



Illustration: Natalia Kulka

Barbarism – The Active Dystopia

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Abstract: In this article, I argue that dystopia also has an ambivalently “active” function in Bauman’s sociology. Across his work, as a counter-image to the “active utopia” of socialism, the traces of the “active dystopia” can be tracked, defined as a pointed *elucidation of the possibilities for barbarism latent within the present*, the clearest expression of which is presented in *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989). The article proceeds roughly in three steps. Firstly, I revisit the arguments in Bauman’s foundational cultural and critical sociology that developed alongside his revisionist reading of Marxism in the 1960s and 1970s, on epistemologies of the future, common sense and the limitations of the predictive ambitions of social science. Then, I develop a particular focus on an unpublished, though essential, typescript entitled “Is the Science of the Possible Possible?”, suggesting that it is usefully read in terms of the emphasis on possibility and potentiality in *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Throughout these sections, I intersperse a reading of *Modernity and the Holocaust* in the light of this foundational work, presenting it as an exemplary form of critical sociology as active dystopia, which elucidates the possibility for barbarism residing within modern societies. Finally, I consider how his thinking situates him in a lineage of critical thought animated by the “active dystopia”, arguing that what is often mistaken for gloominess and pessimism is, in fact, a crucial resource for sociology in its speculative imagination of possible futures.

Keywords: Zygmunt Bauman; modernity; Holocaust; possibility; utopia; dystopia

Rosa Luxemburg famously held that capitalism is marked by an intractable tension between the capacities of consumption and production which renders the imperialist expansion into and absorption of non-capitalist areas essential for its survival. Because

of the limits of space, time and environment, capitalism must effectively devour itself, for once it covers the world in its entirety it has nowhere to offload its crisis tendencies (Luxemburg, 1913/2003, pp. 327, 376). In the midst of European civil war, Luxemburg suggested that the time of collapse was nigh. She famously posited a choice: socialism or barbarism? For Luxemburg, barbarism is not – as it was commonly deployed in the ideological legitimization of capitalist expansion and accumulation during her lifetime – the negative side of a binary between a civilised, modern West and its Others. Barbarism is rather a possibility which continually haunts the expansion of industrial civilisation, a “triumph of imperialism” which “leads to the destruction of culture, sporadically during a modern war, and forever, if the period of world wars that has just begun is allowed to take its damnable course to the last ultimate consequence” (Luxemburg, 1915/1970, p. 269).

Zygmunt Bauman can be counted among a generation for whom Luxemburg’s activist anthropology of freedom, her insights into the political economy of capitalist imperialism and surplus populations, and her account of the dialectical relationship between civilisation and barbarism were highly influential (see especially Bauman, 1968/2001b, 2004; for a discussion see Beilharz, 2002, 2021, p. 342). Bauman, of course, had his own reading of the socialist utopia and of socialism, perhaps more jaded and ambivalent than Luxemburg’s, coming as it did after the world wars, the destruction of European Jewry, which Luxemburg could not have foreseen and, after March 1968, from the estranged vantage point of exile from the Polish People’s Republic (on Bauman as “ambivalent utopian”, see Jacobsen, 2016). For Bauman, socialism was and could only be an *active* utopia. Socialism is not a prefigured blueprint, a set of institutional arrangements imposed from above, but is rather an open-ended and inexhaustible critique of the present, a continual process of elucidating *possibilities* which recede at the moment of their institutionalisation (Bauman, 1976a, p. 36).

In this article, I argue that *dystopia* also has an ambivalently “active” function in Bauman’s sociology. Across his work, as a counter-image to the “active utopia” of socialism, the traces of the “active dystopia” can be tracked and defined as a pointed *elucidation of the possibilities for barbarism latent within the present*. In a neglected exposition of the conceptual history of “barbarism”, Bauman explores how it has been deployed historically as a fig leaf hoping “to hide the ugly and shameful atrocities of imperialism and colonialism”, or more broadly, as the name given to the illegitimate violence of the enemy as against “our” legitimate, “civilized” form (Bauman, 2008/2021, pp. 187, 188–189). This is not how barbarism is figured in *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Bauman, 1989). Famously, in this work, Bauman argued that barbarism erupted from within the orbit of civilisation. Barbarism is not, *qua* Luxemburg, a product of the implosion of capitalist imperialism and its destruction of culture *per se*, but of broader tendencies in the condition of modernity in general, in which civilisation and barbarism are dialectically intertwined (thus, his optic also included horrors perpetrated by modernising commu-

nist regimes, see Bauman, 2008, pp. 78–109, 2010a, pp. 99–107). Indeed, as Bryan Cheyette has noted, *Modernity and the Holocaust* stands as a sociologisation of Walter Benjamin’s pithy dictum that “there is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (Cheyette, 2022, p. 240).

The clearest expression of the active dystopia in Bauman’s work is presented in *Modernity and the Holocaust*. In making this claim my intention is not to reiterate Bauman’s broad arguments – which I assume the reader is familiar with – for the purpose of defending or negating them. Nor is my aim to evaluate Bauman’s Holocaust sociology in the light of studies, evidence and trends in Holocaust studies subsequent to 1989. Much has already been said of how the post-Soviet opening of archives across Eastern Europe, for example, generated challenges to Bauman’s arguments about, say, the bureaucratisation of violence or the location of the Holocaust in distanced camps (for an overview, see Palmer & Brzeziński, 2022). My intention is rather to show what Bauman was doing over the course of the argument that he develops in *Modernity and the Holocaust*, and its basic continuity with a set of epistemological and ontological positions that were developed during the course of earlier work and which Keith Tester suggested foreground Bauman as a “sociologist of possibility” (Tester, 2004, pp. 12–33). This earlier work tends to be neglected these days and its connection with Bauman’s Holocaust writings is very often overlooked (see Best, 2014 for example Best’s critique, which doesn’t reference a single piece before *Modernity and the Holocaust*; see also Tester, 2018 on the significance of Bauman’s early work). It is in recovering the status of the Holocaust as a *possibility* – one which can *recur*, in different guises, if its generative conditions are forgotten or expunged, and which therefore must be guarded against in a stance of vigilance – which affords the opportunity to retrieve the active dystopia as a heuristic device. It is, therefore, the modality of Bauman’s argumentation in his Holocaust sociology that constitutes its classicality and its continuing relevance for us in the present.

I

Towards the end of his *Freedom* (1988), Bauman wrote that “each moment of history is a junction of tracks leading towards a number of futures. *Being at a crossroads is the way human society exists*. What appears in retrospect an ‘inevitable’ development began in its time as stepping onto one road among the many stretching ahead” (Bauman, 1988, p. 89, my emphasis). In several ways, this statement points to arguments which would appear in *Modernity and the Holocaust*, published the following year. But it also harks back. The “crossroads” analogy as a rhetorical device to depict situations of crisis, in which a decision, choice, or judgement must be enacted between a multiplicity of

options (as in the Greek Latin sense *krísis* [κρίσις]), recurs throughout Bauman's writings. In the midst of the *Solidarność* movement, he wrote that Poland stood "at the crossroads" (Bauman, 1981, p. 54). It appears earlier, notably in an unpublished essay titled "At a Crossroads in a World at the Crossroads", dating from his period in Israeli exile, 1968–1971. This essay (Bauman, 1970/in press) is in part a rejection of the temptation of Israeli nationalism after the 1967 Six-Day War, and a similar framing was used in Bauman's editorial for *Haaretz* in 1971, titled "Israel Must Prepare for Peace" (Bauman, 1971b). The country, he claimed, stood at a crossroads between demilitarisation and further militaristic entrenchment, and that if it chose the latter, it would have devastating consequences for the region. He would later come to claim that this was among the few predictions he made that had come true, a point that he reiterated in the discussions of the "children *manqués*" of the Holocaust in the afterword to the 2000 edition of *Modernity and the Holocaust*, "The Duty to Remember – but What?" (Bauman, 1989/2000, pp. 236–241).

The line from *Freedom* also has a bearing on the particular and complex historiographical argument that underpins *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Rather than seeing the Holocaust as the inevitable *telos* of modernity (as suggested, for example, in Best, 2014; Cannon, 2016) – it implicitly clarifies Bauman's argument that the Holocaust was a *specific* event actualised within a concatenation of *general* features of modernity. Bauman did not argue that the Holocaust was the "paradigm of modern civilization" or "truth" of modernity (Bauman, 1989/2000, p. 6). The condition of modernity does not, in other words, steamroll its way down one road; there is a multiplicity of modern trajectories that, as in Bauman's favourite Borges' fable, "proliferate and fork", converging and diverging at various points (Bauman, 1976/2021, p. 84; Bauman & Tester, 2001, p. 24; Borges, 1964, p. 23). The possibility of genocide exists within this multiplicity of modernity (see Palmer, 2022). "The *possibility* of the Holocaust", Bauman wrote, "was rooted in certain universal features of modern civilization", but the implementation of the Holocaust was actualised within a specific conjunction of state and society (Bauman, 1989/2000, p. 82). Thus, he explicitly set himself up against notions that the Holocaust could be generalised, or understood as the logical, linear extension of "everyday" forms of structural violence and inequality (e.g. Scheper-Hughes, 2002). For Bauman, the Holocaust was "an event without precedents" that "stands alone and bears no meaningful comparison with other massacres" (Bauman, 1989/2000, p. 32). The modern subject is not "living in Auschwitz", he was keen to stipulate, and he was still more critical of the (today increasingly common) aesthetic and symbolic appropriation of Holocaust memory to advance partisan positions on routine social conflict (Bauman, 1989/2000, p. 87).

Bauman's ontological presupposition that human society always exists "at a crossroads" – that what is here and now could be otherwise – is also significant because it is precisely the human capacity to make choices from among the many trajectories stretching ahead which is extinguished in genocide. The incorrigibly plural character

of the human world and the capacity for social formations to exercise collective autonomy, institutionalised in political democracy, is the very force against which totalistic, potentially genocidal, interpretations of modernity operate (Bauman, 1989/2000, p. 115). As he put it in *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991), the modern tendency oscillates between “freedom and genocide, constantly able to stretch in either direction, spawning at the same time the most horrifying of contemporary dangers and the most effective means of preventing them – the poison and the antidote” (Bauman, 1991, pp. 51–52).

Establishing this tension between genocide and freedom, Bauman expresses fidelity to the central ideas of his sociology as they developed across the period of his exile, from the late 1960s through the 1970s, in which he married Marxist revisionism with the precepts of Lévi-Strauss’s anthropological structuralism. With the former, Bauman borrowed and extended an activistic current in Marxism elaborated, *inter alia*, by Luxemburg and Gramsci, which emphasises above all “the active, motivating role of mental structuralization of the human world” (Bauman, 1968/2001b, p. 51). Structuralism, meanwhile, was attractive because within its frame culture appears as “a structure of choices – a matrix of possible, finite in number yet practically uncountable permutations”, which aims at “reducing the indeterminacy of the human world” (Bauman, 1973/1999, p. xxvii; see also Bauman, 1968a, p. 29, 1968b, pp. 68–69, 71, 73, 1973b, p. 67, 1968/2018, pp. 57–58). Culture is a universal propensity of humanity to impose structures on a structureless world in infinite permutations.

While encompassing the future in its unique quality of irreducibility to the past, the cultural stance admits a multiplicity of realities. The set of universes it explores in the way the positive sciences investigate the real, contains also “*the possible, the potential, the desirable, the hankered after, even if as yet improbable worlds*” (Bauman, 1973/1999, p. 139, my emphasis).

At the centre of this conception of culture stood a critique of a “mechanistic image” of human beings, inextricably connected with a “managerial sociology” which serves the bureaucratic administration of populations. Herein, the human is reduced to the status of a “reactive being [...] determined by outer forces or inner drives” (Bauman, 1967, p. 13); creativity is aberration, pathology or deviance (Bauman, 1973/1999, p. 115). The practical exigencies of control, moreover, are fused with the scientific ambition of mastery over the future, of prediction and probability. Notably, in this period of his work, we also see Bauman formulating a critique of bureaucracy as instantiated in the “perfect planning” model of Soviet-type societies, later repurposed in *Modernity and the Holocaust* as those societies collapsed (for his coeval response to the end of Soviet communism, see for example Bauman, 1990a). The perfect planning model of Soviet state societies presupposes a bureaucratic “planning agent” as “the only and unchallenged factor determining the totality of social action” (Bauman, 1966, p. 146; see also Bauman, 1971a). The perfect planning model is predicated on the idea that the future can be known in advance and mastered. Indeed, the very legitimization of the planning model is premised

on the “future-orientation” of the system, not some appeal to tradition or charismatic authority of the leader (Bauman, 1973a, p. 17). Bauman’s cultural sociology, and his later-trenchant critique of the ordering impulse of modernity, is a rebuttal to this very idea (see Bauman, 1987).

An “activistic image”, by contrast, emphasises human acts as “creations”, and holds that human behaviour is at best only partly predictable. The sociology which is built upon this philosophical anthropology aims at reducing the determinacy of the social world by “supplying the human beings with ampler knowledge of their situation and so enlarging the sphere of their freedom of choice” (Bauman, 1967, p. 15), a formulation that is maintained more or less consistently throughout his work (see Bauman, 1988, p. 90, 1990b, p. 50; Bauman et al., 2014, p. 81). This is the basis of a *critical* sociology, one which shares with culture and utopia a concern with the elucidation of *possibility* (Tester, 2004). The image of the world as routine, stable, inert, repetitive and regular is based on the repression of alternatives and the disavowal of the coercion which entailed its remaking (Bauman, 1991/2001a, p. 144). As with utopian thinking, critical sociology “defies science’s reduction of man, in the process of cognition, to a purely epistemological and contemplative entity [...] by legitimising the status of ‘the possible’ in valid knowledge” (Bauman, 1976a, p. 33, my emphasis).

II

One of the most interesting and significant among the unpublished papers in the Bauman archive is a typescript entitled “Is the Science of the Possible Possible?”. Its provenance is unclear. It was delivered as a lecture, though no information about where or when is forthcoming. Thematically, it covers material developed in *Towards a Critical Sociology* and *Socialism: The Active Utopia* (I would argue that it was published c. 1976 for that reason), and like those works it has a distinct connection to his better-known writings of later periods, especially *Modernity and the Holocaust*.

Bauman starts by giving his answer to the question posed in the lecture title. No, he says, a science of the possible is not possible. The category of the possible defies the scientific conceptions of causation, truth, law and determination, which hold that “the past is [...] the part of the future which has been rendered already accessible to the human senses” (Bauman, c. 1976, p. 3). Particularly homing in on the science of “futurology”, inaugurated by the Royal Institute’s “Discovery of the Future” conference in 1902, Bauman critiques a notion of “forecasting” which is enjoying something of a resurgence today (see Tetlock & Gardner, 2016). It assumes that “*the past will last indefinitely* [...] The future is becoming an admissible object of science only when ‘made like’ the past. The possibility falls the first victim of this expedient” (Bauman, c. 1976, p. 5).

At this point, Bauman's work approximates a kind of sociological poetics, in the Aristotelian sense (on Bauman's "poetics" see Jacobsen & Marshman, 2008; Wolff, 2013). Just as with Aristotle's poet, the critical sociologist does not merely tell "what happened" but rather "the sort of things that *can* happen" and in so doing represents "a more speculative" enterprise, trading in universals rather than particulars (Aristotle translated and annotated by Whalley, in Baxter & Atherton, 1997, p. 81; see also Koselleck, 1976/2018, pp. 11–13). The closest that the scientific mentality can come to the category of the possible is in the identification with "the probable", but Bauman argues probability and possibility are rooted in incommensurable "existential modalities" (Bauman, 1976a, p. 34). Probability resides in the realm of "*facta*", and refers to "events in relation to which men have neither will nor liberty of action, neither power nor influence". By contrast, the category of the possible inheres in *poiesis*, the process of making, the activity of bringing something into the world that did not exist hitherto. For Bauman, sociologically speaking, possibility "signifies an event which has not yet happened, and whose future occurrence cannot in principle be established on the basis of data about *facta*" (Bauman, 1976a, pp. 33–34). Possibility, moreover, is an intrinsic property of human existence:

It belongs to the essence of human existence that it is ever unfinished and inconclusive, open toward the future, lived, evaluated and revised under the auspices of events which exist so far only ideally, as an end of human effort, as a desirable state, as an ideal pattern, as a nostalgia, a plan, a dream, a threat, a hope, or a danger. All of these events belong to the class of possibilities, which are not present in daily reality in any other way but ideally, and therefore *come into existence the moment they reach the level of consciousness, are named and made into a subject of interhuman communication*. (Bauman, 1976a, pp. 34–35, my emphasis)

Because it *names* possibilities, Bauman's sociological poetics also encompasses his "sociological hermeneutics" as represented in *Hermeneutics and Social Science* (1978). Bauman argued that sociology, as a cultural activity of collective understanding and ideation, is only possible on an assumption of an essential intersubjectivity of life, a unity of the human species. Its task is twofold: to interpret across plural forms of life, and to elucidate the factors which distort communication. Its second task generates its critical function; "the method of sociological hermeneutics, like that of empirical-analytical science, can serve the practice of communication only in its negative capacity, as the method of criticism. It can expose some conditions of communication which lead to an invalid, untrue consensus" (Bauman, 1978, p. 241).

Modernity and the Holocaust, as is too often misperceived, was intended by Bauman as a reflexive sociological elucidation of the possibilities of *modernity* rather than the as a sociology of the Holocaust (Bauman, 1989/2000, p. 222). This is apparent in its constant refrain about the *possibility* of the Holocaust – a possibility not entirely exceeded by its occurrence and thus repeatable – rather than its inevitability, probability or plausibility. This leads to an hermeneutic attentiveness to the way that sociology conspires with its own object, modern society, and in the process renders its possibili-

ties opaque. Bauman makes this point clearly and strikingly in the first chapter of *Modernity and the Holocaust*:

The nature and style of sociology has been attuned to the *selfsame modern society* it theorized and investigated; sociology has been engaged since its birth in a mimetic relationship with its object – or, rather, with the imagery of that object which it constructed and accepted as the frame for its own discourse. And so sociology promoted, as its own criteria of propriety, the same principles of rational action it visualized as constitutive of its object. It also promoted, as binding rules of [its] own discourse, the inadmissibility of ethical problematics in any other form but that of a communally-sustained ideology and thus heterogenous to sociological (scientific, rational) discourse. (Bauman, 1989/2000, p. 29, my emphasis)

In the course of its mimetic relationship with its object, sociology aligns with a “common sense” which is instantiated in “the ‘pruning’ of human potential of all refractory offshoots which protrude beyond the shape allowed by the existing form of domination, thereby *elevating the self-same structures to the status of reality* nobody in his right mind may possibly detach himself from” (Bauman, c. 1976, p. 15, my emphasis). It is this tendency that rendered it incapable, so he thought, of coming to terms with the unprecedented event of the Holocaust, but also of recognising the barbarous possibilities of modern societies as such. To quote Reinhart Koselleck, Bauman problematised the notion that “every attempt to find a [sociological] language adequate to mass extermination seems to fail [...] arrives too late for those affected, too late for the event itself” (Koselleck, 1988/2018, pp. 140–141). In pulling out certain tendencies within the present and giving them a name, elucidating them, exaggerating them, Bauman points to the possibility of hitherto unacknowledged forms of violence, the defence against which requires permanent vigilance (for a similar argument see Silverman, 2022 on *Modernity and the Holocaust* as a “concentrationary” work, an extension of a major series of works on the “concentrationary universe” by Pollock & Silverman, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2019).

The elucidation of a possibility is thus performative. Although the truth of the possibility may be questionable, “the formulation of such a statement may well touch off a genuine chain reaction within the habitualised human conduct, which will lead eventually to a peculiar ‘truth-verification’ process, to wit, a process by which the statement itself will become increasingly ‘true’, and the possibility – increasingly ‘realistic’” (Bauman, c. 1976, p. 9). Language plays a significant role in this process, metaphors in particular (Davis, 2013). They have a double role in Bauman’s sociology. On the one hand, his sociological hermeneutics interrogates the process by which inherited sociological languages have a provenance in metaphor and yet solidify into quasi-natural concepts. The concept of “assimilation”, for instance, as in *Modernity and Ambivalence*, is presented as an example of what Hans Blumenberg, a bedfellow of Bauman’s in this regard, described as the “complex field of transitions from metaphors to concepts”, wherein the metaphor is “absorbed by the word” (Blumenberg, 2010, p. 81). On the other hand, metaphors also function as a means to provide an alternative, more adequate language for capturing inchoate social change, *familiarising* it in the process. Sociological language

in the modality of the active dystopia is also normatively charged, a point Bauman makes explicitly in *Modernity and the Holocaust* when he sets his intentionally shocking phraseology and claim-making against a reality in which “phrases like ‘the sanctity of human life’ or ‘moral duty’ sound as alien in a sociology seminar as they do in the smoke-free, sanitized rooms of a bureaucratic office” (Bauman, 1989/2000, p. 30).

Critical sociology – like utopia – relativises the present “by scanning the field of the possible in which the real occupies merely a tiny plot” (Bauman, 1976a, p. 13). This “scanning the field of the possible” frequently has a negative incarnation in Bauman’s thought, punctuated as it is by reflections on how “society itself, which we consider as the ultimate authority of sociological truth, *may be ‘possessed’ and produce ‘insane’ facts*” (Bauman, c. 1976, p. 17, my emphasis). Critical sociology can probe the “vexing and antinomial question of how science, this completely technical-instrumental venture, *can possibly tell good from evil*” (Bauman, 1976a, p. 24, my emphasis). This aspect of critical sociology functions as a version of what W. H. Sewell Jr. called “eventful sociology” (Sewell, 2005). In the event of a crisis, society is revealed to be a product of human action which always stands at a crossroads and thus opens up to critique. As Bauman puts it, “the event [...] puts on the agenda the need for a theory which selects as its foundation extreme situations, paroxysms of history, ‘pathological’ phenomena rather than statistical uniformities” (Bauman, 1976b, p. 94). In *Modernity and the Holocaust*, the event of the Holocaust is the limit-case of modernity, the realisation of its most extreme inner possibility.

III

What is often mistaken for gloominess and pessimism in Bauman’s analysis is, I suggest, a crucial resource for sociology in its speculative imagination of possible futures. *Modernity and the Holocaust* is, in Umberto Eco’s term, a self-consciously “open work”, which speaks to the multiple and multiplying social, political, economic and ecological crises of our present (Eco, 1969/1989). And, as ever – as Peter Beilharz makes amply clear in his contribution to this issue – Bauman wears his influences on his sleeve. The active dystopia, it could be said, constitutes a living tradition of social and political thought.

Bauman’s Holocaust sociology explicitly recalls Hannah Arendt, but not simply because of any putative similarity in their ethical concerns with the propensity for ordinary people to commit evil under the auspices of “rationality” or “banality” (see Bowring, 2011; Waxman, 2009). Bauman’s reflections on the status of the Holocaust as a possibility much more interestingly evoke Arendt’s concern with totalitarianism as an unprecedented political entity, an emergent phenomenon produced as result of a concat-

enation of various “subterranean” trends and processes. As Bauman, who came after her, Arendt argued that the social sciences, by virtue of their aspirations to be sciences, not only could not have anticipated the emergence of, say, the Nazi camp system, but lacked an adequate language and framework for understanding them *post hoc* (Arendt, 1950). Arendt was also aware, of the problems incurred in trying to assimilate the unprecedented to *facta*, what had already been done, when events were subsumed under functional processes, mechanisms, and causes. She identified this evocatively in her *Life of the Mind*:

Even if the event is of our own making, or at least we are one of the contributing causes – as in contracting marriage or committing a crime – the simple *existential* fact that it now is as it has become (for whatever reasons) is likely to withstand all reflections on its original randomness. *Once the contingent has happened we can no longer unravel the strands that entangled it until it became an event, as though it could still be or not be.* (Arendt, 1978, vol. 2, p. 138, my emphasis)

The notion of “unravelling the strands” of an event so that it no longer appears as an inevitable, rational product of socio-historic development, may be seen as a summation of the narrative-essayistic approach in her *Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt, 1951/2017). This work, the second volume of which (on Imperialism) was substantially influenced by Rosa Luxemburg, was driven by a scepticism towards the “belief in historical causality”, in “causes that inevitably led to certain effects”, preferring to think of the appearance of totalitarianism as a “crystallisation” of various “subterranean elements”, an emergent and unprecedented form of political evil that arose from the entanglement of a multiplicity of processes (Arendt, 1958/2018, pp. 157–158). Beilharz is absolutely correct in identifying a similar “essayism” at work across Bauman’s oeuvre, including in *Modernity and the Holocaust*, something that I centralise in my forthcoming *Zygmunt Bauman and the West* (Palmer, in press).

The presentation of history as if it was underpinned by the logic of unfolding laws of movement is not simply a methodological or ontological deficiency – it is a moral deficiency, dangerous in its implications. For once history is the product and carrier of movement, human beings can be rendered “superfluous”, and be swept aside for its realisation to occur. It is an approach to history that both sidelines the human capacity to *act*, to set in motion processes that would not have otherwise occurred, and that has been deployed in such a way so as to radically transform human beings themselves, precisely through rendering them incapable of acting and by extinguishing our very *plurality*. For Bauman too, the human propensity to imagine and to enact the possible, as against the naturalised background of the real, is constitutive of cultural plurality. The alliance between the modern state and “legislative” intellectuals who see populations as inert matter to be moulded according to the vision of a totalising “grand design” bequeathed by nature or by history contains significant potential for violence

against Others who in their otherness represent alternative possibilities to that design (Bauman, 1987, 2008, pp. 85–89).

The tension that Bauman posits between genocide and freedom approximates “autonomy” and “mastery”, Cornelius Castoriadis’s constitutive tension of the modern social imaginary (Castoriadis, 1975/1987). Castoriadis, the animating figure of the influential journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (see his founding statement in Castoriadis, 1949/1988, pp. 76–106), likewise held that the mentality of *facta* was ahistorical and engendered a fundamentally deterministic view of human action and events which ultimately eradicates contingency and human creativity (Castoriadis, 1997, p. 4). He also stressed that “creativity” entailed no normative evaluation of human conduct: “creation does not necessarily – nor even generally – signify ‘good’ creation or the creation of ‘positive values’.” Auschwitz and the Gulag are creations just as much as the Parthenon and the *Principia Mathematica*” (Castoriadis, 1991, p. 161). The task of critical social thought, he held, is to “elucidate” possibilities of a world that can only be known “in fragments”, as against the fallacy of a general theory of a totalising system of absolute and de-contextualised knowledge (Adams, 2014, p. xii).

Bauman’s deployment of the active dystopia also has a strong affinity with Hans Jonas, one amongst a number of German-Jewish thinkers like Arendt and Günther Anders – all influenced significantly, and ambivalently, by Martin Heidegger – who were concerned by the increasing and accelerating distance between the human technological capacity to master the world in order to act upon it and the moral capacity to consider the effects of the development of this technological capacity. Jonas in particular was concerned “by the kind of size of its snowballing effects, technological power propels us into goals of a type that was formerly the preserve of Utopias” (Jonas, 1985, p. 21). Technological power has expanded to the degree that it now has previously unimaginable consequences, many of which are profoundly dystopian. These consequences have to be *imagined* in the form of thought experiments. For Jonas, fearful imagining thus has a heuristic function, as a mode of orientation to the future that sensitises thought and informs action within the present. Science fiction offered such a resource (Jonas, 1985, p. 30). Arendt, for her part, was also sympathetic to science fiction, “to which, unfortunately, nobody has yet paid the attention it deserves as a vehicle of mass sentiments and desires” (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 2). Bauman originally seemed to have been less enamoured – “the wonderworld of science fiction” is “famous for its remarkable blend of unbridled technical fantasy and disheartening paucity of imagination in anything concerning human relations” (Bauman, 1976a, p. 12) – but his later enthusiasm for Michel Houellebecq’s *The Possibility of an Island* (the first “liquid modern” dystopia, in his view) suggests that he came to change his position (Bauman, 2010b).

Indeed, in his programmatic attempt to expand the cognitive horizons of sociology, Bauman long reserved a distinctive role for the arts:

Like the artist broadens and enriches our esthetic [sic] sensibility and opens our eyes to the kind of beauty we would otherwise never suspect, the student of the social may open our eyes to the kinds of life we would otherwise hardly suspect, and thanks to that he may widen our horizons in such a way that our “reality”, to which we are routinely exposed, is reduced to its true historical proportions. (Bauman, c. 1976, pp. 15–16)

Literature, as is well established, frequently performs this function in Bauman’s work (see Bauman & Mazzeo, 2016). The notion that the event of the Holocaust was made possible by a unique concatenation of universal features of modernity and a specific socio-political conjuncture brings to mind the depiction of the titular epidemic in the novel *Blindness* by José Saramago, “spreading, not like a sudden tide flooding everything and carrying all before it, but like an insidious infiltration of a thousand and one turbulent rivulets which, having slowly drenched the earth, suddenly submerge it completely” (Saramago, 1997, p. 116). Indeed, it is not hard to see why Bauman so admired the Portuguese writer when one considers his depiction of his approach as “accepting that the impossible is possible and extracting from that slightly risky premise all the consequences that the imagination can bring to it, even if ordinary logic has to suffer” (Saramago, 2008).

But sociology need not become parasitic on literature, or indeed become literature itself (Seeger & Davison-Vecchione, 2019). Recent studies by Saskia Sassen on novel forms of “expulsion”, and Shoshana Zuboff on “surveillance capitalism”, exemplify the active dystopia as a living tradition and mediate between a scientific deduction of observable trends and a poetic speculation of future possibilities. Sassen seeks to identify, in an Arendtian turn of phrase, the “subterranean trends” in the contemporary global economy which have produced novel forms of brutality against humanity and habitat which fundamentally call into question “familiar categories for organizing knowledge about our economies, our societies, and our interaction with the biosphere” (Sassen, 2014, p. 8). Zuboff, in turn, attempts to map the emergence of an “unprecedented” logic of corporate surveillance that is colonising our very selves. In a passage which strikingly recalls Bauman’s discussion of the “science of the possible”, she writes:

The unprecedented reliably confounds understanding; existing lenses illuminate the familiar, thus obscuring the original by turning the unprecedented into an extension of the past. This contributes to the normalization of the abnormal, which makes fighting the unprecedented even more of an uphill climb. (Zuboff, 2019, p. 12)

As such, she continues, “any confrontation with the unprecedented requires new language [...] when existing language fails to capture a new phenomenon” (Zuboff, 2019, p. 66). It is here, in the development of new concepts and the appropriation and instantiation of metaphor, that the active dystopia most conspicuously occupies the “third culture” between science and literature identified by Wolf Lepenies (1988).

IV

Fiercely critical of the notion that the Holocaust was the inevitable *telos* of modernity, and hostile to the trivialisation of the Holocaust resultant from its appropriation and extension to more quotidian forms of discrimination, Bauman nevertheless maintained that we continue to “*live in a type of society that made the Holocaust possible, and that contained nothing which could stop the Holocaust happening*” (Bauman, 1989/2000, p. 89). Objections to the gloominess, pessimism or the lack of concrete specificity of *Modernity and the Holocaust* neglect its core message: overawed by pretensions to predict based upon the analysis of precedents, we are blindsided by the possibility of the unprecedented.

Herein lies the classicality and contemporary resonance of *Modernity and the Holocaust*: to remind sociologists that “*the unimaginable ought to be imagined*” (Bauman, 1989/2000, p. 85; for a similar incantation, see Featherstone, 2017, p. 20). It speaks to the possibilities of the present crisis of humanity, chief among them the human destruction of nature and our own conditions of life. Bauman recognised this connection, even if he was curiously quiet on ecological questions. The Holocaust was, he argued, a terrible extension of human rational-mastery over nature, humanity and nature conceived in binary separation. In the Amalfi prize speech, Bauman recognised that “human rational-mastery has increased to such an extent that it runs the risk of transcending nature’s self-healing capacity” (Bauman, 1989/2000, p. 217). This, too, was implied in Rosa Luxemburg’s vision of a global capitalism collapsing into barbarism once it reaches the limits of its growth. Her question – and Bauman’s – resonates as increasing numbers of people find themselves in unliveable conditions at borders, fleeing conflict, environmental breakdown and economic immiseration; who then find that they are denied entry and sanctuary at those borders, or are left to drown in the course of perilous sea crossings. It resonates as the self-appointed defenders of human rights in the centres of global capitalism separate families and detain people indefinitely in remote camps. And it resonates as the institutions of political democracy, designed to protect human plurality and to institutionalise collective autonomy, are hollowed out. All the while, wildfires burn and floodwaters rise. Humanity is well and truly, as ever, at a crossroads.

Ruth Levitas has convincingly suggested that sociology is necessarily utopian, for it is premised – whether implicitly or explicitly – on visions of a “good society” (Levitas, 2013, p. 67). She follows the exhortation of H. G. Wells, the English science fiction writer who moved among the circles of the Sociological Society in the early twentieth century, that the “creation of utopias – and their exhaustive criticism” represents the “method” of sociology (Wells, 1906, p. 367; see also Dawson, 2016, pp. 162–179; Sargisson, 2012). Sociology must by definition, for good and for bad, expose the frailty of

things and remind us that it could be otherwise. In its reflexive and critical mode, sociology thus serves an *active* utopian function, pointing to a horizon forever stretching ahead of the human capacity to institutionalise, a spur to betterment, justice, morality, understanding, and so on, that is never settled once and for all. This crucial, speculative work resides in the realm of poetics.

The active dystopia, I have claimed, is also an important, if less explicitly articulated, modality of critical social thought. But utopia and dystopia are not straightforwardly, as is sometimes implied, two sides of the same coin: “the hope of what the future could be at best” and “the fear of what it could be at worst” (Levitas, 1990/2010, p. 159). The active dystopia operates with a different temporal orientation than its utopian counterpart. If the active utopia works to “bring into being” a world to come in the future, the active dystopia works to “ward off” a world that is potentially already here in the present, apparently dormant, beneath the surface of everyday life. This potential seeps into the everyday world, unevenly distributed, stratified according to sociological determinants. And as Bauman knew, what is utopian for some is dystopian for others and this is a matter of social relations: the arcadia of the tourists, the living embodiment of unrestricted freedom of movement, is the wasteland of the vagabonds, immobilised and subject to total securitisation (Bauman, 1998; see also Featherstone, 2010; Sargisson, 2012, p. 10).

The active dystopia, moreover, points not to a future civilisational breakdown – it is not a nihilistic or passive gesture – but to the potentiality of the present. The writer of the active dystopia expresses not despair since the despairing, as Maurice Blanchot recognised, do not write (Blanchot, 1980/1995, p. 11). Their creation is an expression of a melancholic hope that barbarism can be averted, a rejection of the *inevitability* of dystopian discourse. Borges wrote in his “Garden of Forking Paths” that “the author of an atrocious undertaking ought to imagine that he has already accomplished it, ought to impose upon himself a future as irrevocable as the past” (Borges, 1965, p. 47). Like the writer he so admired, Bauman also recognised that worst “futurology” of all is one which declares that “there is no alternative”, that what happens does so *necessarily* and that necessity is a matter of mastery (see Bauman & Donskis, 2016). The barbaric hallmark of any dystopian society, as Bauman wrote in *Freedom*, is “the elimination of alternatives to themselves” (Bauman, 1988, p. 92).

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Barbarzyństwo – dystopia w działaniu

Abstrakt: W niniejszym artykule ukazuję, że w socjologii Zygmunta Baumana dystopii przypisana jest również ambiwalentnie „aktywna” funkcja. W pismach Baumana ślady „dystopii w działaniu” pojawiają się jako przeciwobraz „utopii w działaniu” socjalizmu, służący naświetleniu tkwiących w teraźniejszości możliwości barbarzyństwa, czemu najbardziej dobitny wyraz daje *Nowoczesność i Zagłada* (2009; wyd. oryginalne *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 1989). Mój wywód przebiega w trzech etapach. Najpierw sięgam do dociekań Baumana na temat epistemologii przyszłości, zdrowego rozsądku i ograniczeń predyktywnych aspiracji nauk społecznych ujętych w jego wczesnej socjologii kulturowej i krytycznej, którą uprawiał równolegle z rewizjonistycznym odczytaniem marksizmu w latach sześćdziesiątych i siedemdziesiątych XX wieku. W następnym kroku koncentruję się zwłaszcza na nieopublikowanym, acz istotnym, maszynopisie zatytułowanym *Is the Science of the Possible Possible?* [Czy możliwa jest nauka o tym, co możliwe], wskazując przy tym, że rzuca on interesujące światło na kategorie możliwości i potencjalności eksponowane przez Baumana w *Nowoczesności i Zagładzie*. W tych częściach odczytuję *Nowoczesność i Zagładę* przez pryzmat wyżej wspomnianej, kluczowej w moim mniemaniu pozycji, przedstawiając ją jako wzorcowy przykład socjologii krytycznej w postaci „dystopii w działaniu”, która naświetla możliwości barbarzyństwa kryjące się w nowoczesnych społeczeństwach. W części końcowej rozpatruję, jak rozważania Baumana sytuują go w tradycji myśli krytycznej, której siłą napędową jest „dystopia w działaniu”, i dowodzę, że to, co często błędnie brane jest za pośepność i pesymizm, jest w rzeczy samej kluczowym zasobem socjologii w jej spekulatywnych wizjach możliwych przyszłości.

Wyrażenia kluczowe: Zygmunt Bauman; nowoczesność; Holocaust; możliwość; utopia; dystopia



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