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## ZYGMUNT BAUMAN: ADIAPHORIZATION IN THE HOLOCAUST AND IN THE SOCIETY OF CONSUMERS

JULIJA TULEIKYTĖ

Vilnius University (Lithuania)  
Department of Philosophy

Rather than a picture on the wall, the Holocaust has been regarded by Zygmunt Bauman as a window which helps to catch glimpses of things that might otherwise remain invisible. In this case, one could say, his book *Modernity and the Holocaust* is one of the corridors into the room in which the window is located. To continue with metaphors, one could, however, find the author's books, their contents and "the corridors" shifting in time, having recently lead towards a new, but nevertheless overlapping with the previous one, window – one of consumerism – which exposes another aspect of the social reality, once again permeated by the principle of adiaphorization – adiaphorization which was one of the main features of the cultural situation exposed by the Holocaust, as Bauman noted.

In other words, adiaphorization is one of the thematic links between Bauman's conception of the Holocaust and his conception of the consumer society. The relation between the two is in a way parallel to the relation between solid modernity and liquid modernity, the features of which the Holocaust and the consumer society respectively are. Therefore, to elaborate on what

adiaphorization in Bauman's social theory is, it is worth analysing the relation between Bauman's conceptions of the two characters of modernity.

The first one is mainly portrayed in *Modernity and the Holocaust* – a book which had been often referred to, and sometimes still is, as the thinker's greatest work – especially until his “liquid turn” in 2000. Interestingly, that year Peter Beilharz published his book *Bauman: Dialectic of Modernity* and tagged *Modernity and the Holocaust* as Bauman's major work – however, surprisingly (or maybe not), in the same year Bauman published his book *Liquid Modernity* (2000), which considerably changed the scenery of his social conception, and a few dozens of books on liquid modernity has since then made it much more difficult to answer the question which Bauman's book(s) might be the major one(s). *Liquid modernity*, *Consuming Life*, *Does Ethics have a Chance in the World of Consumers?*, *The Art of Life*, *Collateral Damage: Social Inequalities in a Global Age* – those are just a few of his 21st century books that the article focuses on for referring to his conception of consumer society, and these books include overlapping ideas – sometimes even sentences or entire paragraphs – and are sometimes as liquid as the content of his theory of “liquid modernity”.

These two characters of modernity feature overlapping, but simultaneously very different characteristics, in the 21st century poetically embodied into very opposite-like adjectives of liquid and solid. Modernity as such is one of the key problems in Zygmunt Bauman's works, but in different centuries it was treated by him slightly differently – the terms changed. Phenomena that before the liquid turn were named as “modernity” and “postmodernity”, were later on metaphorically baptized by the writer as “solid modernity” and “liquid modernity”. If one retrospectively applied the new terms to Bauman's writings before the liquid turn, one could probably refer to his 1989 year book as simultaneously both *Modernity and the Holocaust* and *Solid Modernity and the Holocaust*. Unlike the users of postmodernity term, and similarly to Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash, the thinker retains partial identity of the two periods and eventually names two phases of modernity instead of using the incommensurable or temporally subsequent, potentially glued to many unrelated theories, couple of terms “modernity” and “postmodernity”.

Modernity, which in the 21st century he has called “solid modernity”, is for Bauman the cultural trend of instrumental rationality – a dreadful outcome of which the Holocaust in solid modernity was. Contrary to statements on the abnormality of the Holocaust, the writer states that “[t]he Holocaust was born and executed in our modern rational society, at the high stage of our civilization, and at the peak of human cultural achievement, and for this reason it is a problem of that society, civilization and culture” (1999c: x), and it thus shows what might be considered to

be “normal” in such society. He then analyses the conditions of how this happens and arrives at the notion of the phenomenon of adiaphorization.

In other words, when speculating over the fact of the Holocaust, Bauman engages with the concept of adiaphorization, which he borrows from other contexts (just like he has all in all borrowed fragments from a multitude of different theories, complementing them into a Baumanian whole). In Ancient Greek language and in the Stoic doctrine, “adiaphoros” meant something that was outside of interest. However, when using the term, the author more often than not refers to the Christian tradition, according to which “adiaphoros” is a sphere of moral questioning being treated as something that is “out of question” at a certain situation. All in all, most of the definitions the author provides for the term “adiaphorization” refer to contents of “moral indifference”. For instance, “adiaphoros” might be explained as a sphere outside of the rules of conduct which must be controlled by the Church – that is, it is an unregulated space where a person is free of sin to do something in one way or another.

In a similar fashion, as Bauman noted, in the social reality of modernity (that is, in solid modernity), “an action that is admitted into the class of genuinely social actions” (Bauman 1999c) must serve in a certain way that must not fail to meet the criteria of goal-pursuit orientation, and the ones that do fail are not considered to be of importance. Unlike in the Christian tradition, where things might have been divided into ones that are morally important and ones that are not, in solid modernity with its strict apparatus of order and disambiguity, things might be divided into the instrumental ones – the ones that matter – and moral ones – the ones that do not.

In other words, in the case of the reflection on the Holocaust, the author draws his readers’ attention to the effects of bureaucracy and social organization that allowed social cleansing, killing groups of people, considered as “weeds”, to be performed just like any work with goods would be instrumentally performed at a factory – with rational aims and limitations on one’s view, with a narrowed focus concentrated on a certain piece of work imposed and with no moral elements that might be of disturbance.

Furthermore, following the line of Emmanuel Levinas, a twenty-first-century philosopher, Bauman emphasizes the overall limiting impact of society on morality. According to him, there are certain procedures in society as such – and particularly modern society – that help barbaric and seemingly uncivilized social situations as the Holocaust happen in a civilized modern world like something that had already latently lied within it. As the philosopher states in his famous speech on the social manipulation of morality,

All social organization consists ... in neutralizing the disruptive and deregulating impact of moral behaviour. This effect is achieved through a number of complementary arrangements: (1) stretching the distance between action and its consequences beyond the reach of moral impulse; (2) exempting some “others” from the class of potential objects of moral conduct, of potential “faces”; (3) dissembling other human objects of action into aggregates of functionally specific traits, held separate so that the occasion for re-assembling the face does not arise, and the task set for each action can be free from moral evaluation. Through these arrangements, organization does not promote immoral behaviour; it does not sponsor evil, ... yet it does not promote good either ... . It simply renders social action *adiaphoric*... – neither good nor evil, measurable against technical (purpose-oriented or procedural) but not moral values (1999a: 215).

In Sophia Marshman’s words on Bauman, there is “a distinct Levinasian strand in his thinking, that human solidarity and a sense of responsibility for the others are dependent upon proximity” (2008: 81). In his book *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Bauman attempts to show that in the social factory of the Holocaust, the Levinasian face of the Other was put in a position behind the wall of indifference – in a so called “neighbourless position” (Bauman 1999c: 123) – and left alone, as something that does not relate to the others. According to Bauman, bureaucracy enabled certain actions to be split into unconnected fragments, each performed separately, thus creating framed identities of different social groups. As the thinker provokingly notes, such distancing results in “the improbability of all outside interference with the bureaucratic process; unaffected groups are unlikely to rush to the rescue of the targeted category, as the problems, faced by the two sides, cannot easily find a common denominator” (1999c: 12). To facilitate that, a category of people that is to be taken out of the gardening-state by the social engineering, seemingly “must be effectively ‘sealed off’: either removed physically from the context of the daily life and concerns of other groups, or separated psychologically by overtly and unambiguously discriminating definitions” (Bauman 1999c: 123). Thus, as Marshman puts it when referring to Bauman and his diagnose on the Holocaust, the “victims were dehumanized by their definition as ‘weeds’ as superfluous or ‘unworthy’ lives. They then stood at a conceptual distance from the rest of society” (2008: 77). In other words, they stood in a morally indifferent – that is, *adiaphoric* – space outside of the socially defined area of responsibility.

However, the Levinasian line, woven into Bauman’s social conception, states that responsibility cannot be propelled by society in any way, and the only effect society has on morality is negative, therefore even the “socially defined area of responsibility” that Marshman refers to is something that would not fit in Bauman’s view of the conception of responsibility he finds in Levinas’ texts and adapts in his theory. In other words, not only does Bauman state that society does not help the morals, but he also refers to a kind of ‘either/or’ when regarding morality and society.

In contrast to “most powerful and persuasive cases for the necessity of society” (Bauman, 2009: 47) which emphasize the positive effect of society on morals (the author often alludes to Hobbes, Durkheim and Freud’s conceptions as examples of regarding society as a necessary constraint on individual freedom and egoism in the name of a civilized togetherness), Bauman bases his social conception on a Levinasian view of society, regarding society as a necessary medicine for alleviating the infinity of morality. According to Bauman, “society is indispensable, but not to suppress your evil instinct, but to limit your responsibilities” (Bauman et al., 2014: 223) – that is to silence the silent appeal of the Face. Thus, the philosopher states, adiaphorization as moral indifference is what happens every time the moral party of two is invaded – that is, always when one finds oneself in society, when “the Third” comes and breaks into your infinite responsibility for the Other – in other words, simply always (unless you’re a Saint). Bauman’s conclusion is that society as such restricts moral impulses, as the latter ones, based on his interpretation of Levinas, are pre-social.

In this way Bauman provides an explanation on why moral impulses are likely to be always seen as unnecessary obstacles and disturbances – both by society as such and especially by a solid modernity society with its focus on order and belief in the grand narrative, unanimous disenchantment of all illusions and instrumental ways to achieve that one day.

However, at the liquid turn in 2000, the cultural tendencies that Bauman diagnoses are in the process of changing, and thus at the threshold of the 21st century the thinker arrives at the concept of “liquid modernity”. Since the publishing of *Liquid modernity*, the central topic of his books has been shifting towards the issue of consumer society. Consequently, an addition to Bauman’s views on (solid) modernity and the Holocaust, similar conclusions on adiaphorization might be also found in his 21st century writings – that is, in this fourth phase (to use Shaun Best’s counting system) of writing – texts on liquid modernity which is found in the nowadays process of privatization and deregulation. As Bauman notes, “today the major source of adiaphorization is no longer bureaucracy, but consumer market” (Bauman et al., 2014: 221), as “[u]nder the deregulated/privatized regime, the formula for ‘relief from responsibility’ has remained much the same as it was in the earlier stages of modern history. ... The outcome is not much different from the ‘adiaphorizing’ effects of the stratagem practised by solid modern bureaucracy. ... The collateral victim of the leap to the consumerist rendition of freedom is the Other as object of ethical responsibility and moral concern” (Bauman, 2009: 52-53).

In other words, despite the Levinasian drop of optimism in *Postmodern Ethics* (Bauman, 1995) and Bauman’s explicit belief that postmodernity, which, according to him, is modernity without its illusions, might free morality of modernistic constraints of rules, including ethics and,

possibly, overcome many of the obstacles for the moral impulse to reduce some of the borders between people, and despite the drop of hope in *In Search of Politics* (Bauman, 1999b) and Bauman's belief in global politics, what he finds in liquid modernity and describes in his books, such as *Consuming Life* (Bauman, 2006), are yet neverending new forms of adiaphorization and social inequality that keep being diagnosed in his books with such titles as *Wasted Lives* (Bauman 2003), *Collateral Damage: Social Inequalities in a Global Age* (Bauman 2011) and many others.

In Bauman's writings on the social reality of liquid modernity one can find a portrayal of adiaphoric split between groups of people, and surprisingly (or maybe not), it is in a few essential aspects similar to what one can find in the contents of *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Conceptions of certain groups of people as weeds in the solid modern social engineering project proliferate into a variety of new metaphors in Bauman's writings after the liquid turn. However, despite the changes, a distinct consistent line of the idea of moral indifference runs under the metaphors in the writings of both periods.

In one way or another, one can notice that the thinker's texts refer to moral indifference and socially legitimate dehumanization of 1) certain groups, 2) other individuals and (especially in the cases described in the liquid modernity writings) 3) oneself that are propelled by the prevalent social tendencies. Bauman himself doesn't categorize adiaphorization that way, but the descriptions of situations that are found with reference to adiaphorization can be divided into these three cases.

First, focus on groups and their relations is one of the key axes of the author's social conception – to start with his youth period works on social utopia and such social groups as classes, and to continue with his recent works on the underclass and collateral victims of consumerism. Basically, throughout all his writing, according to The Bauman institute director Mark Davis, „Bauman maintains a basic Marxian dualism between privileged and underprivileged, but reformulates them in various ways” (2008a: 4). Due to that, one can find diverse forms of group dualism in both Bauman's writings on modernity (solid modernity and the Holocaust, retrospectively) and liquid modernity (and consumer society). And even though the characters of modernity shift in form and content, all in all they thematically capture the problem of social distancing between groups of people. As Mark Davis puts it, “Bauman's sociology often can be seen as interpreting social life in terms of two sharply distinct social conditions... . I here employ the term ‘will-to-dualism’ to capture a simple tendency within Bauman's work to view the social life in terms of a basic Marxian dualism between ‘bourgeois’ and ‘proletarian’ or, in lay terms, between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ ... , the ‘postmodern pure’ and the ‘postmodern

dirt'; the 'free consumers' and the 'flawed consumers'; the 'seduced' and the 'repressed'; and, the 'tourists' and the 'vagabonds'" (2008b: 142).

For instance, Bauman describes liquid modernity as an overlap of globalization and individualization, both of which make mobility the new freedom (Bauman, 1998), and draws attention to the contemporary social situations of different paths of different groups of people within the processes of globalization. While some people become more globalized, the others become more localized. As some people in the contemporary world are free [in terms of freedom as privilege (Bauman 1988)] and able to choose, the others find the globe moving under their feet and are thrown into globalization as vagabonds. Thus while physical distances are turning out to be social distances (it depends on your wealth and status whether Australia is far from Europe) and less restricted for some people, others become even more confined in their space and time – both physically and socially; and lots of various ways deepen the split between groups in certain oppositions – and this can be found both in Bauman's solid modernity and liquid modernity conceptions.

In addition to dualism in groups, one of the central problems in the philosopher's (liquid) sociology and social philosophy is a question of dualism between separate individuals – where there is no the Levinasian party of two, or no dialogue between what Buber would call I and Thou, but there is lack of interaction with the Other in liquid society. On the one hand, the antagonism between two individuals, which appears when a face is effaced, is what Bauman finds, again, both in the Holocaust and in the consumer society. On the other hand, in the latter form of society, a certain consumeristic logic transforms one's outlooks into viewing another person as a commodity – something you would make use of until you find something/someone better.

And this is where new aspects of moral indifference are revealed – in the fourth phase writings of Bauman – and where previous solid modern contents of the conception of adiaphorization are complemented by a metaphorically enriched conception of liquid modernity and consumer society. And although new forms of adiaphorization that are prevalent in liquid modernity do not show that the same principles were not peculiar to solid modernity (such as commodifying oneself, viewing one's identity as a thing to sell, to attract, to seduce etc.), new metaphors, descriptions and the method (if one can call a hermeneutic way of theorizing a method) that Bauman starts using after the liquid turn, reveal new aspects of adiaphorization and allow the research on Bauman's conception of adiaphorization to be taken into another level, with new conclusions to add.

Consumer society, according to Bauman, is an existential social mode of consuming for the sake of consuming, leading to endless “pursuit of happiness” (Bauman, 2008), when it’s not the happiness that is important but the pursuit of it. In consumeristic social situations it turns into exchanging iPhones 4 to iPhones 5, solid employees into flexible and zero-drag ones, friends into numerous Facebook friends, old loves to new ones and so on – in his liquid modernity writings Bauman deploys plenty of situations and metaphors to describe consumeristic tendencies towards other individuals and even oneself – for instance, when one engages in the art of life and falls into perpetual creation of one’s identity as a well advertised commodity and frames oneself within subjective fetishism.

All in all, all the three categories of adiaphorization – moral indifference towards a group of people, towards an individual and towards oneself – reveal subjects treated as objects, and a certain epistemic tendency. In addition to the thinker’s definition of adiaphorization as moral indifference, it would be adequate to treat adiaphorization not only as moral, but also epistemic indifference (however, it is important to note that Bauman does not like such systematization of what he has left asunder). None of the multiple examples that Bauman provides when capturing the processes of solid modernity and liquid modernity would contradict adiaphorization being also epistemic indifference. Both in the Holocaust and in the consumer societies all cases that refer to adiaphorization reveal various forms of social expulsion of humans not only outside of the area of morality, but also outside the area of cognition – in one aspect or another. In contrast to Bauman’s idea of morality as a presocial issue, adiaphorization is a completely social phenomenon – a painkiller that makes social existence together possible. And despite primacy of ethics before ontology and epistemology in case of morality, moral indifference is a social case, and there’s no contradiction in interpreting adiaphorization as not only moral, but also epistemic indifference. Multiple metaphors, such as “invisible”, “inaudible” etc. are used by Bauman for describing the walls which separate subjects who treat each other as objects, people as commodities, humans as weeds in a social engineering and gardening project and so on.

Why, in case of the Holocaust, is it important to state that adiaphorization is not only moral, but also epistemic indifference? Because that would help to explain Bauman’s message in between the lines of his conception of the Holocaust.

With the help of the description of the consumer society in dozens of his twenty-first-century books, through the means of metaphors, a certain method that became both more explicit and more developed after the liquid turn, is more and more often exposed and legitimised. As Mark Davis puts it, Bauman’s writings have become as liquid as the liquid modernity he writes about. Perhaps due to that there’s a need for a new label for what he does



– and Bauman’s commentators have been enthusiastically creating new terms to label him – such as “liquid sociology”, as Mark Davis suggests, or “humanization through metaphors”, as Jacobsen and Marshman offer. According to the latter ones,

Bauman is attempting a kind of *humanization through metaphor*. Put simply, Bauman uses metaphor as a device to recall us to our common humanity, as a means of reawakening our sense of responsibility for the Other and of human possibility ... . Metaphors are not only conceptual devices – they are potentially reality-shattering and agenda-changing social acts aimed at presenting an image of how the world ‘ought’ to be or ‘should’/‘could’ be. Therefore, metaphors play a crucial role in Bauman’s practise of moral sociology (Jacobsen and Marshman 2008: 21-22).

In other words, with the help of “humanization through metaphors” Bauman, apparently, intends to awaken his reader’s moral impulses (that is, pre-social impulses) in a societal state – not with the help of a Face, but by his books; that is, via cognitive, epistemic means. However, it is done implicitly, not explicitly; both theoretically and practically – as expressive/impressive language and metaphor is something in between the social and the pre-social, something close to the Face, something, that can capture the sharpness of such event as the Holocaust and open one’s eyes with regard to the Other in the social reality of consumer society.

On the one hand, it’s impossible to affect one’s morality through social means, according to Bauman. However, on the other hand, the moralizing tone of the author’s texts is quite obvious and verbalized by a variety of his commentators.

The idea of adiaphorization as moral indifference and Bauman’s conception on the pre-sociality of a moral impulse show a dramatic abyss between his Levinasian presumptions on the one hand and Marxistic presumptions on the other hand. The convergence of individual morality and the impact of macro forces of society is a certain clash.

All in all, is morality a dialogic phenomenon when facing the Face, before any ontology or cognition (comparisons and generalizations) and can it be influenced by society only in a negative way, or is there any epistemic way of awakening morality? Bauman would explicitly deny the latter option when asked; but his method of “liquid sociology” and “humanization through metaphors” talks in between the lines and tells us more than Bauman himself does.

To conclude, Bauman’s conception of adiaphorization is consistent. However, within two periods of his writings it differs. The adiaphorization that is described with references to the consumer society reveals new aspects of adiaphorization that is described when referring to the Holocaust. It might be regarded as not only moral indifference, but also epistemic indifference.

The new way of writing, which shows Bauman engaging in the language of metaphors, transcends the “either/or” boundary between morality and society, and allows a certain conclusion to be made: Bauman’s book *Modernity and the Holocaust* is not only a technical scientific version of why the Holocaust happened, but also an epistemic mean to awaken the reader’s moral impulse which might have been neutralized by adiaphorization.

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#### ABSTRACT

##### **Zygmunt Bauman: Adiaphorization in the Holocaust and in the Society of Consumers**

The article aims at drawing parallels between the Holocaust and the consumer society through the phenomenon of adiaphorization. To Bauman, the historical event of the Holocaust is of utmost importance to humanity, especially for tackling the problems of morality, moral indifference – in other words adiaphorization – and society. However, Bauman’s social theory contains distinct elements of Emanuel Levinas’s conception of morality and embraces a notion of adiaphorization as a feature of social organization as such – independently of shifting cultural contents. When analysing the society of consumers that is found in the times of globalization and individualization – i. e., liquid modernity – Bauman finds that its cultural tendencies to efface the face dehumanize and treat other people as means towards ends – in other words, placing the Other outside of one’s moral horizon – are similar to those that were used when extinguishing people’s lives in Nazi concentration camps. Both the Holocaust as an epitome of adiaphorization in solid modernity and consumerism as an epitome of adiaphorization in liquid modernity are treated in Bauman’s works as the most conspicuous cultural cases of adiaphorization. However,

a shift in method when theorizing on the consumer society after the liquid turn allows additional aspects in his theory of the Holocaust before the liquid turn to be noticed. Due to that, it is argued in the article that “adiaphorization” might be explained as not only “moral indifference”, but also “epistemic indifference”, and that within conception of the Holocaust Bauman engages in efforts to affect his readers by awakening their morality, as “humanization through metaphors” helps him step over the boundary between theory and practice when he engages in “liquid sociology”.

#### KEYWORDS

Adiaphorization, the Holocaust, consumer society, moral indifference

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