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According to Zygmunt Bauman, "modernity," the cultural and social project of the Enlightenment, is characterized by its drive toward order, design, management, naming, and segregating. Building on his argument in *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989) Bauman identifies its prime agent with the "gardening-breeding-surgical" ambitions of the nation-state. Communism he deems the most literal exponent of modernity, a "counterculture" seeking to realize rationalizing visions that in capitalist states remained only half begun. Bauman's originality lies in defining the counterpart to this project not as chaos or disorder but as ambivalence, a sphere of social action characterized by polysemy, foundationlessness, cognitive dissonance, and contingency.

Bauman's major example of modernity is the assimilating tolerance of liberalism. In his view, tolerance toward (assimilating) individuals was always linked to intolerance aimed at collectivities, above all at their value-legitimating powers. Modern culture, therefore, characteristically depends on the distinction between inside (ordered, accepted) and outside (disordered, unacceptable). The nation-state, Bauman argues, "is designed primarily to deal with the problem of strangers not enemies" (p. 63). Drawing upon Nicholas Luhman's argument that "with the adoption of functional differentiation individual persons can no longer be firmly located in one single subsystem of society, but rather must be regarded a priori as socially displaced" (p. 201), Bauman identifies "strangerhood" as the universal condition of modern individuality and personal life.

Ambivalence, then, is not the condition of the outsider but of "the stranger" who may or may not gain acceptance. The drive for order and inclusion generates ambivalence and contingency as surely as industrial development generates waste. The crucial psychological and social terrain carved out by Bauman is that of "undecidability," experiences and institutions which, like Derrida's *pharmakon*, meditate against the binary opposition, either/or. Postmodernity, in Bauman's analysis, is therefore modernity aware of and accepting of its inevitable underside.

Bauman's analysis centers on the case of German Jewry. He uses this example to argue that the neurotic, dissipatory structure of ambivalence is that of the double bind: the closer German Jews came to assimilation, the more their Jewishness came into prominence. Living on the border between either and or condemned them to continual self-scrutiny, to "life-long and never conclusive examination." Self-scrutiny articulated with the elitist structure of the Jewish community; a psychology of shame directed at the self complemented a sociology of embarrassment.
and disgust directed at "others." Given the oxymoronic logic of assimilation, no cause for shame could ever be isolated. As the writer Jacob Wasserman put it, "others enjoyed a credit account...I, however, had to present my credentials every time, to stake my whole fortune."

Bauman claims that the universal experience of ambivalence and contingency, sustained neither by indoctrination nor by a reign of experts, renders modern societies "spectacularly immune to systemic critique and radical social dissent" (p. 261). In the absence of such critique, a philosopher like Derrida is important because he "restores the indeterminate to its rightful status of the ground of all being" (p. 189).

I have several objections to Bauman's brilliantly written and important argument. First, Bauman defines the state in terms of its ordering or rationality function but does not address the relation of the state to the market. While the market certainly gives rise to ordering and rationalizing tendencies (e.g., centralization, planning) it also generates counter-normalizing tendencies—both those that are irrational in a Marxian sense and those that counter the hegemonic logic of the state.

In addition, Bauman too easily equates the state with the nation. Even if we accept his Foucaultian identification of the state with its normalizing function, we lack any explanation of why national groups seek to maintain a distinction between inside and outside, an explanation such as Freud offered in his Group Psychology and Civilization and Its Discontents. Even in Bauman's example—Germany—the state through part of its history protected collective minorities (not just individuals) against the nation. Both of these objections converge if we take not Germany but the United States as our case study for "modernity." In the United States, on one hand, the market with all its disorder has the greatest possible autonomy vis-à-vis the state and, on the other, there is no racially based or homogenous nation or people capable of upholding the inside/outside distinction for long.

Another objection concerns the use of the Jews as a case study. Bauman notes that a considerable part of the sociological theory of modern assimilation has been based on the Jewish experience, but his own main reason for choosing the Jews—the great number of self-conscious accounts they produced—is not adequate. In my view, the reasons for the particular salience of the Jewish experience in theories of 19th- and 20th-century modernization and assimilation have not yet been articulated.

Finally, Bauman's one-sided characterization of modernity necessarily leads him to an uncritical, indeed celebratory, account of postmodernity. The Enlightenment was a more complex and internally divided phenomenon than Bauman makes it out to be. Its most distinctive characteristic was, arguably, not its ordering and rationalizing project (which characterized many premodern empires as well) but rather the new emphasis on self-criticism, on the examination of one's own assumptions whether by communities (science, philosophy, art) or individuals. This quality, which distinguished modernity from the first, is the necessary basis for
the tolerance of difference which, for Bauman, only entered Western thought in the 1970s.


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Zygmunt Bauman has written an important and thought-provoking book on the Holocaust and modernity. He argues that the Holocaust must be understood as a central event of modern history and not as an exceptional episode that represented a historical regression to barbarism. It was based upon the technological and organizational achievements of an industrial bureaucratic society: modern processes of rationalization, which substitute organizational discipline for moral responsibility, and instrumental rationality, which is one of means rather than of ends (pp. 13–26). The Holocaust was a possibility rooted in essential aspects of modernity itself and, as such, reveals its destructive potential and negative moral possibilities (pp. 26–29).

Such an interpretation requires reconsidering analyses of modernity as a civilizing process (Elias), or as a process of the progressive rationalization of all spheres of social life (Weber). This, in turn, requires rethinking sociology, the theory of modernity, itself. Bauman claims that sociology has not adequately confronted the challenges raised by the Holocaust, in part because sociology participates in the same scientific culture of modernity, shares its emphasis on technique, its propensity for social engineering, and its understanding of rational action (pp. 4, 29). Relatedly, sociology has bracketed moral considerations by endorsing value-freedom and means-ends rationality, and by presupposing that morality is socially grounded. Such an approach, with its assumptions of progress and of socially based morality, will tend to view Nazism as an anomaly, a result of social breakdown. Bauman contravenes this view and calls for a reconsideration of modernity and of the nature of sociological thought.

Bauman begins by arguing that the Holocaust cannot be explained in terms of anti-Semitism alone. He distinguishes racism and anti-Semitism from "heterophobia" and prejudice, and notes that anti-Semitism characteristically is directed against a group it considers anomalous, outside of the "normal" classification systems of society, culture, and religion (pp. 32–45, 81). In the modern period, anti-Semitism became racist, and the Jews became a central focus of antimodernist energy (pp. 46–60). Racism, for Bauman, is a modern form used in the service of nonmodern struggles (p. 62). Racism itself is tied to modern conceptions of social engineering, to the idea of creating an artificial social order by changing the present one and eliminating those elements that cannot be changed as desired (p. 65). Exterminatory anti-Semitism was eminently modern,