor is he opting for planned economy understood in its communist guise, although the welfare state’s redistribution of wealth in his view is a prerequisite for a truly democratic society. He is rather concerned with the creation of the self-constituted society where autonomous citizens actively engage in public and political life instead of retreating into their private fortresses constructed out of fear like the moth, as Marx noted, which as the universal sun starts setting seeks out the comfort and warmth of the domestic lamp.

However, in his earlier years, before arriving in the UK in the early 1970’s, Bauman’s vision of utopia was markedly different than it is today according to his friend and colleague Stefan Morawski who claimed that he at that time embraced a “Marxist worldview in the light of the utopian belief and hope that the Soviet Union was genuinely a country of justice, equality, freedom; that an ethnic pedigree really did not matter” (Morawski 1998:30). Embittered by the experience of the Stalinist and anti-Semitic purges in the Polish academia first in the middle of the 1950’s and later throughout the late 1960’s, the belief in such a communist utopia was upon arrival in the UK ultimately disowned. Despite having dissolved his relatively orthodox roots to Marxist thinking many years ago, there is as mentioned little doubt that his early training within this tradition has directed his attention to aspects fertile for utopian theorising. The utopian vein in his writings from the early years onwards can be seen in the fact that the two major tenets in his thinking, he claims, are respectively suffering and culture (Bauman in Kilminster & Varcoe 1992). Utopia is central to both of these aspects – utopia as relief from suffering and as the realisation of culture as a human and actively created domain. As Bauman is well
aware, we are not all endowed with the same possibilities and chances in the world for avoiding suffering and creating culture. The life chances experienced by a ‘vagabond’ are by definition extremely different and incomparable from that of a ‘tourist’ (cf. Bauman 1993:240-242). The former is the metaphor utilised by Bauman characterising the miserable plight of the underprivileged, downtrodden and marginalised, whereas the latter signifies the possibilities and potentials available to those at the top of the human hierarchy. Bauman is throughout all of his books persistently and categorically taking the side of the weak. According to him, the quality and standards of any society can only be measured and evaluated by looking at the condition of the weakest members.

Thus, for a considerable period of time he hung his utopian hopes exclusively on the ideological coat hanger, as it were, provided by socialism, and later on a humanistic variant of this ideology to be sure. Especially the ‘softer’ kinds of socialism that opened up the world instead of closing it down into new modernist iron-cages appeared to appeal to him after his arrival in the UK in 1971. As Keith Tester (2002a) has illustrated, the majority of the sources Bauman draws upon in his own eclectic work is concerned with utopian visions ranging from, amongst others, the work of Antonio Gramsci via Albert Camus to Emmanuel Levinas (cf. Tester 2002a). These writers are not socialists in the traditional paradigmatic sense of the term, apart perhaps from Gramsci, but nevertheless contain seeds of the notions of a just and morally responsible society that socialism has been able to monopolise throughout most parts of the 19th and 20th centuries. We must also not forget the inspirational contribution of Leszek Kolakowski here or the equally important contributions made by members of the Budapest School. Like Kolakowski, with whom Bauman had to flee the forced utopia of the socialist regime in Poland in the late 1960’s, utopia as a way of thinking is in principle a good thing, although fully-fledged utopias forged after some authoritarian blueprints or master plans often appear to turn
into iron-cages of totalitarianism or authoritarian state apparatuses trying to force progress on its right way (cf. Olson 1982; Rouvillois 2000). Once realised, as Kolakowski (1983) points out, utopias have a bad tendency to turn into dystopian ambitions of perfectibility where humans are made to suffer for a dream of total order, purity and submission.\(^4\) Therefore, just like Kolakowski, Bauman also possesses an anti-utopian current. This anti-utopianism is evident in the way he treats the modernist hopes of creating a better society based on rational planning and the sequestration of difference: “The new, modern order took off as a desperate search for structure in a would suddenly denuded of structure. Utopias that served as beacons for the long march to the rule of reason visualized a world without margins, leftovers, the unaccounted for – without dissidents and rebels” (Bauman in Beilharz 2001:195). Modern utopias sought to dissolve disorder into order, annihilate ambivalence and eliminate adversaries and since both capitalism and socialism were children of the great project of modernity, they were doomed to follow suit in this respect. This finally made Bauman doubt whether socialism could serve as the vehicle leading towards an alternative social order where human culture was not alienating and naturalised and where human suffering was at best eventually eradicated and more realistically was at least reduced to a minimum.

Thus, for long, Bauman saw the Left in general and socialism in particular as the ‘counter-culture of modernity’ (Bauman 1986-1987, 1990b, 1991a). They, modernity and socialism, grew up together, were victorious together, and eventually decomposed together. Already in the early 1980’s Bauman saw his hopes attached to the working class movement as the bearer of an ‘active utopia’ dissolved by the assimilation of these potentially revolutionary forces by corporate capitalism (Bauman 1982) as well as by the Stalinist regime of Wojciech Jaruzelski crushing the Solidarnosz uprising in Poland. When Bauman in the middle of the 1970’s expressed the hopes of socialism as such an ‘active’
utopia (Bauman 1976a), socialism still proved a viable solution to many of the problems faced by capitalism such as ‘legitimisation crises’ but already in the early 1980’s these hopes ended in the throes of death culminating in the upheavals in Eastern Europe in the late 1980’s and the definitive dethronement of the State Socialist projects. These Socialist utopias, being some of the only utopian attempts in history ever really to have been put into flesh instead of merely remaining words, as the ancient Greeks expected of their classical utopian aspirations, were ultimately ‘upturned’ as Noberto Bobbio (1989) termed it. Peter Beilharz (1991) showed how many of ‘labour’s utopias’ on the Left such as bolshevism, Fabianism and social democracy all failed to deliver and bring about the promised mode of production where oppression and alienation disappeared and his analysis is indeed inspired by Bauman’s own work on the failed class project of socialism (cf. Bauman 1972, 1982). This historical defeat of socialism, or the vulgar variant of it practised in the East, however, did not mean that Bauman shrew in the towel and altogether surrendered his socialism convictions. Many of his ideas of socialism as a particularly active utopia still remain with him as well as the hope that such ideas can “pave the way for a critical activity which alone can transform the present predicament of man” (Bauman 1976a:13). Instead of supporting utopianism as conventional and conserving activity, today he rather views it as critical activity.

Bauman’s values, though, are no longer exclusive socialist if understood in terms of ideological monopoly. Rather, they appear to be encompassing and universal humanistic values that especially the Enlightenment philosophers espoused despite his often outspoken critique of the historical excesses of Enlightenment. As he stated in an interview conducted a decade ago about the utopian principles (of justice, self-assertion and autonomy) guiding his work:
These principles stay with me all the time – if you call them socialist, fine; but I don’t think they are particularly socialist, anyway. They are much wider than that. I really believe that communism was just the stupidly condensed and concentrated, naive effort to push it through; but the values were never invented by the communists. The values were there, much wider; they were Western, Enlightenment values. I can’t imagine a society which would dispose of these two values, ever [...] Once the ideas of justice and self-assertion were invented, it is impossible to forget them. They will haunt and pester us to the end of the world (Bauman in Kilminster & Varcoe 1992:225).

Therefore, his utopian vision despite his earlier expressed sympathies does not rest solely on socialist assumptions. Especially the inspiration found in certain varieties of French literary and even postmodernist social thought whether academic or artistic – Camus, Castoriadis and Levinas – appears as mentioned to have inspired Bauman in a utopian direction (Jacobsen 2003c) as does some of the utopian ideas of Ernst Bloch (Jacobsen 2003b), although we must also not forget the inspiration critical theory has provided for his project in this respect. Bauman’s variant of critical thinking is explicated as a way of looking at alternatives, just as conventional critical thinking has always attempted to transcend and look beyond the confines of capitalism. For example, he writes the following characteristic of his understanding and utilisation of critical theory which clearly contains utopian undercurrents if not overtones:

Unlike other theories, critical theory will not be [...] satisfied with the optimally faithful reproduction of the world ‘as it is’. It will insist on asking, ‘how has this world come about?’. It will demand that its history be studied, and that in the course of this historical study the forgotten hopes and lost chances of the past be retrieved. It will wish to explore how come that the hopes have been forgotten and the chances lost. It will also refuse to accept that whatever is, is of necessity; it will suggest instead that the structures be explored which perpetuate what is and by the same token render the alternatives unrealistic. It will assume, in other
words, that until the contrary is proved, reality of some attributes of the world and utopianism of their alternatives are both conditional on the continuation of some practices which, in principle, can be modified or altered (Bauman 1991b:280-281).

This is indeed a very poignant summary of the critical core in his own work, a self-description of the qualities of critical social thinking that he wants to stress either overtly or implicitly through his sociology. Bauman, though, is not a critical theorist per se – he insistently refuses to wear the badge of allegiance of whatever kind or represent any traditions or schools of thought. Though, the utopian and also adversarial element immanent in many parts of critical thinking (Alexander 2001; Benhabib 1986; Calhoun 1995; Cohen & Arato 1992) is a key in understanding the utopian strand that Bauman pursues throughout his many books whether he is writing on a critique of modernity, the characteristics of postmodernity or attempts to draw attention to the liquefied contours of contemporary society. Bauman’s utopian journey, as the above by no means exhaustive account has illustrated, consists of a mosaic of impressions, inspirations and changes. The utopian element derives as much vigour and inspiration from the ‘French connection’ constituted by Camus and his literary focus on the ability of acting otherwise, Castoriadis and his political vision of the autonomous society and individual equally a precondition for each other, and Levinas and his appreciation of the moral responsibility developed through human proximity, as to some of the major ideas advanced by critical thinking or humanistic Marxism. They all share, in different guises and degrees, a concern with utopian ideals.

**Modernist Utopia as Predicament, Prediction and Postponement**

Utopia has always remained the *terra incognita*, the unknowable and intangible that despite being mapped and meticulously described in many a book still
stays beyond human reach as a state that always recedes as soon as we believe we are almost there. In fact, we discover that we are always not yet there, that there are always new things to be improved and perfected (cf. Bloch 2000). Utopia shows what may be in the offing but this image may often just as well merely be a fatamorgana that dissolves before our eyes the closer to it we come. This does not mean, however, that sociology and other related disciplines has been short of attempts at trying to make such hazy mirages into concrete, steel-wired and solid social forms but within sociology there has been fierce debates centring around whether it was the job of sociologists to assist in bringing about utopias or not. For many centuries there was a so-called Wahlverwandtschaft between social thinkers and the social powers that presided to force utopia through but this role ascribed to the work of the social scientist became increasingly unfeasible and problematic throughout the 20th century, as Bauman (1987) so vividly has illustrated.

Robert Friedrich (1970) in his now classic dissection of a discipline, A Sociology of Sociology, distinguished between the most common two broad categories of intellectual involvement in social thinking by labelling them respectively ‘priests’ and ‘prophets’. Where the former were bent on control and prediction of human behaviour and appeared as spearheading specific paradigmatic fractions whose aim it was to plan and choreograph the human life-world in order to make it amenable to social control, prediction and planning, the latter were, on the other hand, content merely in quite individualised, secluded and non-conform fashion, as the Sceptics of ancient Greece, to profess and present their interpretations of the life daily lived through and rehearsed by human beings. The priests often strove for value-neutrality, certainty and absolute ‘objectivity’, that spectre haunting the social sciences for centuries, whereas the latter had no desire or intention to hide behind that kind of smoke screen and therefore openly exclaimed their sympathies and evaluations. Bauman is
clearly, as most postmodern thinkers, a prophet, a translator, a herald of the human condition, although he throughout the early years spent in Eastern Europe appeared more as a priest than as a prophet. His metamorphosis has been total and his sympathy, ever since the publication of his *Towards a Critical Sociology* a quarter of a century ago, has been with the prophetic mood as opposed to the rigid and rational models of the priests (Bauman 1976b). These ideas about separation of roles also paved the way to his later much acclaimed distinction respectively between ‘legislators’ and ‘interpreters’ (Bauman 1987) that in many ways can be seen as equivalents to the aforementioned differentiation between priests and prophets. Where the former, the legislators, throughout the modern age were involved in tasks and assignments often in the capacity as bureaucrats of controlling the human environment, the latter are under postmodern conditions interested in comprehending what is going on in the world at large without showing loyalty to state apparatuses or other societal ‘vested interest’. They want to make people, cultures and communities able to communicate with and understand each other.

Where the two groups of intellectuals, with legislators and priests placed on the one pole of the continuum and the interpreters and prophets positioned at the other, primarily part regards the role the intellectual ought to be assigned and play in human affairs, but where they combine is about the necessity to express truths or notions about the ‘good life’ and how to achieve it. Utopian ideals thus to varying degrees flourish within both camps and this in turn means that they have a tendency to place human happiness or human perfectibility above other concerns but simultaneously to postpone it in some kind of future state of affairs or social order. Bauman is no exception to this rule although his notions about the good life are not to be seen as authoritative exclamations or as iron-cages without other available options. His utopian ideas are more akin to suggestions about alternative realities and he does not venture into telling
incontrovertible truth but instead points out that there are many truths depending on one’s point of vantage or the eye of the beholder. Alphonse de Lamartine, the French Romantic and Enlightenment poet and statesman, noted that ‘utopias are often only premature truths’ (Touraine 2000:26). Whether or not this is the case, only posterity can determine but the important thing is that utopians often strive to make their ideas come true, to make them into ‘hard’ reality at some point in time instead of allowing them to stay within the realm of ‘soft’ thought. This kind of Enlightenment thinking was expressed no more explicitly than by Leibniz who contended that ‘the present in pregnant with the future’. Bauman would agree with this presupposition, although he would insist on the use of ‘futures’ in the plural instead of in the singular, but turn against what he would regard as modernist thinking if these ideas by virtue of being ideas by some logic of necessity or historical inevitability had to be turned into reality. He often illustrates this modernist preoccupation with turning ideas into reality and making dreams come true when quoting the famous words of Jacques Ellul regarding technology when he stated that everything being technologically possible at some point in time would be carried out merely from the fact of being possible. These endless dreams of enforcing the possible have the bad habit of becoming nightmares, which in turn has devalued the desirability of dreaming: “With too many successive dreamworlds remembered mostly for the painful scars they left, the very activity of dreaming has been cast into disrepute” (Bauman 1992c:101).

In short, modernity, in Bauman’s exposition of this historical epoch, was a matter of trying hard to impose utopian blueprints on reality, enforcing notions of the ideal society through bureaucratic planning ranging from legislation processed by intellectuals, urban and architectural planning and the social engineering involved in all spheres of life. He often cites Leon Battista Alberti for the assumption that in the modern mind the ‘perfect society’ is one in which
any change is a change for the worse – a political variant of the Pareto optimal position in economic theory. This was the trademark of modern utopias. Transgressing the threshold to postmodernity or liquid modernity, however, meant that this illusion was stripped off its gown of authority and that a disenchanted era at least for a while thought that re-enchantment, also of utopia, was on the cards (cf. Bauman 1992a:x). Postmodernity was modernity coming to its senses and realising its own grand illusion, just as the little whippersnapper in H. C. Andersen’s fairytale *The Emperor’s New Clothes* revealed to the surprise of the spectators that the emperor was, in fact, naked. All that was solid, even the solidified and ossified visions of utopia, evaporated and crumpled and every idea of the future betterment and improvement of society and social order was apparently irretrievably lost with the end of modernity.

Bauman thus turns defiantly against the grandiose and illusory modernist projects of utopia aimed by totalitarian protagonists of either Hitler, Stalin or Mao at creating the beginning of the Thousand-Years-Reich, the end of the State of Necessity with its substitution by the State of Freedom or a Cultural Revolution crushing all human difference. Those galvanised utopian visions, more often than not erected on human misery and enslavement, appears today to be in vain, attempts belonging to a historical epoch in which the confidence of Man, Reason and Truth spanned the globe, where only the sky was the limit and which shadowed for the fact that the Dream of Purity turned out to be the nightmare for those being deemed impure (Bauman 1997a:5ff). Such utopian visions were perpetrated equally by totalitarian protagonists as well as by well-meaning democrats hoping to be instrumental in making the world more transparent, controllable, perfect and eventually happy. These political men and their followers thought that they had killed off the perpetual spectre of *Unsicherheit* (the tripod of uncertainty, unsafety and insecurity) as well as that associated with ambivalence once and for all but their bluff was disclosed in postmoder-
nity much to their own misfortune and to the annoyance of the technicians of modernity, the state builders and economy planners of Keynesian consensus, for whom a perfect and stable order could and should be created for the sake of the present and future of humankind (Bauman 2002b). They were by history, as it were, proved to be blatantly wrong. As Marx made clear in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, those who are ignorant or negligent of history may be condemned to repeat it and our collective recollection about what modernist utopias could lead to is and ought in Bauman’s understanding to be a bulwark against repeating them.

In the liquefied postmodernity, after the demise of the modernist project as well as the dissolution of the polarised world-picture of two power blocs divided in true modernist fashion by a solid ‘iron curtain’, utopias have not, however, vanished entirely but have taken on ever new meanings and versions more suitable for a ‘new global disorder’, the words used by Kenneth Jowitt to characterise our contemporary condition. The idea of a utopian convergence of the mass utopian or ideological values of East and West, which many sociologists and political scientists found so appealing and endearing throughout the polarised post-World War II period (cf. Buck-Morss 2000), was erected as an unstable house of cards but, as Bauman noted, these cards have now been reshuffled after the end of the ‘Great Schism’ that for almost half a century polarised the world. Today we are instead witnessing a new world disorder where the arrowhead of progress does no longer point in one frozen unilinear direction but like the small pin in a compass is constantly frustrated by the uprooting and chaos of the surrounding environment. Thus, the future of utopia as a way of imagining a different world looks bleaker than ever before if understood in traditional modernist terms and brighter if seen through Bauman’s at times optimistic, at other times more pessimistic postmodern optics. So where do we go from here?
As one of Bauman’s teachers, the revisionist professor of economy Waclaw Lipinski, taught him, sociologists should never predict (Smith 1999:203) and especially should they refrain from predicting about the future, as Danish multi-talented artist Storm Petersen once humorously added. This may also be one of the major reasons why Bauman’s ideas of utopia are not galvanised into the aforementioned grandiose visions of a future kingdom of unrestrained freedom or an equally impossible post-scarcity society. Despite being prophetic and interpretative, he is realistic enough not to daydream or build castles in Spain.⁶ He instead wishes that people themselves without the use of force or coercion may discover the social forms and notions of human cohabitation that fulfil their ambitions and aspirations for the good life. Here the sociologists may be of some assistance in pointing out the possibilities yet uncovered or the constraints on such possibilities to be demolished and discarded and thereby making change impossible. In a similar fashion to Milan Kundera, who stated that a novel that does not discover the hitherto unknown segment of human existence is immoral, Bauman would be able to claim that a sociology that is negligent of human possibilities and potential is by definition unethical (Tester 2002b). We should not pose as the aforementioned legislators of predetermined utopias but rather stand forth as interpreters of the manifold possibilities of different versions of utopia – which is perhaps more a matter of cultural determination than actual individual choice. Bauman is aware that giving up on the modernist ideal of perfecting the world, domesticating the wilderness and creating the utopian ideal in the midst of reality may actually and paradoxically also be an obstacle to the utopias he is envisaging: “To abandon social engineering as a valid means of political practice means to discard […] all visions of a different society; even makes it difficult to imagine another way of living or organizing our lives and priorities” (Bauman 1991:269). However, the modernist utopias born
out of the desire to control, correct and constantly monitor the social world had a bizarre tendency to end in totalitarianism.

The utopian component in Bauman’s work does not mean an idealist rejection of the world as an objective facticity – rather, it means an understanding of the hard and solid realities of the present and the possibilities and potentials for change embedded and immanent within them. Therefore, it is reminiscent of Anthony Giddens’ (1990) ‘utopian realism’ where the real and recalcitrant facts and the utopian and the desired outcomes are thoroughly mixed into a cocktail of potentiality and political potency.⁷ Even Sir Thomas More’s (1516/1965) original definition of the island of Utopia contained a grain of realism – it was, in Kumar’s words, ‘never simple dreaming’.⁸ The same goes for Bauman – his utopian vein goes well beyond dreamscapes and into the rock-solid realities of the world – as a matter of historical fact in the case of modernist utopias and as a matter of desirability in the case of the ability mentally as well as socially to conjure up alternative realities. The utopian presence in his writings is implicit and immanent just as the utopianism he expresses is never preached as an existence based on excess, extravagance or exuberance, as has often been the case in classical utopian thought. It is a much more modest utopianism, yet if practised and not only preached would have extreme consequences for social structure as well as human life. One of the most fiercely contested ideas and which infuriated Bauman the most was Hegel’s assertion that ‘the real is rational’ and that rationality excluded all other kinds of reality. Bauman’s utopianism is, on the contrary, a sociology stressing utopianism as a precondition for imagining reality otherwise, a sociology of potentiality and possibilities in the face of the solidified and sedimented self-appointed ‘rational’ social forms spelling out ‘there is no alternative’ which are still prevalent features even in a times of a ‘liquefied’ modernity. Utopia, in this sense, is and will remain part and parcel
of the human predicament that sociology must necessarily mirror especially in times when utopian visions appear to be lost.

**Liquid Modern Utopias, Dystopias and Heterotopias**

Where most modern utopias, or what Marin (1992) and Hetherington (2002) termed ‘utopics’, were deliberately made flesh and blood and into concrete physical expressions and embodiments through architectural, urbanistic or geographical planning of the elusive utopian ideas (cf. Baczko 1989), which often turned into so-called ‘subtopias’, utopia in the liquid modernity of today has altogether lost its solid spatial dimension and physical grounding. They are now instead utopias without a *topos* – deprived of their previously constitutive topographical features. They have to a great extent become exterritorial like so many other former solid and territorially located features of social life:

The Utopias of yore stand condemned in the new global elite’s *Weltanschauung* and life philosophy. Their two most crucial attributes – territoriality and finality – disqualify past Utopias and bar in advance all future attempts to re-enter the line of thinking they once followed […] ‘Utopia’ – in its original meaning of a *place* that does not exist – has become, within the logic of the globalized world, a contradiction in terms. The ‘nowhere’ (the ‘forever nowhere’, the ‘thus-far nowhere’ and the ‘nowhere-as-yet’ alike) is no longer a place. The ‘U’ of ‘Utopia’ bereaved by the *topos*, is left homeless and floating, no longer hoping to strike roots, to ‘re-embed’ […] The utopian model of a ‘better future’ is out of the question (Bauman 2002a:236-239).

Instead of allowing utopias to become places nowhere to be found or entirely bereaved of spatial and temporal dimensions, Bauman (1998b:98) echoing the words of Fernando Ainsa suggests that we ought to work towards creating a ‘pan-topia’ – the space of everywhere. This is more easily preached than prac-
tised. Utopias have, however, not been entirely dissolved but thoroughly transformed. Present day versions of utopia are nowadays as a consequence perhaps best described with the apt term coined by Michel Foucault (1986) ‘heterotopias’ which are not non-places but are places out of place, as it were, ‘countersites’ and places where the waste-products of civilisation and especially modern utopian civilisation are cast. Heterotopias are thus both part and parcel of and indispensable to utopias as well as their distorted materialisation. They are also alternative places designated to the outskirts or normalcy or the dominant way of life. Together with the rise of such heterotopias, also what John O’Neill (1993) with a colourful metaphor termed ‘McTopia’ where time is eaten away instead of as in real utopias being constant or eternal, appears as a sign of the times. To many, both heterotopias and McTopias are expressions of the so-called dystopias or anti-topias.

The dividing line between utopias, dystopias and heterotopias is one intimately dependent upon definition. Bauman’s images of modernity and post-modernity or liquid modernity can and with good reason often been regarded as heterotopias but equally as dystopias – the mirror opposite of utopias. Everything beautiful can decompose into ugliness, everything intended to liberate people may lead to terror and totalitarianism, everything thought of as the good society may turn out bad and sour. This is perhaps an imminent aspect of the critical theoretically oriented strand of his sociology, which also contains a more literary strand. In style, substance and artistic effects, his work is equally reminiscent of many literary expositions and poetic descriptions of how the world could be imagined and constructed if we discard the one-dimensionality of many modernist utopian visions and also reminiscent of how literary writers depict the world as having taken the wrong turn towards utopia and instead ended in the doldrums. This literary imagination, naturally coupled with a sociological imagination in his work, may assist as an alternative utopian strand.
in debunking the ‘natural’, ‘inevitable’ and ‘common sense’ as a utopian strategy that Bauman described in the following fashion:

We ought to come as close as the true poets do to the yet hidden human possibilities; and for that reason we need to pierce the walls of the obvious and self-evident, of that prevailing ideological fashion of the day whose commonality is taken for the proof of its sense. Demolishing such walls is as much the sociologist’s as the poet’s calling, and for the same reason: the walling-up of possibilities belies human potential while obstructing the disclosure of its bluff (Bauman 2000b:79-80).

Literary thought is full of examples of dystopias and anti-utopias which, contrary to utopias, do not contain promises of creating a better world. Just think of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* or George Orwell’s *1984* as the primary examples of this kind of sombre and sinister premonitions of a future state of affairs where dehumanisation and degradation characterises the daily life of human beings. Both of these classical literary dystopias contain visions of the future that are appalling, where heteronomy crushes autonomy, where dehumanisation prevails and is presented as a distorted picture of humanism, where self-limitation is supplanted by suppression and surveillance.

As a consequence, reality in the work of Bauman is often seen as the dystopia of utopias and as Krishan Kumar with typical eloquence observed: “As nightmare to its dream, like a malevolent and grimacing doppelgänger, anti-utopia has stalked utopia from the very beginning. They have been locked together in a contrapuntal embrace, a circling dance, that has checked the escape for either for a very long time” (Kumar 1987:99). This is also the case in Bauman’s writings where dystopia, sometimes in the guise of someone’s exclusive or special utopia, is always lurking in the background presented as something to be transcended. His work is thus neither only ever exclusively utopian
nor solely dystopian, although many of his books such as *Modernity and the Holocaust, Modernity and Ambivalence, Globalization: The Human Consequences, In Search of Politics, Community, Liquid Modernity, The Individualized Society, Society Under Siege* and *Wasted Lives* could easily be read and interpreted in such a superficial and singularly dystopian way. However, beneath the surface of the often pessimistic and sombre premonitions permeating these relatively recent as well as older works, a more promising and optimistic vision is always lurking. There is light at the end of the tunnel of nightmarish and totalitarian tendencies. Bauman thus mixes utopian with dystopian thinking in a way that simultaneously shows the limitations to utopias as well as their promises.

An example of such a mixture is that whereas most classical understandings of utopia centred on the construction of social order (Donelly 1998), Bauman instead proposes his utopia as the potential for disorder, the defiance and dissolution of solid and incontrovertible order and structure. In this fashion, Bauman’s utopia has more in common with Victor Turner’s (1969) *communitas*, anti-structures and liminality than with its orderly twin phenomena. Thus, ambivalence is a force to be reckoned with in social transformation because it rejects the barriers constructed in order to avoid disorder (Bauman 1991). Bauman’s utopian vision embodies ambivalence instead of expelling or eliminating it but to many constructors of modern utopias, this would equal a dystopia where everything solid melts into air and evaporates. This solid substance called ‘order’ was and still remains a social construction where everything falling outside the classificatory map, as Adorno and Horkheimer (1944/1972:16) stated in their *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, has to be avoided and eventually annihilated. Order was a ‘task’ and thus utopia was not just a perfect society – it had to be perfected, *made* perfect. Someone had to intervene in order to secure the perfect society – the means were often violent and ex-
treme, the agent often the state and its bureaucracy legitimised by the monopoly on the use of force that modernity bestowed upon it together with the drilling machinery of the Panopticon of prisons and asylums and the factory where production took place under rigid regulation. As a consequence, what is utopia for some may well turn into a dystopia for others. The dream of the realisation of the Thousand-Years-Reich meant for a large proportion of people – Jews, sexual dissidents, political heretics and ethnically ambivalent groups of people – that the barbed wire of the concentration camps marked the meandering dividing-line between the dystopia on the inside and the outside utopian social order (cf. Bauman 1989).

As a result, Bauman has been instrumental in illustrating how excess, either in its National Socialist, Stalinist or later capitalist and consumerist guise, despite differences in degree equally will lead to dehumanised conditions, how the tensions or contradictions between freedom and dependency, order and chaos, production and consumption, morality of proximity and ethics of distance, *Unsicherheit* and security, certainty and safety appear to haunt most social arrangements. His utopianism, though, seeks to overcome these inherent contradictions by posing ways to transcend them without resorting to portrayals of actual arrangements or concrete conditions and circumstances to be realised. In this fashion he is true to most traditional utopian rules of thumb:

> Utopia, of course, aspires to overcome these contradictions, to show how the circle can be squared. In doing this what it often reveals is the price to be paid for following one or other principle to its logical extreme. This is part of the value of utopia. One of its chief heuristic uses, in fact, is that by the very idealism of its attempt to resolve the dilemmas of modern society it dramatizes them in a vivid and highly effective form […] It also evokes, as a fierce challenge to its whole promise of reconciliation, the grim-faced anti-utopia, its dialectical and equally one-side counterpart (Kumar 1990:51).
This is also part and parcel of Bauman’s ‘postmodern dialectic’ that he presents reality in a relatively one-sided way in order to be able to propose something transcending the utopia turned dystopia (cf. Jacobsen 2003a). This is done either by proposing diametrically opposite and internally contradictory conceptual pairs such as freedom and dependency, us and them, nature and culture (cf. Bauman 1990a) and then opting for the ambivalent position or by pointing to the eternal inner tension within each concept in itself.

Not only contemporary social thought is directed towards some understandings of utopia and simultaneously dystopia. The same interest is and has for quite some time now been reflected in various social movements that through their often idealist interpretations of contemporary society represent utopia and dystopia at one and the same time. Take as examples the women’s liberation movements, gay activists, anti-globalising organisations, ethnic or ecological movements. All of these groups advance indeed particularistic and one-sided interpretations of utopia – a state they equate with the disappearance of oppression within the specific cultural domain they defend and the right to choose for themselves. However, most of them extend these particularistic interests into universalised notions of ‘the good society’ and ‘the common good’. Hereby they are instrumental in pointing particularly to the civil society as a place that ought to be kept free from oppression and where self-limitation, pluralism and individual autonomy flourish (Alexander 2001). These groups extend the claims about autonomy but also mutual dependency and thereby open up inclusive visions of utopia despite their initial particularistic aspirations and they turn often relatively abstract utopian thought into concrete action in order to change, transform or transcend current reality.

Krishan Kumar identified as the core of utopian thought, together with its cornerstones consisting of hope and harmony, design and desire, that it “pro-
vides a map of quite different possibilities for speculating on the human condi-
tion” (Kumar 1990:19). As a matter merely of thinking it opens up different
and often conflicting interpretations and understandings of what is to be
achieved and what is to be avoided. As a matter of action it tends to narrow
down these understandings to myopic or insignificant choices and to specify
exactly what must be done and perhaps more importantly what is to be re-
frained from being done. This in turn often leads to totalitarianism and heteron-
omy, as Bauman points out. However, we cannot allow utopianism to be split,
as so many other phenomena, into thought on the one hand and action on the
other. This tendency boils down to severing the link between means and ends,
to cut the causal link between what we want and how we want to and may
achieve it. By cutting this link we exclude and even emasculate politics and
collective action. Thus, in Bauman’s sociology, the thinking and acting are in-
stead combined into people possessing what Giddens (1984) termed a ‘trans-
formative capacity’, which means the ability of opening up for possibilities to
change things.11 Utopia has to be practised, not just imagined or contemplated –
as Bauman hammers home time after time, we need to combine the vita con-
templative with the vita active if utopia is to stand a chance and if things will be
changed to the better. As Kumar ends his exposé on utopian thought:

Utopia confronts reality not with a measured assessment of the possibilities of
change but with the demand for change. This is the way the world should be. It re-
fuses to accept current definitions of the possible because it knows these to be
part of the reality that it seeks to change. In its guise as utopia, by the very force
of its imaginative presentation, it energizes reality, infusing it […] with ‘the
power of the new’ (Kumar 1990:107).

Despite not explicitly mentioning the work of Bauman, this description of ‘the
power of the new’ embedded within utopian thought is a very exact replication
on his notions of what utopia means. Utopia is thus a way of thinking alternatively of reality, a way of looking at the ‘familiar in unfamiliar ways’ and Bauman already early on reminded his readers that “our would is one of many possible worlds” (Bauman 1967:409). His utopianism is a way of combining thought and action, an act of thought that enables its possessor to comprehend reality in a more full and fertile fashion, an act of thought that enables people to act and seek to transcend reality instead of paralysing them. Especially people and scholars not indoctrinated into the orthodox and rigid rules of habitual thought and common sense such as strangers or outsiders, as Bauman himself, will have an advantage in this endeavour as opposed to those exposing the traits of trained incapacity to see alternative routes: “Those unaccustomed to the accepted ways of thinking who enter these relations carrying other forms of life may find, by default, that they question and so disrupt accepted ways. They may question themselves in the process, but their actions may also have a transformative effect on the form of life itself” (Bauman & May 2001:179). Strangers, outsiders, sociologists; all of these are people who sit solidly astride the barriers meant to keep things apart but from their elevated or excluded platforms – that sometimes are substituted with prison cells or concentration camps - they may be able to glimpse hope in the midst of despair and misery, the germinating promise even in our endemically tragic human condition. This is as much a stifling and terrifying experience, as it is equally a moral challenge. As Cornelius Castoriadis, a spiritual soul mate of Bauman, mused:

We will always […] have to make our lives under the tragic conditions that characterize those lives, for we do not always know where good and evil lie, either on the individual level or on the collective level. And yet, neither are we condemned to evil, any more than we are to good, for we can, most of the time, turn back upon ourselves, both individually and collectively, reflect upon our acts, re-examine them, correct them, repair them (Castoriadis 1997a:122).
This is a very apt description of how utopia can be cast as something that embraces ambivalence, uncertainty and reflexivity without giving in to the perpetually tragic circumstances of our condition. Sociologists are not immune to such social circumstances. The intellectuals as postmodern ‘interpreters’ instead of modern ‘legislator’s may have lost ideology as a vehicle for utopia but can now without ideological cloaks and straitjackets propose alternative visions of the good society, as Bauman proposes in his ‘postmodernist conclusion’ to Legislators and Interpreters. We currently live through a time when

all old and prospective blueprints for a ‘good society’ seem embarrassingly unreal and naïve. The result is what has been described as the ‘loss of nerve’ or the loss of the ‘capacity for forward dreaming’. Ours is, decisively, not an age of utopias. The age of utopias is an age when utopias seem practical and realistic; ours is an age when the programmes intended as practical seem utopian (Bauman 1987:194).

Bauman laments this loss of ability to dream of utopias – not as blueprints for social order but as the ability to imagine things differently. In the former version as blueprints, “modern utopias were never mere prophecies, let alone idle dreams: openly or covertly, they were both declarations of intent and expressions of faith that what was desired could be done and will be done” (Bauman 2000a:131). A change of mood or sentiment has, as has been illustrated, taken place since these modernist times. Contrary to modern societies, where utopias were presented as rock-solid and iron-clad ideological idealisations and distortions of reality, in liquid modernity, utopian aspirations have turned dystopian especially because everything solid and lasting has melted into air and in a strange fashion “this seems to be a dystopia made to the measure of liquid modernity – one fit to replace the fears recorded in Orwellian and Huxleyan-
"style nightmares" (Bauman 2000a:15). We have gone almost in a straight line from utopia in the solid and singular to the present day lack of ability to think differently and alternatively altogether. In short, Bauman’s sociology deals with how to turn current social dystopias into utopias without turning into coercion, heteronomy and estrangement and how sociologists may play a significant role in this transformative task.

**Utopia Lost and Found**

Upon visiting the United States a couple of years ago, I was struck by the apparent lack of interest in the work of Bauman. Although everybody appeared to know about him, very few had in fact read any of his works, let alone were familiar with his central position within contemporary sociology. The few colleagues who had attempted to come to grips with what many of them saw as a strange European flavoured philosophical type of social thinking, that to many appeared at best redundant and at worst irrelevant, quickly discovered the depth and the unavoidable and invaluable source of wisdom embedded in his work. Thus, in many ways the general reception of Bauman’s utopian-oriented work was similar to that of another central thinker on utopianism, Karl Mannheim, when his *Ideology and Utopia* was first published in the mid-1930’s (cf. Kettler & Meja 1994). This masterpiece was also labelled as an almost obscure kind of philosophical theorising unsuited for practical application or utility. One of the exceptions to this rule of neglect though is, for example, the work of respectively George Ritzer (1997) and Steven Seidman (1998) who have been instrumental in making Bauman’s reception in the United States anything but negligible. Most scholars I encountered during my extended stay being acquainted with his ideas, however, admitted turning their back on Bauman and his social theorising due to its abstract almost philosophical character. A colleague even
ventured into saying that the obscurity of this kind of sociology was not considered fertile or conducive for empirical research. 12 Perhaps this turning their backs on Bauman has something to do with the way American sociology, although speaking about American sociology in the singular is obviously misleading, regards this kind of elusive, utopian thinking as contrasted with the still outspread interest in what C. Wright Mills (1959) famously termed respectively ‘grand theory’ and ‘abstracted empiricism’? Perhaps other reasons such as Bauman’s erstwhile flirtation with Marxism is to blame? Whether one reason or the other, the widespread misrecognition of his work in the United States is surprising especially because so much of American culture, its democratic institutions, popular sentiments and urban planning has been inspired exactly by utopian ideas. The very notion of the ‘American Dream’ is itself a striking expression of utopianism and the perpetual striving that characterises it and as former Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, aptly summarised: ‘For other nations, Utopia is a blessed past never to be recovered; for Americans it is just beyond the horizon’. Perhaps Americans forgot to dream or the dream has become real? Perhaps they forgot to imagine what lies just beyond the horizon? Whether one or the other, utopia stand the best chances when it is at odds with reality and thus there is still hope that Bauman’s thinking will eventually cross the Atlantic and also inspire American colleagues.

Mannheim noted that ideas, in order to be utopian, needed to be ‘incongruous with the state of reality’ within which they occur (Mannheim 1936/1976:173). Bauman’s utopian undercurrent is indeed incongruous with the contemporary state of affairs in most parts of the world where the collective ability to dream, hope and conjure up alternatives has dried out. Today, utopias have to a great extent been ‘privatised’ and ‘deregulated’ together with the fears of reality and the moral impulse to do something about human misery,
suffering and daily degradation. With this privatisation and deregulation, that we often proud ourselves of, follows political apathy and moral indifference:

We tend to be proud of what we perhaps should be ashamed of, of living in the ‘post-ideological’ or ‘post-utopian’ age, of not concerning ourselves with any coherent vision of the good society and of having traded off the worry about the public good for the freedom to pursue private satisfactions (Bauman 1999:8).

In utopianism in general and in Bauman’s work in particular there is at refusal to give up or give in to individualisation; a germination of optimism despite hardships being present all around. Although Bauman blames the contemporary social world for closing down alternatives by presenting it through the messages and ideologies of the romantic relationship between TINA (‘there is no alternative’) and précarité, he keeps insisting that this is not the only option open to us. Utopianism, in Bauman’s case, is a matter of presenting alternatives, of opening up horizons instead of closing them down. His is an example of what I would term ‘open-ended utopias’ instead of the hermetically ‘close-ended utopias’ of many philosophers and political ideologists. It is not a matter of agitating revolution or demanding subservience. Bauman rather wants people to think for themselves, as Kant also proposed, instead of being told what to do and blindly following the whims of others (Beilharz 2000:33). The horrors of the Holocaust is but one extreme example of what happens when people stop thinking for themselves and making their own moral judgements, when people allow themselves to be allured into following the demands of superiors, as Stanley Milgram’s studies indicated.

The price of individualisation is high and paid in hard human currency. As Bauman reports and laments in his book, In Search of Politics, “we live through a period of the privatization of utopia and of the models of the good (with the models of the ‘good life’ elbowing out, and cut off from, the model of
“the good society)” (Bauman 1999:7). Individualised life politics have taken over from classical collective emancipatory politics or at least lost any connection with them. Where modernity, with its focus on the forced and imagined community of the nation state, rational planning, and the search for truth and salvation through rational science, sought to collectivise utopia, postmodernity or liquid modernity, with its emphasis on realising private ambitions and aspirations, has been instrumental in individualising, atomising and relativising utopia, cutting it into small digestible pieces ready for quick consumption and immediate obsolescence. The uncoupling of utopia from collective concerns may have liberated it from the burden of collective moral responsibilities but simultaneously it has meant an overburdening of the individual equally with anxiety and indifference. Either way the outcome is not desirable and can never lead to the realisation of a social order based on solidarity as well as collective rights and responsibilities that extend beyond one’s own immediate and personal interests. Utopia in Bauman’s sense of the term can come about only if we take this into consideration and direct our moral attention especially at the margins where the potentially most vulnerable are cast, whose wishes of realising alternative possibilities of the present and the future for different reasons may be severely restricted:

The children, bodily too weak to resist physical force and mentally too inarticulate to oppose, or even ask for, an argument and a proof; the animals, devoid of a language in which the demand could be phrased and of the skills to solicit rights by bargaining or coercion; the yet unborn single beings or generations of beings, unable to address us, to reciprocate or retaliate, even to appear to us as Faces, as bearers of needs and givers of commands; the poor and indolent, the deprive and the dispossessed, denied human rights by the Law, convention or custom, or too feeble to execute such rights as have been formally awarded to them […] These are the cases of moral responsibility reaching its peak (Bauman 1998c:20).
Especially in what could be termed Bauman’s ‘moral phase’ ranging approximately throughout the last decade of the millennium, he was inspired and almost seduced by the insights consisting of moral responsibility, *being-for* instead of *being-with* the Other, and the willingness to give one’s own life for the sake of the Other (cf. Bauman 1992b, 1993, 1995). The moral utopia, as the one depicted in the recent box office success *Pay It Forward*, is derived from Emmanuel Levinas, one of Bauman’s main intellectual sources of inspiration, where the minute and meticulous moral actions of discrete individuals are thought and hoped to bring about more widespread consequences like ripples on the surface of water spreading to wider and wider regions of social life. On his own utopianism which beyond reasonable doubt has also inspired Bauman, Levinas noted:

There is a utopian moment in what I say; it is the recognition of something which cannot be realized but which, ultimately, guides all moral action. This utopianism does not prohibit you from condemning certain factual states, nor from recognizing the relative progress that can be made. Utopianism is not a condemnation of everything else. There is no moral life without utopianism – utopianism in this exact sense that saintliness is goodness (Levinas 1988:178).

It appears that this utopian vision of an ethics of proximity in an increasingly globalised and individualised world becomes more and more distant and blurry but Bauman has never, despite some minor concessions (cf. Bauman 1997b, 2001b:175-200), turned his back totally on this hope – utopian or not. Elsewhere Levinas differentiated between ‘totality’ and ‘infinity’. Where totality refers to attempts at coercing people into order and systematically limiting possibilities, infinity, on the other hand, refers to the infinite possibilities, human responsibility and of being other (cf. Levinas 1961). The utopian strand in Bauman’s thought is in favour of infinity and against totalising tendencies that
through strategies of heteronomy and the so-called ‘adiaphorisation’ seek to undermine autonomy and moral responsibility whether on the individual or social level – the one being the prerequisite for the other. His utopian vision is against the solidified and impenetrable utopias that were erected upon foundationalism, imposed standards and corroding into every nook and crannies of the world (cf. Alexander 2001:583). These totalising utopias demand total submission to the letter of the ‘legislators’ trying to impose it and can never come to any good. Bauman’s own ‘unconditional ethics’ derived from Levinas, Kierkegaard and Løgstrup is, on the contrary, in no demand of submission to rigid rules and indeed requires no reciprocation, as is the case in most contractual and formal relationships. Thus, it is an illustrative example of an infinite and silent utopian sentiment that takes no interest in colour of skin, gender, class relation or creed, religious or ethnic origin, national background, etc. It is universal but devoid of the totalising tendencies inherent in many modernist ideological attempts at enforcing utopia that eventually will or may lead to totalitarian regimes, as Kolakowski (1983) also feared. As Bauman notes, “modernity was a long march to prison. It never arrived there (though in some places, like Stalin’s Russia, Hitler’s Germany or Mao’s China, it came quite close), albeit not for the lack of trying” (Bauman 1992a:xvii). We may still be allowed to hope that we have left this modernist totalitarian tendency behind us on the graveyard of history and have moved on to less inhuman conditions. We are still allowed to hope despite such hope being cast in doubt day in and out in liquid modernity.

A desirable utopia under current liquid conditions, in short, ought in the opinion of Bauman to be equivalent to the ‘good society’, the ‘common good’ and an approach to life and to others that in a respectful and moral fashion exemplifies solidarity. In is not the closed and guarded community, such as that advanced by many contemporary communitarians, he is advocating but the in-
clusive and potentially universal community of all of mankind since we, as also Kant pointed out, are destined to share the same globe whether we like it or not. However, Bauman believes that this conception of the common good and the moral community is in danger of being lost in the contemporary globalised world where ‘society’, due to individualising and globalising pressures from within and without, is taking on an ever more menacing appearance. He thus writes that it is “no wonder either that the ‘good society’ is a notion most of us would not bother thinking about, and that many would think such thinking to be a waste of time” (Bauman 2001:111). Utopia is, as we saw above, no longer a state, understood as a territorially delimited area, as it was when Thomas More used the term some centuries ago because, as Bauman (2002a) suggests, it has now lost its firm anchoring in physical space and has become ‘phantasmagoric’. It has become imaginary and amounts to nothing more than a mental image of a better place. During times when every politician, every scientist and every bureaucrat are telling us that ‘there is no alternative’, utopia appears to be lost at least for a while if by utopia we mean alternative interpretations of reality. In a world where every spot on the map, every region, exotic country or deserted island in globalitarian fashion has been discovered and rediscovered, the world has lost much of its erstwhile magic, has become overcrowded and disenchanted at the same time as the people inhabiting the world has become self-sufficient and atomised.

What straws can we clutch at in such a world? Can an apparently utopian morality of proximity be ‘stretched’ to the limit and span the global order? Bauman gives a few hints although they always seem to stop short of explaining how dyadic morality can be made to measure the political actions necessary to change the course of the world. Bauman’s utopia is more about ability and possibility than desirability when insisting that things can be different and instead of spelling out exactly this difference should look like. He is very cau-
tious not to dictate *how* people should live their lives. Utopia is about the good life – and there are many varieties of the ‘good life’ (Kateb 1973) - but just as Marx never actually depicted the content of the anticipated post-revolutionary social order, Bauman does not want either to spell out in so many details what this utopian good life exactly means. He hints at the classical Greek and republican model of citizenship, the democratic *agora* and the equally responsible and interrelated *oikos* and *ecclesia*. His utopia is thus a vision of the autonomous and self-constituted society, as he has adopted it from Castoriadis (1993), where ambivalence and difference is allowed to exist and even are valorised and where adiaphorisation and heteronomy are annihilated. In Bauman’s utopia, individuals become individuals *de facto* and not only remain individuals *de jure*, their freedom is not coined in negative terms but in positive ones – freedom to act instead of freedom from want, fear or otherwise (Bauman 2000a). This utopian model of the good society and the common good embedded in democracy is perhaps not in the offing at the moment but as Kolakowski remarked with clarity but also remarkable subtlety: “*It may well be that the impossible at a given moment can become possible only by being stated at a time when it is impossible*” (Kolakowski 1969:92). When all apparently is said and done, something important might have been found missing or something could have been done otherwise. In his classical critique of modernist utopias, *A False Utopia*, William Henry Chamberlain also stated that “*it often happens that the absence of something is the best means of teaching a sense of its value*” (Chamberlain 1937:v) and this is indeed what Bauman does when he pinpoints the problems involved in the demise of utopian thinking.

Thus, in the dispute between those arguing for ‘endings’ (cf. Bell 1960; Fukuyama 1992) and against them (cf. Jacoby 1999), Bauman clearly takes the side of the latter. Instead of speaking apocalyptically of ‘endings’, the end of democracy, of the welfare state, of collective politics, and of community, etc.,
we should instead optimistically be speaking of ‘beginnings’ even in times when optimism is a white-knuckle ride. There is light at the end of the tunnel, and the 20th century both marked an ending (of modernity) but also a new beginning full of potential to be realised. It is in the latter that Bauman’s utopian hope is embedded:

The 20th century was the culmination of the long and tortuous modern crusade against uncertainty. It was also the time of ‘farewell to arms’ – the arms stocked to be wielded in that crusade. So it was also a beginning. A start to the long a tortuous process of reshuffling and refurbishing our joint, enlarged, global home in which uncertainty, once a despised aborigine meant to be civilised or an illegal immigrant meant to be rounded up and sent home, has been issued with the permission to stay and made to feel welcomed (Bauman 2002b:25).

There is, in other words, hope ahead, if the spirit of beginning anew that was put on track at the end of the preceding century is followed up in this present one. A beginning to an acceptance of ambivalence, of the uncertainty of life in liquid modernity and the risks and responsibilities associated with living together. Bauman does not place his utopian hopes in the past, as many traditionalists or romanticists would want, or place, postpone or procrastinate it into the future, as many progressive spirits would, but he locates it potentially in the present, in a vision of alternative realities. As Northrop Frye stated, utopia is not “a future ideal but a hypothetical one, an informing power and not a goal of action” (Frye 1973:36). The present, as it were and as a paraphrasing of Leibniz, is always pregnant with utopia. Thus, there is a dynamic in Bauman’s utopian thinking that is not found in equal measure in positions more oriented towards and looking statically at the present as an iron-cage or trap or enviously at the idyllic past or hopefully towards the brightness of the future horizon. This dynamic and drive, whether utopian or dystopian for that matter, is
essential for change and change is what is needed according to Bauman. As Pi-
erre Bourdieu pointed out, in order to be able to shape the future of human life,
we need to be able to grasp the present: “The capacity for future projections is
the condition of all behaviour considered to be rational […] To conceive of a
revolutionary project, that is to have a well thought-out intention to transform
the present in reference to a projected future, a modicum of hold on the present
is needed” (Bourdieu in Bauman 1999:172). This grasp of the present is not
only a matter for ‘ordinary people’ all over the globe but equally a lesson to be
learned for those claiming to analyse and dissect the human condition, the soci-
ologists and related scholars.

Sociologist are, as mentioned earlier according to Bauman, capable of as
well as responsible for seeking to bridge what is to be done on the one hand,
and what we can do on the other hand. Bauman muses at the end of his Amalfi
Award lecture more than a decade ago: “Who more than we, sociologists, are
fit to alert our fellow humans to the gap between the necessary and the real,
between the survival significance of moral limits and the world determined to
live – and to live happily; and perhaps even after al – without them” (Bauman
1989:221). More recently, however, he has stated his own mission more di-
rectly and clearly than previously conflating with his understanding of our dis-
cipline’s raison d’être by pronouncing:

Sociology cannot correct the short-comings of the world, but it can help us to un-
derstand them in a more complete manner and in so doing, enable us to act upon
them for the purpose of human betterment. In this time of globalization we need
the knowledge that sociology can provide more than ever before. After all, to un-
derstand ourselves in the present enables a hold upon current conditions and rela-
tions without which there is no hope of shaping the future (Bauman & May
A voice of utopian hope resonates in Bauman’s work, a hope for the future of humanity, a hope that will keep burning until the vision of sociology carried like a torch by him for decades is finally either extinguished or passed on.

Notes

1 Bauman himself is suspicious of the myopic understanding that has determined the fate of the concept of ‘utopia’: “I suspect that in our social-scientific usage all too often we unduly narrow down the concept of ‘utopia’ to the early modern blueprints of the good society, understood as a kind of totality which pre-empts its members’ choices and determines in advance their goodness, however, understood [...] I am now inclined to accept that utopia is an undetachable part of the human condition [...] I now believe that utopia is one of humanity’s constituents, a ‘constant’ in the human way of being-in-the-world. This does not mean that all utopias are equally good. Utopias may lead to a better life as much as they may mislead and turn away from what a better life would require to be done” (Bauman & Tester 2001:48-50). Throughout the years he has moved from the somewhat narrow understanding to a much more encompassing notion of utopia as part and parcel of the human predicament and condition.

2 Central to Mannheim’s position is the separation of ‘utopia’ from ‘ideology’. Utopia transcends reality and breaks the bonds of the existing order through, at some point in time, being passed over into actual conduct whereas ideologies are the situationally transcendent ideas that never succeed in a de facto realisation of the intended and projected contents. Transcendence, however, constitutes the core of both types of thinking whether they reach their point of orientation or not (cf. Mannheim 1936/1976:173ff, 184). This analytical distinction is, admittedly, at odds with the one advanced in this article where utopian ideas do not necessarily have to be transformed into concrete action in order to be deemed utopian. Leonidas Donskis therefore also noted that “without ideology, utopianism becomes little more than the free play of imagination devoid of cultural – aesthetic, moral, and intellectual – articulation” (Donskis 2000:2). Utopia and ideology are, in other words, inextricably linked and in the work of Bauman is more than merely a ‘free play of imagination’ – it is instead dead serious. For a good and compressed discussion of ideology and utopia from the early liberalism and marxism onwards, see Chattopadhyaya (1997:67ff).

3 As Jeffrey Alexander captures this point very well: “Utopian conceptions inform and complement the kinds of differentiated and pluralistic social orders we inhabit today. For utopias to be ‘real’, it is enough that various conceptions of utopia do, in fact, animate the nooks and crannies, the spheres and subsystems, of such a social order. The reality of utopia does not (empirically), cannot (theoretically), and indeed should not (normatively) depend on its actual, that is complete, realization” (Alexander 2001:581). Thus, for utopia to be real merely means that it should to some extent be thought of and be present in the back of the minds of people – it does not have to be realised as a specific social order.

4 Despite being relatively sceptical regarding utopias and their tendency to be parading as potential totalitarian ideologies in disguise, Kolakowski is also capable of seeing the possibilities inherent in utopias for human purposes when he in the same connection cryptically remarked: “The existence of a utopia as a utopia is the necessary prerequisite for its eventu-
ally ceasing to be a utopia” (Kolakowski 1969:92). Only by being presented by proponents and protagonists as utopia, as something ultimately to be realised at a later stage of human development, will utopias cease to be utopian.

5 This does far from mean that Bauman has shed himself of his socialist sympathies. In a recently conducted interview he in eloquent fashion presents the following diagnosis of socialism: “Like the phoenix, socialism is reborn from every pile of ashes left day in, day out, by burned-out human dreams and charred hopes. It will keep on being resurrected as long as the dreams are burnt and the hopes are charred, as long as human life remains short of the dignity it deserves and the nobility it would be able, given a chance, to muster. And if it were the case, I hope I’d die a socialist” (Bauman & Tester 2001:155).

6 In his first book published in English, Between Class and Elite, Bauman ends on a contemplative note when remarking that “human history is notorious for its insidious defiance of probabilities” (Bauman 1972:322). History and its future developments cannot be calculated in advance.

7 Despite his relentless critique of realism, Bauman does not want his utopianism merely to be dreaming. In this he could be associated with the so-called ‘Real Utopias Project’ initiated by Erik Olin Wright in which the desire according to its programmatical statement is to propose “utopian ideals that are grounded in the real potentials of humanity, utopian destinations that have pragmatically accessible waystations, utopian designs of institutions that can inform our practical tasks of muddling through in a world of imperfect conditions for social change” (Wright 2003:viii). So far the ‘project’ have resulted in four volumes dealing with institutional democracy, voluntary associations, market socialism and egalitarianism between state, market and community.

8 Bauman captures especially the core concern of modern utopias when he states that they “were anything but flights of fancy or the waste products of the imagination. They were blueprints for the human-controlled world to come, a declaration of the intent to force that world to come, and the serious calculation of the means necessary to do it […] A remarkable feature of modern utopias was the attention devoted to the meticulous planning of the environment of daily life […] Utopian inventions were strikingly similar to each other bearing vivid testimony to the shared obsession that gave birth to all of them: that of transparency and unequivocality of setting, capable of healing or warding off the agony of risky choice” (Bauman 2001b:64).

9 The modernist utopias were erected and drafted at a time when the world desperately craved and demanded order. Thus, “utopia was to be the fortress of certainty and stability; a kingdom of tranquillity. Instead of confusion – clarity and self-assurance. Instead of the caprices of fate – a steady and consistent, surprise-free sequence of causes and effects. Instead of the labyrinthine muddle of twisted passages and sharp corners – straight, beaten and well-marked tracks. Instead of opacity – transparency. Instead of randomness – a well-entrenched and utterly predictable routine […] Utopias were blueprints for the routine hoped to be resurrected” (Bauman 2002a:229). In this fashion, modern utopias contained a certain core element of premodern routinised traditionalism, however this time spiced up with the order-making obsession: “Utopia was a vision of a closely watched, monitored, administered and daily managed world. Above all, it is a vision of a predesigned world, a world in which prediction and planning starve off the play of chance” (Bauman 2002a:230). The play of chance and the presence of fate in premodernity have in the modern utopian order been annihilated.

10 It is interesting to note that in recent years, travel agencies bearing names such as Utopia Travels or Utopia Tours have seen the light of day. Whereas most other travel agencies in boastful fashion would normally use slogans such as ‘We Will Take You Anywhere’, charac-
teristic of their times and their etymological origin, these new ‘utopian’ agencies ought to use slogans such as ‘We Will Take You Nowhere’.

11 According to Giddens’ theory of structuration, to cease to make an impact in the world, to be prevented from acting differently, means to cease to be an ‘agent’: “An agent ceases to be such if he or she loses the capability to ‘make a difference’” (Giddens 1984:14). In Bauman’s understanding, to cease to make an impact in order to realise possibilities would more dramatically equal ceasing to be human.

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13 Bauman from his critical postmodernist perspective, just as Jacoby (1999) from his critical theoretical perspective, is worried about the apparent lack of interest in substantial issues in contemporary society where superficial or shallow agendas advanced under such headings as communitarianism, multiculturalism, feminism and environmentalism appear to reject the universal aspect in their bitter struggles against other utopian visions. Exclusion, as a consequence, takes precedence over inclusion. Universalism and inclusion are inherent in, indeed integral to, Bauman’s own plea for more visionary utopian ideas of a better world.

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