

Zygmunt Bauman

LIQUID
LOVE



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On the Frailty of Human Bonds

ZYGMUNT BAUMAN

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Foreword

Ulrich, the hero of Robert Musil's great novel, was – as the title of the novel announced – *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*: the man without qualities. Having no qualities of his own, whether inherited or acquired once and for all and undetachable, Ulrich had to compose whatever quality he might have wished to have by his own effort, using his own wits and acumen; but none of these qualities were guaranteed to last indefinitely in a world full of confusing signals, prone to change fast and in a way no one expected.

The hero of this book is *Der Mann ohne Verwandtschaften* – the man with no bonds, and particularly no bonds as fixed as the kinship bonds used to be in Ulrich's time. Having no bonds that are unbreakable and attached once and for all, the hero of this book – the denizen of our liquid modern society – and his successors today must tie together whatever bonds they want to use as a link to engage with the rest of the human world by their own efforts with the help of their own skills and dedication. Unbound, they must connect . . . None of the connections that come to fill the gap left by the absent or mouldy bonds are, however, guaranteed to last. Anyway, they need to be only loosely tied, so that they can be untied again, with little delay, when the settings change – as in liquid modernity they surely will, over and over again.

The uncanny frailty of human bonds, the feeling of insecurity that frailty inspires, and the conflicting desires that feeling prompts to tighten the bonds yet keep them loose is what this book tries to unravel, record and grasp.

Lacking Musil's sharpness of vision, richness of palette and subtlety of brushstrokes – in fact any of his exquisite talents that made *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* into the definitive portrait of the modern man – I have to confine myself to drafting a portfolio of rough and fragmentary sketches, rather than try a full, let alone the definitive likeness. The most I can hope for is an identity kit, a composite picture that may contain as many gaps and blank spots as filled-up sections. Even that final composition, though, will be an unfinished task, left to the readers to complete.

The principal hero of this book is human *relationship*. This book's central characters are men and women, our contemporaries, despairing at being abandoned to their own wits and feeling easily disposable, yearning for the security of togetherness and for a helping hand to count on in a moment of trouble, and so desperate to 'relate'; yet wary of the state of 'being related' and particularly of being related 'for good', not to mention forever – since they fear that such a state may bring burdens and cause strains they neither feel able nor are willing to bear, and so may severely limit the freedom they need – yes, your guess is right – to relate ...

In our world of rampant 'individualization' relationships are mixed blessings. They vacillate between sweet dream and a nightmare, and there is no telling when one turns into the other. Most of the time the two avatars cohabit – though at different levels of consciousness. In a liquid modern setting of life, relationships are perhaps the most common, acute, deeply felt and troublesome incarnations of ambivalence. This is, we may argue, why they are firmly placed at the very heart of the attention of liquid modern individuals-by-decree and perched at the top of their life agenda.

'Relationship' is these days the hottest talk of the town and ostensibly the sole game in town worth playing, despite its notorious risks. Some sociologists, used to composing theories out of questionnaire statistics and the commonsensical beliefs such stat-

istics record, hurry to conclude that their contemporaries are all out for friendships, bonds, togetherness, community. In fact, however (as if following Martin Heidegger's rule that things reveal themselves to consciousness only through the frustration they cause – going bust, disappearing, behaving out of character or otherwise belying their nature), human attention tends nowadays to be focused on the satisfactions that relationships are hoped to bring precisely because somehow they have not been found fully and truly satisfactory; and if they do satisfy, the price of the satisfaction they bring has often been found to be excessive and unacceptable. In their famous experiment, Miller and Dollard saw their laboratory rats ascending the peak of excitement and agitation when 'the advance equalled the abianche' – that is, when the threat of electric shock and the promise of tasty food were finely balanced...

No wonder that 'relationships' are one of the main engines of the present-day 'counselling boom'. The complexity is too dense, too stubborn and too difficult to unpack or unravel for individuals to do the job unassisted. The agitation of Miller and Dollard's rats all too often collapsed into a paralysis of action. An inability to choose between attraction and repulsion, between hopes and fears, rebounded as an incapacity to act. Unlike the rats, humans who find themselves in such circumstances may turn for help to the expert counsellors offering their services, for a fee. What they hope to hear from the counsellors is how to square the circle: to eat the cake and have it, to cream off the sweet delights of relationship while omitting its bitter and tougher bits; how to force relationship to empower without disempowering, enable without disabling, fulfilling without burdening...

The experts are willing to oblige, confident that the demand for their counsels will never run dry since no amount of counselling could ever make a circle non-circular and thus amenable to being squared... Their counsels abound, though more often than not they do little more than raise common practice to the level of common knowledge, and that in turn to the heights of learned, authoritative theory. Grateful recipients of advice browse through 'relationship' columns of glossy monthlies and weeklies and

weekly supplements of serious and less serious dailies to hear what they have been wishing to hear from people ‘in the know’, since they were too timid or ashamed to aver it in their own name; to pry into the doings and goings on of ‘others like them’ and draw whatever comfort they can manage to draw from the knowledge endorsed-by-experts that they are not alone in their lonely efforts to cope with the quandary.

And so the readers learn, from other readers’ experience recycled by the counsellors, that they may try ‘top pocket relationships’, of the sort they ‘can bring out when they need them’ but push deep down in the pocket when they do not. Or that relationships are like Ribena: imbibed in concentration, they are nauseating and may prove dangerous to their health – like Ribena, relations should be diluted when consumed. Or that SDCs – ‘semi-detached couples’ – are to be praised as ‘relationship revolutionaries who have burst the suffocating couple bubble’. Or that relationships, like cars, should undergo regular MOTs to make sure that they are still roadworthy. All in all, what they learn is that commitment, and particularly long-term commitment, is the trap that the endeavour ‘to relate’ should avoid more than any other danger. One expert counsellor informs readers that ‘when committing yourself, however half-heartedly, remember that you are likely to be closing the door to other romantic possibilities which may be more satisfying and fulfilling.’ Another expert sounds blunter yet: ‘Promises of commitment are meaningless in the long term . . . Like other investments, they wax and wane.’ And so, if you wish ‘to relate’, keep your distance; if you want fulfilment from your togetherness, do not make or demand commitments. Keep all doors open at any time.

The residents of Leonia, one of Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, would say, if asked, that their passion is ‘the enjoyment of new and different things’. Indeed – each morning they ‘wear brand-new clothing, take from the latest model refrigerator still unopened tins, listening to the last-minute jingles from the most up-to-date radio’. But each morning ‘the remains of yesterday’s Leonia await the garbage truck’ and one is right to wonder whether the Leonians’ true passion is not instead ‘the joy of expelling, discarding, cleansing themselves of a recurrent impurity’. Otherwise why

would street cleaners be ‘welcomed like angels’, even if their mission is ‘surrounded by respectful silence’, and understandably so – ‘once things have been cast off nobody wants to have to think about them further.’

Let us think...

Are not the residents of our liquid modern world, just like the residents of Leonia, worrying about one thing while speaking of another? They say that their wish, passion, aim or dream is ‘to relate’. But are they not in fact mostly concerned with how to prevent their relations from curdling and clotting? Are they indeed after relationships that hold, as they say they are, or do they, more than anything else, desire those relationships to be light and loose, so that after the pattern of Richard Baxter’s riches that were supposed to ‘lie on the shoulders like a light cloak’ they could ‘be thrown aside at any moment’? When everything is said and done, what sort of advice do they truly want: how to tie the relationship, or how – just in case – to take it apart without harm and with a clear conscience? There is no easy answer to that question, though the question needs to be asked and will go on being asked, as the denizens of the liquid modern world go on smarting under the crushing burden of the most ambivalent of the many ambivalent tasks they daily confront.

Perhaps the very idea of ‘relationship’ adds to the confusion. However hard the hapless relation-seekers and their counsellors try, the notion resists being fully and truly cleansed of its disturbing and worrying connotations. It stays pregnant with vague threats and sombre premonitions; it tells of the pleasures of togetherness in one breath with the horrors of enclosure. Perhaps this is why, rather than report their experience and prospects in terms of ‘relating’ and ‘relationships’, people speak ever more often (aided and abetted by the learned advisers) of connections, of ‘connecting’ and ‘being connected’. Instead of talking about partners, they prefer to speak of ‘networks’. What are the merits of the language of ‘connectedness’ that are missed by the language of ‘relationships’?

Unlike ‘relations’, ‘kinships’, ‘partnerships’ and similar notions that make salient the mutual engagement while excluding or

passing over in silence its opposite, the disengagement, ‘network’ stands for a matrix for simultaneously connecting and disconnecting; networks are unimaginable without both activities being simultaneously enabled. In a network, connecting and disconnecting are equally legitimate choices, enjoy the same status and carry the same importance. No point in asking which of the two complementary activities constitutes ‘the essence’ of network! ‘Network’ suggests moments of ‘being in touch’ interspersed with periods of free roaming. In a network, connections are entered on demand, and can be broken at will. An ‘undesirable, yet unbreakable’ relationship is the very possibility that makes ‘relating’ as treacherous as it feels. An ‘undesirable connection’, however, is an oxymoron: connections may be, and are, broken well before they start being detested.

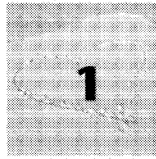
Connections are ‘virtual relations’. Unlike old-fashioned relationships (not to mention ‘committed’ relationships, let alone long-term commitments), they seem to be made to the measure of a liquid modern life setting where ‘romantic possibilities’ (and not only ‘romantic’ ones) are supposed and hoped to come and go with ever greater speed and in never thinning crowds, stampeding each other off the stage and out-shouting each other with promises ‘to be more satisfying and fulfilling’. Unlike ‘real relationships’, ‘virtual relationships’ are easy to enter and to exit. They look smart and clean, feel easy to use and user-friendly, when compared with the heavy, slow-moving, inert messy ‘real stuff’. A twenty-eight-year-old man from Bath, interviewed in connection with the rapidly growing popularity of computer dating at the expense of singles bars and lonely-heart columns, pointed to one decisive advantage of electronic relation: ‘you can always press “delete”’.

As if obedient to Gresham’s law, virtual relations (renamed ‘connections’) set the pattern which drives out all other relationships. That does not make the men and women who surrender to the pressure happy; hardly happier than the practising of pre-virtual relations made them. You gain something, you lose something else.

As Ralph Waldo Emerson pointed out, when skating on thin ice your salvation is in speed. When the quality lets you down, you

tend to seek redemption in quantity. If ‘commitments are meaningless’ while relations cease to be trustworthy and are unlikely to last, you are inclined to swap partnerships for networks. Once you have done it, however, settling down turns out even more difficult (and so more off-putting) than before – you now miss the skills that would or could make it work. Being on the move, once a privilege and an achievement, becomes a must. Keeping up speed, once an exhilarating adventure, turns into an exhausting chore. Most importantly, that nasty uncertainty and that vexing confusion, supposed to be chased away thanks to speed, refuse to go. The facility of disengagement and termination-on-demand do not reduce the risks; they only distribute them, together with the anxieties they exhale, differently.

This book is dedicated to the risks and anxieties of living together, and apart, in our liquid modern world.



Falling In and Out of Love

‘My dear friend, I send you a small work of which one could say, not unjustly, that it has neither head nor tail, since everything in it is on the contrary a head and a tail, alternatively and reciprocally. Consider, I beg you, the admirable convenience such a combination offers to all – to you, to me, and the reader. We may cut short – I my musings, you the text, the reader his reading; because I do not hold the tiring will of any of them endlessly to a superfluous plot. Take out one disc, and two pieces of that tortuous fantasy will fall back together without difficulty. Chop out many fragments, and you’ll find that each one can exist on its own. Hoping that some of its stretches will please and amuse you, I dare to dedicate to you the whole snake.’

This is how Charles Baudelaire introduced *Le spleen de Paris* to his readers. What a pity that he did. Had he not, I myself would have wished to compose the same or a similar preamble to what is about to follow. But he did – and I can *only* quote. Walter Benjamin, of course, would strike out the word ‘only’ from the last sentence. And so would I, on second thoughts.

‘Chop out many fragments, and you’ll find that each one can exist on its own.’ The fragments flowing from under Baudelaire’s pen did; whether the scattered thought-snippets collected below will – is not mine, but the reader’s right to decide.

In the family of thoughts, there are dwarfs aplenty. This is why logic and method were invented, and once discovered were gratefully embraced by the thinkers of thoughts. Midgets may hide, and in the end forget their puniness amid the mighty splendour of marching columns and battle arrays. Once ranks are closed, who will notice how tiny the soldiers are? You can make an awesomely powerful-looking army by lining up in fighting order rows upon rows of pygmies...

Perhaps, if only to please the methodology addicts, I should have done the same with these chopped-out fragments. But since I do not have enough time left for the finishing of such a task, it would be foolish of me to think of the rank order first and leave the call-up for later...

On second thoughts: perhaps the time at my disposal seems too short not because of my old age, but because the older you are the better you know that however big the thoughts may seem, they will never be big enough to embrace, let alone keep hold of, the bountiful prodigality of human experience. What we know, wish to know, struggle to know, must try to know about love or rejection, being alone or together and dying together or alone – can all that be streamlined, put in order, match the standards of consistency, cohesiveness and completeness set for the lesser matters? Perhaps it can – in the infinity of time, that is.

Is it not so that when everything is said about the matters most important to human life, the most important things remain unsaid?

Love and death, the two principal characters of this story, with neither a plot nor a denouement but condensing most of life's sound and fury, admit this kind of musing/writing/reading more than any other.

Ivan Klima says: there is little that comes so close to death as fulfilled love. Each appearance of either of the two is a one-off, but also once-and-for-all appearance, brooking no repetition, allowing no appeal and promising no reprieve. Each one must, and does, stand 'on its own'. Each one is born for the first time, or born again, whenever it enters, always sprouting from nowhere,