1. Introduction

Zygmunt Bauman is one of the most famous social theorists of our times who has always been intellectually involved in themes concerning modernity.

The text I chose is *Changing conception of ‘community’ according to Bauman* which represents the fifth chapter on his book *Liquid Modernity (2006).* In the extract from his writing, the author analyzes some aspects of the community - such as individual freedom, security, unity, ethnicity and nationalism - under different lights and without forgetting his opinion. In doing so, he also takes into consideration other sociologists’ ideas, which he borrows to achieve a clear delineation of the central subject matter.

Frankly speaking its content opened the gate towards a completely new dimension for me, but I am also a bit displeased for the lack of other pivotal issues, regarding society, which I was hopeful to read.

The main points I personally find worth discussing are the following ones: the “unholy trinity” paradox, nationalism vs patriotism and the necessity of regular sacrifice in explosive community.

2.1 The “Unholy Trinity” Paradox

By Citing one of his old publications (*In Search of Politics, Polity Press, 1999*) he argues anxiety is mainly produced by uncertainty, insecurity and unsafety. Given that it is a volatile substance – almost like a gas I would say – it despairingly attempts to escape through whatever outlet it finds; ultimately, the pressure is directed toward the “valve of bodily, domestic and environmental safety” (Bauman 2006: 181).

The result is a vicious circle: as the “unholy trinity” (Bauman 2006: 181) keeps pressing for a solution to its safety problem, it endlessly overburdens human beings with anxiety and thirst for more security. Even though a solution might be found, it is only a matter of time before this perpetual gravedigger knocks again at the door asking for safeness while threatening whoever stands in front of him with anxiety.

In this optic of despair, I do not believe simply putting together a community of similarly-ravaged beings could be the right solution to forget about the problem of security. The old Roman motto “Union is strength” is not appropriate for this context: a group of people sharing the same issue cannot resolve this inborn struggle overnight by joining together like some kind of twisted league. Hence, I find it nonsensical to sustain that we can never reach a condition in which a human being may only rely upon himself and feel safe.

Bauman is right when saying the “we” is used as an act of self-protection. However, this only works if we postulate the existence and propensity of some powerful individuals to defend and be involved in a community with other weaker people. Thus, it cannot be applied to a group composed only of insecure subjects.

2.2 Nationalism vs Patriotism

Nationalism and patriotism are two focal points in this section of *Liquid Modernity*. Even if they might sound the same, Bauman makes two fundamental distinctions: the first is about the substance of the two beliefs and the way we talk about it; the second is about a choice that the two sets of convictions relatively offer.

In the first distinction, while nationalism represents a “locked from the inside” system which relies on a “vomiting out strangers” approach – “anthropoemic” strategies (Bauman 2006: 176) – patriotism has a more open-ended scheme and warmly invites strangers to partake in it with the aim of digesting them – “anthropophagic” strategies (Bauman 2006: 175).

In the second place, they both give a choice to the outsiders that do not belong among them. Patriotism humanely offers the possibility to join and remain loyal, but still do not consider the strangers as legitimate members. Instead, nationalism puts the belonging in terms of destiny; the stranger – in this case determined as such for some traits which are different from those who established the rules – is called to choose between either embracing whatever tag has been put among them or to rebel against it.

This clarification between the two conception is, in my modest opinion, the best I have ever run into.

However, the writer underlines that neither one of them presents any traits of xenophilia inasmuch as they do not propose a tolerant and hospitable attitude of the nation-state toward outsiders, who should be considered as source of richness – given that variety is to be considered a benefit and a strength in this case.

We see this happening also today: the “othering” process, thought to be a utopia - in which everyone avoids each other because of their differences – is the one becoming our dimension; we can easily recognize the fact our social feature has been diminishing from the fact we have been isolating ourselves from the outsiders always more after the period of the enlightenment.

This is all about the fact that unity is believed to originate from the setting up of boundaries and the emphasizing of the differences between us and them; but in a world which is always more fragmented we should rebel against this attitude and promote the universal idea that we are all the same even though some cultural and religious barriers make us believe the opposite.

2. The Necessity of Regular Sacrifice in Explosive Community

Bauman argues that violence should be looked at from an ancestral point of view, as the legacy of inborn characters deriving directly from our ancestors. In fact, in a hypothetical world where official structures are absent, the entire sociality would probably regress to its “explosive manifestations” (Bauman 2006: 193) typical of the pre-communal period.

Furthermore, he avails himself of Girard’s theory of the role of violence in the birth and the constancy of community to explain how explosive communities “need violence to be born and need violence to go on living” (Bauman 2006: 194). Underneath the surface of any community there is some momentum of violence which needs to be channeled entirely outside the “communal island of tranquility” (Bauman 2006: 194) where brutalities can be tolerated. In this way, boundaries are set – either drawn or created - and the unity of the community is recurrently enforced.

The problem with this is type of unity is the method that is used to attain it, namely regular sacrifice of a surrogate victim that helps to draw “tight unsurpassable boundaries between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ of the community” (Bauman 2006:194). As Bauman points out, before the first ceremony has taken place, there would hardly have been the “ranks to be tightened and a communal existence to be made secure” (Bauman 2006: 196). Furthermore, it is supposed to appeal to a collective remembrance of the event of its creation which is not always present.

Therefore, the regular sacrifice is just a pretext to export the inner brutal impulses of a specific community outside its borders and cannot be considered a necessity with regards to the unity of its members.

3. Conclusion

Bauman’s analysis of the human psychology in combination with the sociological factors that press people to form communities is a brilliant interpretation – even though it is not always easy to follow.

The problem of security still remains an open-ended question, for the reason that Bauman sustains that a community is enough to make one’s fears disappear, and I do not believe that is possible since simply putting together people that share a common issue does not solve it immediately – it might even exaggerate it.

The various distinctions between patriotism and nationalism (on the basis of ethnicity and the self-assertion of nation-states) mirror perfectly the question with the current problems of the neo-fascist parties’ rise around the world and the shocking wave of xenophobia which running rampant across countries formerly involved with racism struggles in the past.

Even if the formulation of explosive community – in the absence of institutional structures – appears like a convoluted and bold answer to dress up and hide the inner auto-destructive impulses of human beings, it really reflects a possible outcome of an hypothetical society after the dismantlement of political structures. However, the famous sociologist demonstrates that sacrifice is only a pretext used to export violence outside the community and not a means to unite its members.

Overall, Bauman shows a great understanding of the community flow in the modern and postmodern eras, and his portrayal of the general rules which domain society are one of the most captivating and complete studies of our times.

4. References

Bauman, Zygmunt (2006): “Community”, in: *Liquid Modernity.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 168-199