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'The Activating Presence'
—What Prospects of Utopia in Times of Uncertainty?*

Abstract: The work of Zygmunt Bauman is often classified by commentators and critics as either representing the thoughts of a proponent of postmodernism or as those of a valiant defender of a humanistic variant of Marxism. This article, however, focuses on a specific and often neglected leitmotif—sometimes hidden, sometimes explicit—running through Bauman's work from the early years until the most recent publications, the utopian mentality. Bauman's work is dissected along the lines of its contribution to utopian thought, however without it ever proposing a sketch of an 'ideal society' or 'the common good' as so many other utopian writers. Bauman is classified among the band of critical social thinkers—including the likes of Ernst Bloch and Leszek Kołakowski—for whom utopianism is an undying motif in human life, but who also, in varying degrees, fear the detrimental consequences of an actual implementation of Utopia. Moreover, they all, and especially Bauman, insist that the currently lived-through version of (in)human reality is not the only one possible and that we may still muster and imagine alternatives to the stubborn present.

Keywords: utopia; dystopia; solid modernity; liquid modernity; socialism; humanism

> "There is no hell against which we must fight, nor a heaven we must buttress: there is no unique god with a necessary counterpart. We are confronted by a pantheon which incarnates the plurality of our lived experience. In this is all the tragedy and all the uncertainty of social existence. Here indeed we find what we might call confrontation with destiny"
>
> Michel Maffesoli, *The Shadow of Dionysus*

> "Keep faith with the beginning, whose genesis is still to come"
>
> Ernst Bloch, *Man On His Own*

Confronting Human Destiny

Utopias have always been part and parcel of the human condition. A world without utopias is almost inconceivable. Ever since the dawn of time, humans have envisaged

and wished for a reality different, and more often than not better, than the one cur-
rently lived through and since the advent of modernity this search for a 'better world,'
the 'common good' or the 'great society' has been constantly intensified. Simulta-
neously, however, also the distorted version of utopia, dystopia, has attracted a fair
amount of attention, perhaps because the promised bliss and hoped for revelation
of utopias has refrained from materialising. According to many social commentators
and critics, we today therefore live closer to dystopia than utopia with the detrimen-
tal consequences for social existence this situation conveys. On these consequences,
Karl Mannheim at the pinnacle of modernity concluded his diagnostic masterpiece
Ideology and Utopia with the following observation:

> The complete disappearance of the utopian element from human thought and action would mean that
> human nature and human development would take on a totally new character. The disappearance of utopia
> brings about a static state of affairs in which man himself becomes nothing more than a thing … Thus, after
> a long tortuous, but heroic development, just at the highest stage of awareness, when history is ceasing to
> be blind fate, and is becoming more and more man's own creation, with the relinquishment of utopias, man
> would lose his will to shape history and therewith his ability to understand it (Mannheim 1936/1976: 236).

This sinister diagnosis is now, almost 70 years after its first formulation, perhaps
more accurate and urgent than by the time of its original conception. At least, this is
the case if we are to believe the sociological diagnosis of contemporary utopianism
advanced by Zygmunt Bauman. In one of his recent essays he portrayed our so-called
'liquid modern times' as an epoch in which utopia had almost disappeared or at
least undergone a radical transformation beyond recognition and without precedent
(Bauman 2002a: 222–241). Many other commentators, 'the new utopians,' as they
despite their diversity may accurately be labelled (Jacobsen 2005), have throughout
the years noticed the gradual disappearance of utopianism from social and political
thought and they have in recent years been standing on each other's toes to mourn
the loss of utopian spirit. For instance, Russell Jacoby remarked how "the utopian
spirit—a sense that the future could transcend the present—has vanished" (Jacoby
1999: xi), Bruce Mazlish recently observed that "the social context in which we live is
not favourable to utopias" (Mazlish 2003: 43), José M. Castillo described that "utopia
has … been itself removed to the sidelines, to the realm of exclusion, of extravagance"
(Castillo 2004: 35), and Krishan Kumar some years ago noted how "utopia as a form
of social imagination has clearly weakened—whether fatally we cannot say" (Kumar
1987: 423). If we venture further back into the era of so-called 'solid modernity,' also
Chad Walsh in his *From Utopia to Nightmare* mourned the 'waning of utopia' in the
20th century and the rise of dystopianism in its place (Walsh 1962) and Judith Shklar in
After Utopia: The Decline of Political Faith described how the 'last vestiges of utopian
faith' seemed to have irreparably vanished (Shklar 1957). Bauman's own diagnosis
comes close to these rather doomsaying pronunciations and prophecies. He, however,
has never surrendered hope, which warrants his classification as a true 'utopian of
hope' (Tester & Jacobsen 2005: 33). According to Bauman—perhaps as an echo of
Mannheim above—humans today in an unprecedented fashion are confronted with
destiny, no longer with blind fate. This means that there is a choice involved, something
not predetermined (indeed something ultimately undeterminable), an insistence that

things *can* be different and that we, human beings, are responsible for making such a difference. This may be a burdensome and frustrating experience, but it is also liberating. Contrary to common belief, utopia is not merely something planned or predetermined—if anything, it is underdetermined. So now *we* have to make the difference. In times of uncertainty, as the present, utopia may be the first casualty, but it may also be our last hope.

Bauman, however, not only diagnoses the current state of utopianism. He also espouses and exposes it throughout his own work, as so many of his famous Jewish socialist-utopian predecessors in social theory such as Ernst Bloch or Walter Benjamin (see Löwy 1992). Ever since the release of one of his first books published in English upon his arrival in the United Kingdom more than three decades ago, utopianism has been a continuous however often invisible or silent presence in his work. In this book, *Socialism: The Active Utopia*, Bauman specifically analysed and dissected socialist utopianism and described it as an 'activating presence' (Bauman 1976a). By 'activating presence' he, among other things, meant to suggest, in his definition of socialist utopianism, that "utopias relativise the present … By exposing the partiality of current reality, by scanning the field of the possible in which the real occupies merely a tiny plot, utopias pave the way for a critical attitude and a critical activity which alone can transform the present predicament of man." He went on to claim that "the driving force behind the search for utopia … is the principle of hope," that "utopias scan the options open to society at the current stage of its history," that "utopias weaken the defensive wall of habit," and finally that "utopias enter reality not as the aberrations of deranged intellects, but as powerful factors acting from within what is the only substance of reality, motivated human action" (Bauman 1976a: 12–17). From this definition it becomes obvious that for Bauman a special kind of utopia and utopianism, an 'active' as opposed to passive or stagnant utopia, is important, if not essential, to critical thinking and critical activity and thus equally important if the status quo of the social world, whether solid or liquid modern, is to be challenged. Therefore, Bauman, before anything else, is a utopian sociologist.

In the following, we will offer a brief presentation of the utopianism of Zygmunt Bauman, first by discussing the status of utopianism in relation to sociology and socialism (Bauman is, to this day, a devout socialist), followed by a delineation of the 'historiography' of utopias—from gamekeeping via gardening to hunting utopia—recently offered by him. Subsequently, the contours of Bauman's dystopian diagnosis of liquid modernity and his more positive and concrete contribution to challenging this anti-utopian liquid modernity will be outlined and the paper is concluded with an appreciation of what can be learned from the utopianism of Zygmunt Bauman.

Utopia—The Doppelgänger of Sociology and Socialism

Utopia has been the perpetual, and at most times obnoxious, doppelgänger of sociology. By its scattered supporters hailed as the ultimate expression of the human quest for something good and desirable, but by its majority of critics roundly attacked,

ridiculed and deemed unscientific, impossible empirically to test and as a pseudo-scientific return to values as the guiding principle of social science. More than half a century ago, Andrew Hacker therefore proclaimed how it was "no secret that the Utopian is not a respectable member of the company of political and social theorists" (Hacker 1955: 135). Utopia remained a thorn in the side of a discipline whose genesis was closely related to the birth of positivistic science and whose self-understanding preached value-neutrality, objectivity and abstinence when it came to political pronunciations and prognostications. As J. Colin Davis observed on the 'anguished tension' between science and utopianism:

> For the scientist—and even for the student of the social problems of science—there is an anguished tension between the desire to solve, and so 'get beyond,' normative problems and the simultaneous fear of value commitment because it thrusts the scientists away from the last vestiges of objectivity and, in the process, may destroy the social coherence of their discipline (Davis 1984: 26).

In sociology, this tension has been prevalent almost since the conception of the discipline. So, in short, utopianism stood—apart from in the minds of a relatively few souls such as Fourier, Saint-Simon and later Mannheim—for something to be eradicated from rigorous research and as dangerous for the continued public reverence for scientific practice. Therefore, the voluminous catalogue of critiques aimed against utopianism unsurprisingly contains its potential realisation of totalitarianism, the irrationality of thinking about not to mention planning the future, the idleness of dreaming, its absolutist epistemology, and the impracticality of its political propositions (Kateb 1963; Goodwin 1978: 190–199; Goodwin & Taylor 1982: 92–115).

Within sociology, utopianism has never gained a stronghold, perhaps as a consequence of Marxism's showdown with the utopian socialists. So not only in its relation to sociology has the status of utopianism consistently been undermined. Also in its affinity with so-called 'scientific socialism' has utopianism encountered stubborn rejection. Ever since Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels castigated and used utopianism as a whipping boy in their critique of the utopian socialists and their allegedly futilitarian and utterly unscientific predilection for the anticipated future instead of preoccupation with the urgency of the present situation and in bringing about actual revolution instead of merely dreaming about it, conventional Marxism turned away from utopianism, thereby abandoning this domain and the initiative within it to heretic or idiosyncratic Marxists. This meant the relegation of utopian ideas to the margins of socialism, where it, in the words of Martin Buber in *Paths of Utopia*, constituted a voluntaristic contrast or antipole to more deterministic variants of Marxism:

> The polemics of Marx and Engels have resulted in the term 'utopian' becoming used, both within Marxism and without, for a socialism which appeals to reason, to justice, to the will of man to remedy the maladjustments of society, instead of his merely acquiring an active awareness of what is 'dialectically' brewing in the womb of industrialism. All voluntaristic socialism is rated 'utopian' (Buber 1949: 9).

Also, according to critical rationalists such as Karl Popper, one of the main reasons why utopianism must necessarily be criticised is its exclusive focus on 'ends' instead of on 'means.' We cannot, according to Popper, who defended 'piecemeal social

engineering' as opposed to 'utopian engineering,' be rational about ends, the main concern of *Wertrationalität*, and therefore utopianism must be deemed irrational. As Popper stated on his own and Marx's critique of utopianism: "What is common to Marx's criticism and mine is that both demand more realism" (Popper 1945a: 164). Zygmunt Bauman, however, rejects this realist line of critique by stating that "there is no method which allows us to establish in advance the 'truth' or 'untruth' of utopia, for the simple reason that the fate of utopia … is not determined in advance … The 'realism' or 'practicality' of a utopia may be discovered (or, more appropriately, secured) only in the course of action" (Bauman 1976a: 17).

As is obvious from these lines, Bauman belongs to the admittedly exclusive band of sociologists who, despite their socialist convictions—or perhaps because of them— still believes that utopianism and sociology are not incompatible. The discipline of sociology has always been suspicious of those thinkers who found it difficult to differentiate between the 'is' and the 'ought.' Despite many assassination attempts, some wholehearted, others less determined, utopianism however survived in the shadowy folds of a discipline constantly paranoid that its scientificity could be questioned. A few stood up and defended utopianism as the lifeblood of social scientific practice. Robert Nisbet, for example, stated that "utopianism and social science may seem to be incompatible. But they are not. Utopianism is compatible with everything but determinism, and it can as easily be the over-all context of social science as can any other creative vision" (Nisbet 1962: xvii). Bauman's critical, and creative, sociology is consistently opposed to determinism—the view that things cannot be changed and that the chips are down once and for all—and he insists that the aim of critical sociology is to denaturalise the world, to debunk myths parading as common-sense and to assist people in navigating in the world surrounding them (Bauman 1976b: 75–76, 2006a). His declared aim is *rationalisation*, not *manipulation*, as that practised by the so-called 'sciences of unfreedom' or 'Durksonianism.' Manipulation ends, and rationalisation begins, only when people start thinking for themselves. As he states in *Towards a Critical Sociology*, "then, and only then, does the natural begin to be perceived as artificial, the habitual as enforced, the normal as unbearable" (Bauman 1976b: 93). The 'active utopia' may assist in arriving at such a situation.

According to Bauman's utopianism, which at least in this respect sets his perspective apart from that of Mannheim (Levitas 1979), utopias can therefore neither be right nor wrong. One cannot determine the success of utopia from its effects, for what it may accomplish in so-called 'reality.' For him, utopia must always remain merely a possibility; it belongs exclusively to the realm of the possible, not to the spheres of the factual or the probable. Utopia is a catalyst for critique and change, not an end-state to be achieved; utopia challenges any given reality without ever turning into reality itself. Repeating Max Ernst's memorable epigraph in relation to utopia and reality, they are "mutually irreconcilable realities … wedded to each other." Or in the words of Robert Musil (1995), utopia is an 'orientation,' not a 'destination.' In this sense, Bauman's utopia is and remains forever not yet.

Utopias Past and Present

Whether put in the darkest corners of social science or proudly parading in political and ideological programs, utopia has always been with us. However, especially modernity was in essence a time when a new type of utopias initially and emphatically saw the light of day because the advancing modern society provided the two necessary preconditions for this advancement of utopianism: First, an overwhelming feeling that the world was not functioning properly or optimally; and second, that humans possess the ability and potency to perform this task of recalibrating the social world. This suggests that throughout the modern era, the great period of humanism, numerous utopias were feverishly conceived, written and constructed based on the belief in the omnipotence of Man in shaping the present and in forestalling the future. Utopia was thus a particularly and thoroughly modern invention, a figment of modern imagination, a creation of modern mind. However, it was never merely a figment of the imagination or utterly idle or 'simple dreaming,' as Krishan Kumar (1991) so emphatically pointed out. Rather, modern mentality was bent on embodying and embedding utopia in concrete and actual reality. Modern imagination insisted, in the wonderful words of American novelist Toni Cade Bambara, that "the dream is real … The failure to make it work is the unreality" (Bambara 1980: 126). Today, in liquid modernity, it is this ambition and aspiration that has entirely evaporated—at least at the societal level.

In a recent manuscript, "Living in Utopia," Bauman testified how the modern mentality—in its early infancy, its full-blown realisation as well as after its loss of illusions—comprised and embraced different notions of utopia which can be divided into three somewhat historically overlapping yet analytically distinct phases (Bauman 2005b). The first utopia is by Bauman labelled the 'gamekeeping utopia.' The premodern or early modern gamekeeping state, passively regarding the surrounding world as a natural wilderness and infused with performing merely the function of a gamekeeping utopia, concentrated primarily on the strict supervision of the porous borders between wilderness and civilisation and on upholding the superhumanly designed universe (Bauman 1987: 51–68). Therefore, gamekeepers or wardens, based on their predominantly metaphysical or religious perspective on the world, only rarely tinkered with the natural and divine order of things and mainly aspired to maintain the status quo: "Gamekeeper's services rest on the belief that things are at their best when not interfered with; that the world is a divine chain of being in which every creature has its rightful and useful place, even if human abilities are too limited to comprehend the wisdom, harmony and orderliness of God's design" (Bauman 2005b: 4). Thus, the premodern utopia of the gamekeepers was, according to Bauman, in essence almost a non-utopia, in which the future was merely seen as and expected to be a smooth and gradual extension of the present or at something not to worry about at all. No, or only a few, visionary dreams on behalf of mankind were dreamt, pipe dreams were regarded with suspicion and punished as heresy or hubris, and nothing seemed to guide human imagination which could not be obtained immediately in the daily grind. As a consequence, most things were left entirely in divine hands and

"the idea that human beings can replace the world-that-is with another and different world, entirely of their making, was almost wholly absent from human thought before the advent of modern times" (Bauman 2005b: 3).

The advent of modernity, later more specifically labelled 'solid modernity' by Bauman as a contrast to contemporary 'liquid modernity,' signalled a much more potent, active and confident attitude embodied in the notion of the 'gardening utopia.' This was the nursery of the great political and economic ideologies of capitalism, liberalism and socialism alike. As the metaphor suggests, gardeners are concerned with cultivating, ordering, planning and structuring activities—they seek a beautiful, symmetrical, harmonious and homogenous human garden in which the weeds and unwanted waste have been removed by root. The modern Promethean mentality— inspired by the humanistic impulse of the Enlightenment and aided and abetted by *les philosophes*—was self-confident, persevering and determined. Joe Bailey summarised the activist underpinnings of modern practical utopias that set them apart from the utopias conjured up in the premodern minds:

> Modern utopias are extensions into time of some desired or feared characteristics already apparent in societies and as such functions as expectancies with all the political and ideological potency of such motivating visions … The modern utopia is a manifesto of man's ability to engage in deliberate social change. It is secular, a critique of existing conditions and an implicit reform of, or complaint about, social organisation (Bailey 1988: 57).

The thoroughly modern, deliberate and secular utopia, contrary to the religious or metaphysical gamekeeping utopia of premodernity, was guided by dreams of purity, progress, perfection and predictability wished to be translated from the realm of dreams to the realm of reality. As Bauman noted in *Society Under Siege* on the ambition and aspiration of the specifically modern utopian urge that distinguished it from its premodern steppingstone:

> 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).

The practical vehicles used by the proprietors of the gardening utopia in order to obtain these chromium-plated ideals and blueprints were primarily the technological progress of modern natural science and the political planning or social engineering emanating from the State as the natural and legitimate nucleus of society. It took the shape of political reform, social organisation, economic activity, architectural planning and technical and scientific development. The modern gardening utopia was an obsessively activist, restless and manic modern phenomenon trying to make tomorrow today because "impatience is an integral part of the utopian attitude," as Bauman (1976a: 25) observed. Such impatience several times proved dangerous or downright deadly to those who could, would or should not become part of the promised utopia as when the gardeners—in Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Soviet Union

or Mao's China—started using their herbicide on humans. The dividing-line between utopia and dystopia then became increasingly strained until the point of breaking. Bereaved of God and left to their own human and supposedly rational devices, the moderns desperately sought a thoroughly secular and earthly order, a new artificial totality named 'society' in which all the debris and disorder abandoned by the gamekeepers' utopia, the *l'ancien regime*, would, in an act of 'creative destruction,' be wiped away: "The new, modern order took off as a desperate search for structure in a world 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).

Therefore, as Bauman testified in *Liquid Modernity*, "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 2000: 131). Modern utopias, contrary to their passive premodern predecessors, were actively and practically involved on all levels of systemic reproduction, social integration and the constitution of individual and cultural lifeworlds. Nothing escaped attention and nothing was left entirely to coincidence. The 'Great Society' required that the population was continuously held at bay either by the external and coercive presence of the extended supervision of the State or by the conscientious 'policeman in the back of the mind.' The architectural structure of the Panopticon as proposed by Jeremy Bentham and analysed by Michel Foucault embodied this vision of constant surveillance and supervision, and thus a catflap was inadvertently left open not merely to serve the noble cause of 'ordinary' or 'necessary' social control, law and order, but also to excessive totalitarianism and its predilection for eradicating unpredictability, opaqueness and freedom of choice:

> Modern utopias were anything but flights of fancy or the waste products of the imagination running wild. 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 2001: 64).

As a consequence, the deep-seated latency for dystopian totalitarianism and authoritarianism, that exists as a side-effect of planning and reforming activities, lies at the heart of Bauman's merciless critique of modern gardening utopias. When modern utopias turned into 'blueprints,' 'declarations' or 'projects' for a world to be brought about by force, the totalitarian, destructive and repressive side of the double-edged sword of utopianism, the 'totalitarian temptation' as Hannah Arendt once called it, overshadowed its opposite more progressive, democratic and humanistic side. Today, however, the problem lays not so much with the totalitarian tendency in utopianism but, on the contrary, with the privatisation of utopias.

Bauman's Dystopia

Just like its premodern gamekeeping predecessor, also the modern ambitious gardening utopia ultimately ran out of steam and was superseded by a radically different utopian, or some would say anti-utopian or dystopian, perspective. The coming of liquid modernity heralds the abandonment of the grand designing illusions and planning ambitions of solid modernity: "If one hears today phrases like 'the demise of utopia' or 'the end of utopia' or 'the fading of utopian imagination,' repeated often enough to take root and settle in common sense and so be taken for self-evident, it is because the gamekeeper's and gardener's postures are giving nowadays way to that of the *hunter*" (Bauman 2005b: 4). The 'hunting utopia' differs radically from the utopias of premodernity or modernity because it is utterly devoid of any aspirations of controlling the present or of shaping or forestalling the future. Bauman continues: "Unlike the preceding types, hunters could not care less of the overall 'balancing of things,' whether 'natural' or designed and contrived. The sole task they pursue is another 'kill,' big enough to fill their game-bags to capacity" (Bauman 2005b: 4). Contrary to the collective and long-term focus of the utopias of modernity, hunting utopias are hyper-individualised and thoroughly short-termed; grand designs or lofty ideals appear as anachronisms in the deregulated atmosphere of liquid modernity. Individuals are now socialised and interpellated primarily if not exclusively as hunters and act like hunters—constantly and with cutthroat-mentality searching for new prey and for that extra amount of sensation to stimulate, however unsuccessfully or short-term, their insatiable appetite for ever more. At most times people hunt alone, but sometimes hunting in packs appears more rewarding and assuring, as when groups desire similar consumer goods and create short-lived and shallow 'imaginary communities' in order exclusively to claim and obtain these desirables. Such communities, or 'neo-tribes,' as Bauman revealed in *Intimations of Postmodernity*, may take the form of either tribal politics, politics of desire, politics of fear or politics of certainty (Bauman 1992: 198–200). Common to all these forms of community is their temporariness and the fact that they are relatively superficial—they may momentarily unite when public attention is directed towards them, but divide when the mass media eventually direct their attention elsewhere.

Unlike the controlling ambitions embodied in the iron-cage Panopticon of the modern age, in which the few guardians (or gardeners) successfully supervised the many, in contemporary so-called Synopticon—a neologism proposed by Norwegian criminologist Thomas Mathiesen (1997)—the many watch the few and uncritically emulate, imitate and celebrate their way of life. Synopticism "represent the situation where a large number focuses on something in common which is condensed" (Mathiesen 1997: 219). This 'something' attracting widespread attention is constituted by consumer goods and by the images disseminated by the mass media. As Bauman observed in *Identity*: "Millions and hundreds of millions watch and admire the same film stars or pop celebrities, move simultaneously from 'heavy metal' to rap, from flared trousers to the last word in trainers, fulminate against the same (global) public enemy, fear the same (global) villain or applaud the same (global)

saviour" (Bauman 2004a: 97). Consequently, people today are primarily socialised and interpellated as individual consumers—as opposed to the mass of producers of conscript armies or factory labourers so characteristic of solid modernity—through the mass media and through their daily mediated confrontation with celebrities and life-style experts endlessly on display. There is no longer any need for panoptical guardians—only in connection to those unfortunate 'flawed consumers' incapable of participating in the omnivorous orgies of the hunters' utopia. Meanwhile 'light capitalism,' the capitalism of lap-top computers, first-class tickets and stock-exchange transactions, has replaced the 'heavy capitalism' of monumental (or monstrous) factory structures and massive labour forces. Modernity was the utopia of production and social labour, whereas liquid modernity is the utopia of consumption and the constant stimulation of individual desires and dreams. Liquid modern society valorises and celebrates the never-ending search for stimulation. As a consequence, disengagement rather than life-long loyalty, forgetting rather than remembering, escaping rather than committing, dismantling rather than constructing, consuming rather than accumulating is the name of the game for hunters. The reification of human relationships, however, is the heavy price to be paid (Bauman 2003). In recent years, Bauman often quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson's words that 'in skating on thin ice, our safety is our speed' as the philosophy permeating contemporary liquid life. Therefore, hunting utopia is similar to George Steiner's (1971: 73) notion of 'utopias of the immediate.' They are utterly concentrated on the speed and sensation of the 'here and now' and they are post-cultural in the sense that they have abandoned every comprehensive cultivating ambition of the gardening utopias of yesteryear and appear satisfied with managing merely the surfaces of social life such as lifestyle choices and the accessibility of consumers goods. The hunting utopia, in Bauman's diagnoses, comes dangerously close to dystopia, and, as José M. Castillo rightly observed, "at the end of the 20th century and start of the 21st, we have reached rock-bottom on the dark road of loss of hope and, for many, the tragedy of despair" (Castillo 2004: 37).

As a consequence of the widespread dystopian mentality—among politicians, ordinary people and intellectuals—Bauman's comprehensive description of contemporary society in the 'liquid trilogy,' consisting of *Liquid Modernity* (2000), *Liquid Love* (2003) and *Liquid Life* (2005a)—in the near future turning into a quadruple analysis with the forthcoming publication of *Liquid Modern Fears* (Bauman 2006b)—also advances an excessively bleak depiction of our liquid world as one in which human relationships are reified, people live in perpetual feelings of uncertainty, insecurity and unsafety, globalisation and individualisation are tearing society apart and in which remaining communal shelters are as exclusive as they are excluding. Moreover, and perhaps as the most appalling tendency, there is no agency willing, or rather able, to change the course of this self-propelling and self-reproducing development. Consequently, the liquid modern world appears immune to critique and change, something which Bauman captures with the notion of the TINA-syndrome ('there is no alternative'). In recent private correspondence, he revealed how there was no discrepancy or paradox between a liquid world being portrayed as solid and impenetrable:

No contradiction here—I learned it from Claus Offe and Pierre Bourdieu. It is *because* of fluidity that the world is so stubbornly un-manageable. Offe explained the apparent paradox by pointing to the tools of actions being sorely inadequate to the enormity of the task—hence the forces let loose rebound as intractable necessity … Bourdieu uncharacteristically leaped into psychology pointing out that people deprived of the grasp of the present cannot seriously think of controlling the future. This way or the other, we are invited back to the problem of the missing agency. Since we do not know who would be able to do it, were we aware what was to be done, we are disinclined to waste time designing what is to be done, and the summary result is the intractability of reality being perceived as self-reproducing.

The utopian spirit may not have vanished altogether, but the conventional carriers of that spirit—state agencies, politicians, planners and intellectuals—have all abandoned their previous sense of urgency and responsibility. Utopia has been transformed—and transformed thoroughly indeed. Therefore, as Bauman stated years ago, utopia as such has not disappeared, but a special—a specifically modern—kind of utopia is now nowhere to be found, and this heretofore unseen situation is the cause of despair and disillusion in many quarters of contemporary academia and within political circles:

> The 'sour grapes' feeling reverberates in the often voiced opinion that our present age is afflicted and enfeebled by the petering out of the ability of 'forward thinking,' and in particular by the waning of utopias. One wonders, though, whether the diagnosis is correct; whether it is not the fading of a certain *kind* of utopia that is bewailed here, concealed in the overly generalized proposition. Postmodernity is modern enough to live by hope … Postmodernity has its own utopias, though one may be excused for failing to recognize in them what one has been trained to seek and find in the kind of utopias that spurred and whipped modern impatience with the forever imperfect realities of the present (Bauman 1994: 15).

Modern utopia has now been replaced, or superseded, by a multitude of much more postmodernity-suitable utopias. From an examination of the many hits on the internet when searching for the contemporary use of the term 'utopia,' Bauman thus comes to the conclusion that the concept today has been almost exclusively appropriated by fashion houses, cosmetics corporations, holiday providers or interior design companies (Bauman 2005b). The fact that Barbie dolls, some of the world's most celebrated toys, are sold under the label 'Fairytopia,' or that the world's strongest and most expensive and exclusive beer is currently being marketed as 'Samuel Adams Utopias,' goes to prove his point. In *Society Under Siege* Bauman stated that "unlike the utopian model of the good life, happiness is thought of as an aim to be pursued individually, and as a series of happy moments succeeding each other—not as a steady state" (Bauman 2002a: 240), and in *Liquid Life* he declared how "utopias have become the game and the prey for lone rangers, hunters and trappers; one of the many spoils of the conquest and annexation of the public by the private. The grand social vision has been split into a multitude of private, strikingly similar but decidedly not complementary portmanteaus" (Bauman 2005a: 152). We currently witness the privatisation of utopia in which many one-dimensional 'micro-utopias,' as Yaron Ezrahi (1984) poignantly termed them, are mushrooming, whereas the collective or public utopias wither.

Jürgen Habermas once remarked how, "as utopian oases dry up, a desert of banality and bewilderment spreads" (Habermas 1989: 68). This is an apt description of the state of affairs in what Bauman above labelled liquid modern 'hunter's utopia.'

His diagnosis of contemporary liquid modernity is almost exclusively negative and full of sombre premonitions. There is little or nothing positive to say about the current drift of a society in which all social problems are privatised, collective agencies aimed at assisting the unfortunate are deregulated, moral concerns, fears and uncertainties are individualised and society becomes atomised. What George Steiner once called 'casino culture' is now the name of the game. As we all know, in the casino there are many bets, but only few winners. At the end of the day, only an infinitesimal minority walk away with a profit. As a metaphor for liquid modern social stratification and individualisation, the casino reigns supreme. At the same time, society is now besieged on two fronts—threatened from the outside by globalisation and torn apart from the inside by individualisation. We are rapidly approaching a situation, heretofore unseen, in which what we know as 'society' is all but gone (Bauman 2002a: 25–51). How are we to believe in the 'good society' at all, the aim of utopianism, if we no longer even believe in 'society' as such? As described above, the arrival of the hunting utopia signals the distillation, dissolution and disillusion of the conventional collective or public utopia of solid modernity. It seems as if our liquid modern society has moved, in the words of Danish philosopher Peter Thielst (2001), from the 'grand utopias' of the late 19th and early 20th century to the 'small visions' of the early 21st century. Does this signal the end of utopia, a eulogy for utopianism? Only in the conventional sense of the term, is Bauman's response:

> If a life of continuing and continuous hunting is another utopia, it is—contrary to the utopias of the past—a utopia of *no end*. A bizarre utopia indeed, if measured by orthodox standards … Strange, unorthodox utopia it is—but utopia all the same, as it promises the same unattainable prize all utopias brandished, namely the ultimate and radical solution to human problems past, present and future, and the ultimate and radical cure for the sorrows and pains of human condition. It is unorthodox mainly for having moved the land of solutions and cures from the 'far away' into the 'here and now.' Instead of living *towards* the utopia, hunters are offered a living *inside* the utopia (Bauman 2005b: 10).

Now, after centuries of striving for utopia, we live inside it. Indeed a new type of utopia, an ultra-utopia, a realised utopia or, perhaps, rather a dystopia? In *Liquid Modernity*, after presenting the preconditions and consequences of the liquidity and fluidity of social life, Bauman defined the contemporary state of affairs in the following dramatic way: "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 2000: 15). Apparently, this is where we currently reside—but is there a way out of the trap of dystopia?

Bauman's Utopia

After many years apparent disappearance, Bauman's rediscovery of the theme of utopia, at least in its explicit terminological presence, coincided with his discovery and description of 'liquid modernity' and its negative and dystopian social consequences, as described above. Thus, as Stefan Morawski rightly observed on Bauman's writings, "the utopian motif has not disappeared" (Morawski 1998: 35). Bauman himself also in

conversation recently revealed that he never actually abandoned utopia and that the phenomenon ever since the publication of *Socialism: The Active Utopia* three decades ago had continuously been present, however in a 'perverse fashion:'

> The first book [*Socialism: The Active Utopia*] explored the signs of utopia's demise or terminal convulsions (incorrectly deciphered, as it afterwards transpired); most recently, an examination of its newest avatar … Utopia was very much present in my writings, though in a somewhat perverse fashion—'hiding in the light.' Utopia was then 'the Great Absentee,' conspicuous in a roundabout way, by the fatal impact of its disappearance: if anything, utopia's significance was enhanced as it became evident, once the orientation point whose role it served through a large part of modernity was missing from the landscape, that it was precisely an orientation point that made a bagful of sights into a landscape (Bauman in Jacobsen, Tester & Marshman 2006).

Utopia as such an 'orientation point making a bagful of sights into a landscape' is today sorely missing from the map of liquid modern privatised existence, and therefore Bauman takes it upon himself throughout his writings to defend and promote utopianism, despite the fact that utopia remains a sitting target for criticism within contemporary sociology.

As mentioned above, one of the main and most frequently expressed criticisms against utopianism has been its often intangible, ethereal or unrealistic propositions on how to turn its beautiful ideas and bountiful ideals into actual, concrete reality. Popper's aforementioned predilection for the realism of 'piecemeal social engineering' captures the essence of this criticism: "By the 'realism' of the choice of our ends I mean that we should choose ends which can be realized within a reasonable span of time, and that we should avoid distant and vague Utopian ideals, unless they determine more immediate aims which are worthy in themselves" (Popper 1945b: 367). According to such criticism for utopianism to contain any value at all, it needs, when concerned with ends instead of means, as a minimum to be directed towards short-term, achievable and 'realistic' goals. In a somewhat similar vein, Henry David Thoreau famously remarked in *Walden*: "If you built castles in the air, your work need not have been lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them" (Thoreau 1854/1960: 215). As the annals of history convey in abundance, the danger always lurks, however, that utopian ideas, whenever realised or coming close to realisation, when the 'foundations are put under them,' as it were, in reified and totalitarian fashion turn against their human inventors. Therefore Leszek Kołakowski's (1983) apt warning against utopia ever being realised because it would lead to totalitarianism and dehumanisation. On the disastrous consequences of such realised utopias, he stated:

> A feasible utopian world must presuppose that people have lost their creativity and freedom, that the variety of human life forms and thus the personal life have been destroyed, and that all of mankind has achieved the perfect satisfaction of needs and accepted a perpetual deadly stagnation as its normal condition. Such a world would mark the end of the human race as we know it and as we define it (Kołakowski 1983: 238).

If we compare this diagnosis with Mannheim's statement above that a world *without* utopia would 'bring about a static state of affairs in which man himself becomes nothing more than a thing,' we may glimpse a gigantic paradox: How can a world *with*

as well as a world *without* utopia at the same time constitute either the best or the worst place imaginable? Do we stand before an unsolvable conundrum? Hardly, we suggest. But it attests to the widespread confusion, within sociology and elsewhere, about what utopianism *can* mean.

Throughout his writings, Bauman—despite his reverence for utopianism—has continuously been wary of ever depicting such a realised utopia, an end-state to history or the 'perfect society.' If we take Thoreau's aforementioned words literally, Bauman's utopianism still needs solid foundations beneath the ethereal and somewhat intangible ideas about the 'common good' or the 'good society.' Ultimately and essentially, his utopianism is a critical and iconoclastic *attitude* craving and demanding alternatives to the currently present reality, 'a knife with the edge pressed against the future,' in the words of George Santayana. In recent years, however, Bauman has ventured into a somewhat more substantial and tangible expression of utopianism. From primarily espousing lofty ideals such as 'moral responsibility,' 'moral proximity' and 'ethical demand' throughout most parts of the 1990s, with the publication of *In Search of Politics* Bauman embarked on buttressing his utopia with concrete suggestions for a 'basic income,' a 'new internationalism,' the revitalisation of the Republican ideal of the classical Greek 'agora' in which public and private meet and solve conflicts or problems, 'cosmopolitan institutions' capable of countering the problems caused by globalisation, universalism as opposed to sectionalism or separatism, etc. Simultaneously, he criticised fundamentalists, communitarians and complacent multiculturalists either for advancing too solid versions of utopia bordering on totalitarianism or, on the contrary, for representing a defeatist or ignorant attitude towards the real problems facing people in liquid modernity (Bauman 1999: 154–202). And later, in *Europe: An Unfinished Adventure*, he celebrated the European Enlightenment ideas of liberty, equality and brotherhood and the Kantian notion of planetary dependency and eternal peace as the guiding principles for a world increasingly characterised by the Hobbesian state of nature advanced by the American empire (Bauman 2004b). Such a state of nature, 'nasty, brutish and short,' according to the famous words of Thomas Hobbes, must be countered by a more civilised and indeed utopian alternative. As Bauman stated as an echo of Cornelius Castoriadis, his spiritual soulmate: "I have a positive (and even egoistical) interest to live in a society that is closer to that of the *Symposium* than to that of *The Godfather* or of *Dallas*" (Bauman 1999: 168). Liquid modern American empire represents the latter two filmic examples, whereas Bauman's utopia is expressed through the former piece of work.

As mentioned, even in liquid modernity utopia has not entirely disappeared. We not live *through*, not *towards*, utopia. Today it has merely, but perhaps fatally, for better or for worse, lost its two characteristic twin attributes—finality and territoriality (Bauman 2002a). In modernity, as well as in the premodern rendition of Sir Thomas More, utopia could physically be located on the map, however fictional, architecturally and in particular urban settings or on distant island-states. It also signalled the end of a long and tortuous human development, the apex of human ability and will, the culmination of human perfectibility. To Bauman, utopia understood in this territorial

and finalistic way, is undesirable. His utopia comes closer to Italo Calvino's wonderful description of the 'utopia of fine dust:'

> Certainly, in recent times, my need to come up with some tangible representation of future society has declined. This is not because of some vitalistic assertion of the unforeseeable, or because I am resigned to the worst, or because I have realized that philosophical abstraction is a better indication of what may be hoped for, but maybe simply because the best that I can still look for is something else, which must be sought in the folds, in the shadowy places, in the countless involuntary effects that the most calculated system creates without being aware that perhaps the truth lies right there. The utopia I am looking for today is less solid than gaseous: it is a utopia of fine dust, corpuscular, and in suspension (Calvino 1986: 254–255).

As such a utopia 'less solid than gaseous,' 'corpuscular and in suspension,' Bauman is more than willing to defend its necessity and desirability for sociology as well as for society. Without it, we may be hoping against hope.

Utopian Ambivalence, or On Building into the Blue

A few days prior to his execution, El Salvadorian philosopher and theologian Ignacio Ellacuría proclaimed: "Only in a spirit of utopia and with hope can one have the faith and the courage to attempt, together with all the poor and downtrodden of the world, to turn back history, to subvert it and launch it in a different direction" (Ellacuría in Sobrino 2004: 125). Zygmunt Bauman would agree with the necessity of a spirit of utopia and hope in these increasingly dark times, and he would undoubtedly agree that it is possible to 'launch history in a different direction.'

As is evident from the preceding presentation, Bauman is a utopian thinker, however a thinker with a somewhat ambivalent attitude towards utopia. As he states, "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 in Bauman & Tester 2001: 50). His utopian edge, as it were, is concerned with how we can transcend the dualism (or turn it into a dialectic) between freedom and security, individuality and collectivity, dependency and responsibility. How can we square these circles? As George Steiner (1971) once observed, today dialectics tend to be binary, so there is really no transcendence involved. Despite claims to the contrary (Nilsen 2004: 194–195)—postulating that Bauman consistently looks at the world in a black/white and either/or fashion—he *is* in fact a dialectical thinker. His 'methodology' when approaching human (and thus social) problems and issues is concerned with how they can be overcome, how it is possible to bridge or reconcile opposite desirables (such as freedom and security) and how we can possibly square the circle between individual autonomy and collective solidarity (see Jacobsen 2004). However, he remains disinclined or reluctant to propose concrete solutions or provide definitive answers to these dilemmas, but insists on being inquisitive and asking questions. As he, as an allusion to Castoriadis, revealed in *In Search of Politics* on his own 'conviction:' "I happen to believe that questions are hardly ever wrong; it is the answers that might be so. I also believe, though, that refraining from questioning is the worst answer of all" (Bauman 1999: 8). And in an unpublished manuscript he revealed how "when everything has been already

said, something important, perhaps something most important of all, is still missing"
(Bauman 2002b: 2). This 'something most important of all still missing' means that
we have to keep looking for the possible, keep our eyes open to alternatives and to
the horizons and that we nurture the human hope that, even in the darkest of times,
cannot be extinguished.

In all of this, in his attack on realised utopia and defence of utopianism as an orien-
tation, Bauman comes close to the utopianism advanced by obscure and unorthodox
Marxist, Ernst Bloch in his magnum opuses *The Spirit of Utopia* and *The Principle of
Hope*. According to Bloch,

> to limit the utopian to the Thomas More variety, or simply to orientate it in that direction would be
> like trying to reduce electricity to the amber from which it gets its Greek name and in which it was first
> noticed. Indeed, the utopian coincides so little with the novel of the ideal state that the whole totality of
> *philosophy* becomes necessary … to do justice to the content of that designated by utopia (Bloch 1986: 15).

Not only the totality of philosophy, but also the totality of sociology, or social
science as such, becomes necessary if we are to do justice to and understand Bauman's
utopianism. He himself was critical, in a spirit similar to Bloch's, of the myopic
utilisation of the term 'utopian' within sociology:

> 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 … The idea of once and
> for all getting rid of the torments of choice and uncertainty cannot but allure the tormented … 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 … The 'deregulated' and 'privatized' utopias of our
> individualized world I assign to the latter category (Bauman in Bauman & Tester 2001: 48–50).

To this 'latter category' also belong the totalitarian utopias of the modern era.
Despite their many and substantial differences, the collectivist and enforced utopias
of solid modernity and the deregulated and privatised utopias of liquid modernity
share an equal amount of anti-humanist and heteronomous ambition in their quest
either to limit and pre-empt individual choices or, alternatively, to withdraw entirely
and place the burden of responsibility on the shoulders of hapless, isolated or indolent
individuals.

Max Horkheimer once proclaimed that utopianism has a dual edge: on the one
hand it proposes a critique of what currently exists and, on the other hand, out-
lines a proposal—often a rather detailed sketch—for what should come to exist
(Horkheimer 1968). In this sense of the term, Bauman is only half a utopian. As is
obvious, Bauman is thoroughly ambivalent towards utopia. On the one hand, utopia
is a prerequisite for human existence, an expression of humanity's undying hope of
a better world. Ernst Bloch put this conviction into words: "To be human really means
to have utopias" (Bloch in Bloch 1988: 33). On the other hand, however, utopia
can be destructive, enforced and potentially totalitarian. In almost Blochian fashion,
Bauman thus stated: "Human being-in-the-world means being ahead-of-the-world.
Human life is propelled and kept on course by the urge for transcendence … 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 articulations into projects" (Bauman 2002a: 222–223). And elsewhere, he reminded us that "if you know exactly what the good society is like, any cruelty you commit in its name is justified and absolved" (Bauman in Bauman & Tester 2001: 49). When transformed from a critical impulse, an 'activating presence,' or an 'imaginative incentive' in the words of Kołakowski, into grand projects, chromium-plated blueprints, spectacular designs or meticulous master plans, utopianism paradoxically ceases to be utopian. Utopianism, as anything else, needs to be practiced with a minimum of caution, modesty and self-restraint. And so, we have come full cycle. Human existence without utopia is unimaginable and probably also untenable and unliveable. And Bloch commenced, in his very first lines of *The Spirit of Utopia*, to crystallize his utopian credo—particularly useful for the uncertain and undetermined times when humans have finally been relieved from blind fate to create their own destiny—that might also capture Bauman's:

> I am. We are. That is enough. Now we have to begin. Life has been put into our hands. For itself it became empty already long ago. It pitches senselessly back and forth, but we stand firm, and so we want to be its initiative and we want to be its ends … That is why we go, why we cut new, metaphysically constitutive paths, summon what is not, build into the blue, and build ourselves into the blue, and there seek the true, the real, where the merely factual disappears—*incipit vita nova* (Bloch 2000: 1–3).

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