

Liquefying modernity:

Zygmunt Bauman as organization theorist¹

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Abstract

The world of organizations is changing in ever more liquid ways: new media generate business innovations, collaborative idea creations, new forms of participation, exploitation and criticism. We explore the contours of these changes and their import for organization analysis by considering the work of Zygmunt Bauman from the perspective of organization studies. We discuss liquid selves, liquid organizations and liquid aesthetics, as three facets of a post-canonical Baumanian theory of organization.

Keywords: Bauman, liquid modernity, leadership, liquid organizations.

Chapter objectives

This chapter presents the contours of an era characterized by volatility, relentless change and fuzzy boundaries. It does so through the work of Zygmunt Bauman who calls such a world one of 'liquid modernity'.

The chapter discusses how:

- New digital technologies are erasing the boundaries between public and private, organization and environment, entity and process.
- The liquefying of the world changes processes of leadership and organizing
- The meaning of work and career is altered by liquid modernity
- The replacement of traditional bureaucracy by new forms of distributed power and organizational control.

Introduction

In this article we discuss organizing in our digital age in terms of liquidly modern times, whose birth was announced by Zygmunt Bauman. There is a view, represented in Clegg et al (2016), which sees the world of organizations changing radically in ever more liquid ways: new media generate business innovations, collaborative idea creations, and new forms of participation, exploitation and criticism. Distinctions between organizations and their environments as objective determinants fade into irrelevance as strategies increasingly focus on creating new environments rather than adapting to existing ones. The boundaries of the firm dissolve as Coase's (1937) explanation for the existence of firms is revisited. In these new contexts strategy, it is argued, morphs into a co-produced socio-technical phenomenon where local practices transform globally available resources and professionals move between projects in a world that is post-organizational in at least two ways; first it is one that deviates from the norms of an organizational society premised on Weberian characteristics such as organizational careers, transforming into a society where experts use organizations as temporary platforms; second, the organization, as a specific organization defined by those activities it envelops, is decomposing, fragmenting, reforming and deforming, globally. Control, once vested firmly within organizational pyramids, becomes distributed across a network of actors, including new media and their users. The private sphere of management control as a peak activity enveloped in a tangible and specifically modernist form is dissolving. Workers are becoming globally sub-contracted, matrixed and fragmented. Boundaries, choices and control are all shifting in the direction of

increasing fluidity and plurality. The times may be changing. The research question that this paper addresses is the nature of the contours of these changes and their import for organization analysis. This exploration is supported by the work of Zygmunt Bauman's oeuvre.

Bauman's corpus

Zygmunt Bauman is the author that best guides our explorations of the liquid world. We will discuss the reception of Bauman's work in organization studies with a special focus on the notion of liquid times. We will focus on three liquid themes: liquid selves, liquid organizations and liquid aesthetics. Zygmunt Bauman is a link to an older, classical concept of sociology as social theory, one that has almost died out. By social theory we mean the capacity to range theoretically across a wide scope of social issues and questions rather than being a narrow specialist. As a social theorist Bauman stands as one of the major intellectual figures of the twentieth and twenty first century.

Born to Jewish parents in Poland in 1925, in his youth a committed Marxist who fought as an anti-fascist with the Russians in the Polish First Army in the Second World War, he worked with the Communist authorities in Poland in the early years after the war. Bauman suffered from anti-Semitic persecution from the communist authorities during the period of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war as a part of the Cold War alliance of the Soviet Union with the Arab States. In the aftermath of the war, in 1968, as a result of a power struggle within the Polish Communist party, related to events in Czechoslovakia's Prague Spring, there were purges resulting in an

expulsion of 15,000 Poles of Jewish origin between 1968 and 1972. Bauman was one of the purged intellectuals and was obliged to give up both his Chair at the University of Warsaw and his Polish citizenship. Initially, he migrated to Israel and taught at the University of Tel-Aviv, as well as spending a period as a Visiting Professor in Canberra at the Australian National University.

In 1972 Bauman was appointed to the Chair of Sociology at the University of Leeds. At this time the appointment was surprising to many British sociologists who were not aware of the fourteen books that he had already published in Polish. Prior to 1972, when a version of his 1960 London School of Economics PhD thesis was published as *Between Class and Elite: The Evolution of the British Labour Movement – A Sociological Study* by Manchester University Press, he had written little in English. At Leeds, Bauman built a solid sociological department whose seminars were legendary for the plethora of top social scientists who were invited to speak at them and for the quiet way in which Bauman, after others had asked their questions of the visiting speaker, would remove his pipe and ask a question that invariably cut to the core of the presentation.

From 1972 his publications in English bloomed. The period between 1972 and 1983 was marked by a focus on issues of class, Marxist analysis, culture and hermeneutic methods. One of these early works, *Culture as Praxis*, from 1973, introduced the concept of structuration that subsequent theorists such as Giddens (1984) were to popularize. In the period bookmarked by *Memories of Class* (1982) and *In Search of Politics* (1999), the predominant themes were those of modernity and post modernity, ethics and globalization. In 2000, however, he published the first of his

subsequent studies into *Liquid Modernity*, which have continued to the present day. Past themes of ethics, culture and inequality were joined by a new focus on consumerism as the hallmark of liquidly modern societies, societies in which class was increasingly only a memory.

Bauman's reception in organization studies

Despite his widespread reception across the social sciences, Bauman's address of liquid themes has not been greatly influential in organization studies. Most references to his work are only in passing (Dale 2005; Knox et al 2008; Jensen et al 2009; Jensen 2010; Hensby et al 2012; Ekman 2014; Weiskopf and Munro 2012; Hancock and Rehn 2011; Johnsen and Gudmand-Høyer 2010). Ybema et al. (2009) see one of the symptoms of individualism in liquid modernity to be the search for 'identity' while Hollinshead and Maclean (2007) see signs of liquid modernity in Serbian enterprise. The most extensive use of Bauman's theme of liquidity in the journals is the work of Clegg and Baumeler (2010) who argue that the 'crucial space in which the liquidly modern organizational self works is in project teams.' As Clegg and Baumeler suggest, liquid organizations are those in which investment in people are highly liquid and easily liquidated, with no long-term investment implications. These authors explore the ethical, political, identity, and organizational consequences of increasing liquidity. Ethically, liquidly modern leaders are forever reassembling the pieces of their own identity as the liquid state changes. Politically, power relations become marked by a new lightness of synoptical power relations augmenting and supplementing the more traditional panoptical power (also see Lancione and Clegg 2014). In terms of identity, liquidity is marked by the

immediateness of the self in the moment. Organizationally, liquidity predisposes its leaders to improvisation over heavy scripting.

Power et al. (2009: 301) briefly cite Bauman (2007) in relation to themes of 'increased ambiguity and uncertainty at the level of individuals and a problematization of trust in, and legitimacy of, institutions and experts in an interconnected world'. The themes that Power and his colleagues address are those of how specific social, organizational and managerial processes occur that enable the recognition of risk and attempts at risk management. Pelzer (2014) deepens this analysis by more explicitly linking the discussion of risk to Bauman's theory of liquid society. For Pelzer (2014), the financial markets function as a prototype for studying the effect of increasing liquidity. Liquidity is seen as the essence of risk management within financial markets. In organizational terms, as Clegg and Baumeler (2010) argue, leaders, as well as employees in general and their organizations, are becoming more liquid. Employees increasingly are employed on short-term or highly contingent contracts, accordingly reducing their commitment and loyalty to organizations, subject to changing personnel policies. These policies place them at more risk by lessening employment certainty in the name of a freedom of choice that, for its recipients, is essentially limited.

Increasingly, those who assume the role of leaders are less likely to be positional experts solidly grounded in organizational hierarchies and technical expertise so much as managerial expertise in 'leadership' as a practice of shared, dispersed and mutually constituted influence gained in successful steering of projects despite the irreducible contingency of unforeseen events. In reality, suggest Bauman (2007;

2000) there is little in the way of central control that is steering events. Deregulation, individualization, weakened human bonds, increased fluidity of solidarities, and the drift from normative regulation to seduction are all key features of the liquid condition identified by Bauman (in Jacobsen and Tester, 2007, p. 313).

Liquid themes

The major treatment of Bauman's implications for organizations and, implicitly, for leadership and strategy is to be found in *Liquid Organization: Zygmunt Bauman and Organization Theory*, edited by Kociatkiewicz and Kostera (2014), who characterize Bauman's later work as focusing on three main themes: the *dynamics of modernity*, the *possibilities of radical social change*, and the *ethics of compassion* – which they term 'sociological compassion'.

In terms of the *dynamics of modernity*, elements of these themes were prefigured in earlier works, such as the 1993 books on *Modernity and Ambivalence* and *Postmodern Ethics* and the 1998 book on *Work, consumerism and the new poor*. In the period before 2000, Bauman's reflections were cast in binary terms, influenced, suggests Jensen (2014), by Tönnies' famous distinctions between *Gemeinschaft* (embedded and constraining community) and *Gesellschaft* (disembedded and liberating society), drawing contrasts between 'modernity' and 'postmodernity'.

The apex of modernity, for Bauman (1989), was reached in the death camps that delivered the Holocaust, where the strengths of normal organization in delivering

efficient terminal mass production was exemplified.² The thesis has been widely discussed (see Clegg, Courpasson and Phillips 2006) and also criticised by scholars who have argued that the Holocaust was not organized by practices of bureaucracy (du Gay 2000). The critics, such as du Gay, have sought to preserve the notion of Weberian bureaucracy, arguing that what occurred in the camps was organization's corruption by fascism rather than an example of bureaucracy's ethos.

Posing a dualism between one state, modernity and another, post modernity, is inherently problematic. It leads to a problem of transition: how does one move from one state of existence to the other and how does one know that the transition has occurred? Such historical breaks are the exception rather than the rule, which is not to say that change does not occur, for it surely does, but more continuously, as a process of everyday life and living. The solidities of one time morph slowly into history, into something else, as they die of neglect or are extinguished. It is these moments of unfolding that are captured by the notion of postmodernism as a moment in the unfolding of history (Clegg and Kornberger 2003). As Lyotard (1993) says, postmodernism is not the end of modernism, but its birth and rebirth, its constant coming into being. Modernity is a constantly shifting edge, struggles over the meaning of which define both modernism that seeks to condense its meaning and postmodernism that seeks to liquidate rather than consolidate.

More recently, Bauman distinguishes between solid and liquid modernity. Solid modernity represents the world of conventional organization and management

² Bauman's (1989) study of *Modernity and the Holocaust* takes seriously Eichmann's plea that he was merely a good bureaucrat, following orders, establishing routines, and processing flows in a system – albeit one in which the throughput was extinction of life for certain bureaucratically defined categories of person. In such a system ethics could be reduced to being a good functionary.

theory. Its hallmarks are a concern with objective structure, rational strategy and normal equilibrium. It is a world stalked by uncertainty and equivocality – the evils to be minimized and avoided as best as is possible by formulating appropriate strategies and structures. Stable bureaucracies, rational systems, orderly routines, formal leadership, long-range planning – these are the devices used to ward off evils.

The dominance of solid modernity defied much of the post war era. Large bureaucratic organizations, characterized by rational planning and long-term careers for their cadres, were the norm, in both the state and civil society. But events conspired to unmake this solidity. On the one hand, from the early 1970s onwards, fuelled by the costs of maintaining the US warfare state, initially in Vietnam, the US state began to experience a fiscal crisis as it became more and more indebted due to deficit financing (Gamble and Walton 1976). On the other hand, inspired by the political economy of economic neoliberalism (Harvey 2005), organizations became increasingly global in their decomposition and recomposition (see Clegg et al, 2011), through strategies of outsourcing, off shoring and alliancing.

The idea of a process, of a transition from one state to the other, still accompanies the very idea of there being a dualism, which is why, perhaps, in his later work, Bauman abandons the juxtaposition that served him well in the 1990s for a formulation that much better captures this sense of an edge of uncertainty and introduces instead the idea of there being a liquid modernity. Liquid spreads, seeps, leaches, moves by osmosis. Liquid modernity's other is not post but solid: being solid it does not melt or fade away but becomes a container, here more effectively, there less so, of a liquid edge that is forever seeping beyond its containment. The solid and

liquid phases of modernity are implicated together: the one contains but that which it contains is never constrained by the form of the historical container; it shifts shape, it trickles off in new directions and new containers develop to try and restrict its viscosity, to discipline its flows, as it seeks to liquidate its containment. However, the very term liquid modernity still invites comparison with its antimony, solid modernity; for this reason, we will stress the verb rather than the noun and write of liquefying modernity.

The world we have lost: The dynamics of liquefying modernity

The organizations that flourished from the end of World War II through the 1970s, built on the long range planning that the US Army Chiefs of Staff engaged in when planning the campaign to defeat Hitler, starting with the Normandy Landings. A natural ecology for leadership was to be found in the very large firms, such as General Motors, that dominated predictable and secure markets that they sought to control through long range planning. Ironically, at the time that the Soviet bloc engaged in the same practices of long range planning – the Five Year plans – corporate America, the bastion of private enterprise, sought to do the same – albeit based on corporate as opposed to state planning. In the Soviet case it was the state that sought to plan; in the American case it was left to the corporations. In doing so they were assisted by the facts of post war corporate life: markets that were largely based in the United States, protection from foreign competition by tariffs, standardization, regulation, subsidies, price supports and government guarantees.

Keynesian demand management was not just a feature of the US. In Europe, especially in France with its *plannification*, there was a very explicit linking of centralist state and private sector interests by bureaucrats schooled in the Parisian *Grande Ecoles*. Keynesianism was allied with a strong central planning structure in the UK under the Wilson administrations of the 1960s and 1970s. The state, it was believed, could steer the white heat of technological revolution, a belief that died during the terminal stages of the Callaghan administration when the first fluttering of the new 'monetarism' emerged to assume full bloom in the Thatcher era of the 1980s, as Keynes was dismissed and Hayek became the new point of reference.

After 1980, with the rise of a new economic liberalism under the sponsorship of President Reagan and Prime Minister Thatcher, new competition was unleashed by the joint forces of creative destruction and liberal economic deregulation, liquidating the solidities of the modernist high water mark. The emergence of a new class of managers from the 1980s onward saw them greatly enriched in remuneration relative to all other wage and salary earners, in part, by the adoption of agency theory as a strategy in practice widely used in the American corporate world. The corporate organization increasingly came to be assumed as merely an aggregation of individual agents, constituted as a legal personality that contracts real individuals to its purposes, the principal with whom contracts are entered. These contracts are incomplete because of uncertainty that cannot be predicted and covered by contract. Fama and Jensen (1983) presumed that the firm is a nexus of contracts between individuals in which the costs of enforcing contracts that are always incompletely stipulative will be a perennial problem.

Corporations that were quite obviously social institutions, with organizational employees treated in a manner in some respects similar to social democratic citizens, with family health care programs, decent wages, salaries and pensions, were being invited to deconstruct. '[T]he "nexus" imagery served as a useful provocation, a lever to bust up the unwieldy and shareholder-hostile conglomerates built up over the prior decades. This was a theory perfectly designed to legitimate a bust-up takeover wave' (Davis 2016, p.509). Agency theory was an account that spawned in practice on a grand scale what it theorized, increasing the liquidity of organizations financially as well as making life within their frame more liquid because less bound by bureaucratic norms.

The growth and application of agency theory to practice over the last 40 years or so, particularly but not exclusively in the financial sector (Mallaby, 2010), has seen agents become rewarded as principals that don't even have to risk their own capital. In tying their agency to that of the principals, they have voted themselves stock options, thus becoming significant principals in their own right. In most companies in the United States the CEO tends to enjoy a considerable imbalance of power compared to the nominal authority of the board that appoints the CEO and to which they are legally accountable. Hence, the growing control of CEOs in governance on company boards has vested them with an ability to set, up to a point, their own salaries as well as nominate stock options. Leadership in this context became a proxy for personal enrichment on a scale unprecedented in prior rational-legal organizations as the euthanasia of bureaucracy was accomplished by the triumph of the *rentiers*. Modern organizations were being liquidated (Davis 2016a, b).

There were corollaries to these processes of liquidation in terms of organizational changes: careers gave way to project portfolios; leaders give way to dispersed leadership and self-leadership; bureaucracies became leaner as non-core elements of the business were outsourced; their operations became more global as it was realized that enhanced value could be captured in value chains that probed wide and far into production sites and subcontractors in far away places. The state also decomposed its bureaucracies in search for more efficient privatization of those goods and services once take for granted as within its domain.

In solid modernity the major container was work and the relations of production that this entailed. Successful capitalism, however, successful in fulfilling and perpetually expanding material wants and needs, shifted its register inexorably from a productive container defined primarily by exploitative relations of production that state interventions into the welfare of its labouring citizens modified, to an infinitely plastic container that expanded with the accelerating fetishization of ever more phenomena, including work itself. Work that had equated with a lifelong career, in the sense of an unfolding, a linear progression, of working, often in the same or very similar organizations, saw its meaning liquefied. Liquefying modernity increasingly replaces citizens with consumers.

Solid modernity, at its best, developed a whole program for citizens around the rights of labour (Abrahamson and Broström 1980). Liquefying modernity erodes the relations associated with being employees, such that having employment contracts and deploying capital became more fluid, less secure, increasingly unstable. Liquidity was translated in terms of the prevailing political and economic ideologies into

increased choice and freedom for the individual. These freedoms dissolved established commitments and sense of obligation and the institutions that supported these, such as mutual societies, trade unions, established religions and political parties. Identities founded in church and chapel, union and community, party allegiance and its tribal oppositions, weakened. The political process became more marketized, such that selling the message was becoming more crucial than what the message might say. Universities weakened their collegial bonds and became increasingly sites for the mass production of knowledge workers and specialist boutique ventures for the creation of intellectual property that could be valorised.

In a cliché, the reality of liquefying modernity is that the only certainty is change; uncertainty becomes the new norm; instability and insecurity the new order; identity a matter of choice, and choice a matter of improvisational ability and access to the resources available to sustain it. Identity became the major arena for struggle: entrepreneurial subjects could propel themselves from being local identities to cosmopolitan personalities, thus setting new norms of identity for others to struggle to emulate or exceed.

Consumption can never be sated when global capital roams. Every day, in every way, new, improved, and breakthrough delights for consumption will be tantalizingly available to those that can afford to sample them, disposing of out-dated, inferior and unfashionable modes of consumption and of stuff already consumed. No thing is sacred; nothing is secure; every thing can be made redundant, become more liquid – including the leaders of products past. Identity increasingly is posited to reside not in

being who one is, defined by the old materialities such as relations of (un)employment and place, so much as in who and what one might become through the consumption of things in the desire for expressing selfhood. The injunction that by one's work(s) one shall be known is replaced by the exhortation to buy now and become what one might be. As the political events associated with Brexit and Trump demonstrate, this breeds a politics of resentment on the part of those who feel themselves excluded from cosmopolitan identities, tastes and consumption.

In liquefying modernity life is lived increasingly in public: notions of private life cease to have the same meaning when one's becomings are routinely displayed in Facebook, when one's thoughts are tweeted incessantly, when one's smartphone becomes a McLuhanite extension of one's nervous system by which we create and consume content, in which the medium is more constant than the content it produces (McLuhan 1964).

Leading in liquefying times

What does it mean to lead in liquidity? In this section we discuss liquid selves, liquid organizations and liquid aesthetics, as three facets of a post-canonical Baumanian theory of leadership relations.

Liquid selves

Life lived in public increasingly pervades people's experiences in organizations. It does so in two ways: one is through an enhancement of the panoptical tendencies of solid modernity, where the few exercise surveillance over the many; the other is

through the development of new forms of synoptical power, where the many watch each other and the ambitious among them watch the few. The two systems of power combine within liquid modernity. Organization studies developed a term to capture this combinatorial effect when it accepted the idea of the 'emotionally intelligent' subject (Salovey and Mayer 1990; Goleman 1995).

The emotionally intelligent subject displays emotional competencies (Goleman 1998), learned capabilities for outstanding work performance. The key competences are in being liquid about innovation, commitments, adaptability and achievement (Clegg and Baumeler 2014): each of these is viscous, shifting and redefinable – in a word, liquid. Liquid in the sense of being quick to liquidate not only tasks performed but also how they are performed, where they are performed, with whom they are performed. Liquidity requires autonomy, spontaneity, creativity, adaptability, communicative and relational competence, as well as significant capacities to invest in social and educational capital and a capacity to develop swift trust in switches from project to project, as liquid life in organizations is lived not in a linear career but in a succession of projects experienced in the moment. Being, self and actants are organized in a series of reflexive autopoietic loops, looping round existential anxiety.

The most acute and stubborn worries that haunt liquid leaders are fears of not being in the moment. Organizationally, liquid life is a mess of contradiction: liquidly modern leaders (of the self) have to be perpetually constructing and reconstructing themselves; they are forever reassembling the pieces of their own identity, refining themselves day after day (Bauman 2005). Inadequacy in this new liquidity involves inability to acquire the desired image to which leaders' aspire. Adequacy is having

the ability to be simultaneously the plastic subject, sculptor and object of one's self, of becoming both the onlooker of self-work and the teacher of that self, a voyeuristic self, engaged in a process in which watching self watching others watching self becomes the liquid centre of self-existence and leaderly achievement (Clegg and Baumeler, 2014; 51; 52). In short, to succeed in liquid times leaders must become strategists of their self. Impression management rules (Goffman, 1959), mediated through the media extensions of the self as Linked In, Facebooked, tweeted, etc. Jensen (2014: 24) suggests a prime fear of the liquid organizational member is to be unseen – especially when one occupies a position of visibility, such as that of a leader (Maravelias, 2009).

Liquid selves are valorised as free selves: free to choose; free to take responsible action for their self, free to construct their own biographies and projections of self. These projections are all self-centred, even as they project synoptically to others. The chief responsibility owed is to and for one's self (Bauman 2007: 92). The organization provides arenas in which scenes may be staged that enable the aesthetic projection of the self. As Clegg and Baumeler (2014: 38) suggest, liquidly modern leaders are entrepreneurs of their selves: they must manage with enthusiasm and with passion and expect to share an ethos of immediacy, playfulness, subjectivity and performativity (Hjorth and Kostera 2007; Bauman 2008). Between the performance and presentation of self and the reaction of significant others yawns a chasm of uncertainty as the subject, still of surveillance but now also committed to being passionate, must choose how to make the killer presentation – of self – that secure their profile as the kinds of subjects they

anticipate that their significant others expect them to be (Jackall 1988). Being in the liquid state is an unfolding project in which constant vigilance and perpetual effort must be expended, with no guarantees that the performance will pay off, as Bauman states (2000: 8).

Liquid organization

The cornerstone of the liquid organization is an absence of moral concern. Liquid organizations are adiaphoric: that is, subject to *adiaphorization*:

[M]aking certain actions, or certain objects of action, morally neutral or irrelevant – exempt from the categories of phenomena suitable for moral evaluation. The effect of adiaphorization is achieved by excluding some categories of people from the realm of moral subjects, or through covering up the link between partial action and the ultimate effect of co-ordinated moves, or through enthroneing procedural discipline and personal loyalty in the role of the all-overriding criterion of moral performance (Bauman 1995, p.149).

Adiaphorization will especially characterize the top management team: while each member may ontologically be a moral subject the organization cannot be. This is the essence of leaderly strategies, as we shall see in due course. Leadership may well be formulated within governance structures, rules, guidelines and policies but it is essentially ethically blank in its representations. As Bauman (2014: xvi) has most recently expressed it:

Organizations ... serve the process of adiaphorization – of excising large

swathes of human behaviour and human habit from the realm of moral evaluation and ethical obligations and thereby rendering them less sensitive to moral impulses. To put it simply: they serve the process of cutting down moral responsibility to a manageable size; and of recycling it into a form that is amenable to management. Reduction and simplification of moral obligations and ethically inspired emotions in general are viewed as indispensable conditions for a focused, determined, efficient and therefore rational conduct.

Strategic imperatives are seen to flow from this process of adiaphorization: one is not so much responsible for a generalized set of other selves as responsible to the order in which one is employed: its rules, its authorities; its definitions of what is right according to the rules and what the rules make wrong. Necessarily, this invests considerable synoptic power towards the hierarchical ordering of judgments and their expression as imperative commands transmitted through vertical command-obedience sequences; simultaneously, it makes of one a specimen subject to the multitude of panoptical powers used to exercise surveillance over one's self at work. Devices such as audit (Power 1999), HRM (Townley 1993), CCTV, and those ubiquitous recordings of customer interactions that call centres suggest may be used for training purposes, are all oriented towards the latter.

The combination of synopticism, panopticism, and responsabilization pump and transfer the moral responsibility of the executors of commands upwards, as Bauman (2014) suggests, to the command givers. Those that enact, the subordinates, 'are excluded from the authorship of their acts' (Bauman, 2014: xvi). Those that

command do not enact – that is the responsibility of those subject to the imperative commands. ‘As a consequence, neither bears full, undivided responsibility for their acts. Absolute moral responsibility is thereby ‘deconstructed’’, says Bauman (2014: xvi). What remains is the ethical pose of the individual subject, judged only according to the organization rules. Responsibility floats and ethics are defined largely in terms of the contracts that leaders have entered into with stockholders, such that, in principle, as Bauman says, no leader can be perceived as a moral subject qua organizational membership. Their moral responsibility is to be found in service of organization strategies, strategies turned towards abstractions of the market and their manifestations in analysis and share values, not their questioning.

In the past, before modernity became so liquid, this was efficient enough when composed wholly within the envelope of an all-encompassing organization that organized itself on classical bureaucratic lines. Members were expected to express a vocation, to display character, respect an ethos. Careers in the service of the organization and its solid composition as a bureaucracy reinforced a sense of disciplined ethical virtue expressed in deference to routines, rules, and rationalities. However, as a result of what Bauman (2014; xvii) refers to as the ‘second managerial revolution’, the solid organization has decomposed. It is not that bureaucracy is being superseded but it is becoming embroiled in complex processes of hybridization (du Gay, 2000; Courpasson and Reed, 2004), simultaneously decomposing and recomposing.

Decomposition takes us to the world of supply chains and outsourcing. It also takes us into the world of the others, the undeserving poor, those whose subjectivity is

insufficiently *legitimately* entrepreneurial, which is to say that they might well be illegitimately entrepreneurial in an undisciplined mode – perhaps in the local narco-economy. Their marginal existence warns us that apart from consumption there is only deserved misery. Recomposition takes us into the world of new organizational forms. In the former, there are some very familiar politics of surveillance and control; in the latter there are more innovative developments that centre on the replacement of the central figure of the bureaucrat with that of the project leader and the central life experience of the occupational career followed largely in one organization being replaced by that of individual's leadership achievements in projects. The politics of the project become the testing ground for elite reproduction (see Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Clegg, 2011).

What is distinctive about leading and working in the contemporary liquid decomposed organization is that the major mechanism of the career has undergone a substantial change. Careers will be increasingly project-based, flowing now like mercury and then reconsolidating in a new plane of activity (Schein & Van Maanen, 2016). The project – whether innovation, R&D, engineering, marketing or whatever, becomes the major vehicle for organization networks and alliances and developmental tasks within specific organizations – although, increasingly these will involve team members from other organizations. In such hybrid and often-unclear situations conflict and confrontation are inevitable, so managing emotions becomes a crucial skill. Leaders need to create learning environments—via coaching, hands-on-teaching and mentoring—to stimulate and develop their employees – and to manage expectations about evolving roles in projects. Employees become sensitive

to shifting roles and the signals they send about a person's worth. A popular metaphor for the post bureaucratic leader is that of a coach trying to build a team out of a group of highly paid free agent talents, networking like crazy. For the committed employee, work spills over into downtime, occupying the wakeful creative moments of the organizational members, traveling with them as they use their portable digital devices, playing with which becomes seen as almost, 'better than sex' (Trinca and Fox 2004).

If one follows the direction of decomposition it is clear that in the new margins located on the global margins of modernity, in the electronic panopticon of the call centre or the outsourced production line, bureaucracy is alive and well in a particularly centralized, standardized and routinized form. Here the bureaucratization of the shopfloor has proceeded into the heart of the white collar, pink blouse, and colourful indigenously attired digital factory, policed by the spectre of the reserve army of the unemployed and under employed, the non-respectable poor. If, on the other hand, one follows the recomposition route into the upper echelons of leaner and more entrepreneurially oriented organizations, a surprising finding emerges. Leaders are no longer responsible subjects – at least not for performance in all its manifestations: ethical, financial, production, etc.

The more they are able to do less of the work of the organization the more efficient and the less responsible they are. Efficiency is measured in simple terms as value considered only in costs and profits. Responsibility is pushed down and out. Pushed down it is subsidiarized by being constituted as empowerment of the subaltern workforce who become panoptical governors of their employment relations (Barker,

1993). Pushed out it is outsourced, sub-contracted, and embedded in a supply chain whose governing mechanism is invariably contractually expressed in financial terms. Should those financial terms be delivered in ways that seem ethically dubious, where people die, become ill, poisoned or incapacitated, then the responsibility does not reach the top of the chain: the buck stops where the contract remotely resides. Gains flow upwards through the circuits of power; costs are pushed downwards. Greater responsibilities are no longer attached to higher remuneration:

Chief executive officers have by now gained a nearly comprehensive insurance against punishment for failure to deliver results, including failures caused by their indolence, incompetence, neglect or downright sloth: the eventual loss of their golden nests would be amply recompensed by golden handshakes, paid for their subordinates in the currency of job and career losses (Bauman 2014: xviii).

Leaders self-manage and convince their subordinates to do the same; in doing so they bring to bear all their emotional intelligence and attachment, using digital devices that register their participation in working panoptically as they project their efforts synoptically to their Linked In network and Facebook 'friends', interpolating work achievements into life lived outside official confines, outside of the office (Clegg and Baumeler, 2010; 2014).

In liquefying modernity leaders' success is measured by their wealth.

In 2014, the richest 1% of people in the world owned 48% of global wealth, leaving just 52% to be shared between the other 99% of adults on the planet.

Almost all of that 52% is owned by those included in the richest 20%, leaving just 5.5% for the remaining 80% of people in the world. If this trend continues of an increasing wealth share to the richest, the top 1% will have more wealth than the remaining 99% of people in just two years ... with the wealth share of the top 1% exceeding 50% by 2016 ... The very richest of the top 1%, the billionaires on the Forbes list, have seen their wealth accumulate even faster over this period. In 2010, the richest 80 people in the world had a net wealth of \$1.3tn. By 2014, the 80 people who top the Forbes rich list had a collective wealth of \$1.9tn; an increase of \$600bn in just 4 years, or 50% in nominal terms. Meanwhile, between 2002 and 2010 the total wealth of the poorest half of the world in current US\$ had been increasing more or less at the same rate as that of billionaires; however, since 2010, it has been decreasing over this time (The January 2015 Oxfam Issue Briefing, *Wealth: Having It All and Wanting More*).

The most recent trends from 2015 data reported in 2016 show no shift to a better distribution of incomes in terms of the prospects for growth; in fact, the inequalities are increasing: just 62 people own as much as the poorest half of the world's population, increasing their wealth by more than half a trillion dollars to \$1.76tr with no positive trickle down effects. (<http://www.oxfam.org.uk/media-centre/press-releases/2016/01/62-people-own-same-as-half-world-says-oxfam-inequality-report-davos-world-economic-forum>). Organizationally, liquid wealth composition occurs largely through tax minimization by transfer pricing increasing the pie and stock options increasing the slices of the pie disposed to leaders.

Liquid aesthetics

The liquidly modern organization announces itself to be so visually in its style and in the disposition of its internal spaces. Not for it the bland boxes and skyscrapers of solid modernity. There are several ways of being liquidly aesthetic. For early and start up organizations it is typical that they will rent a funky, slightly distressed space, perhaps part of an old factory or warehouse, preferably with valid heritage features: the location of design companies such as Advanced Digital Institute in the remains of Salt Mill in Saltaire, Bradford, a World Heritage Site, is typical of a liquidly aesthetic workplace statement. The employees sought are those whom Warren (2014: 71) terms 'liquid employees' – individuals who choose their jobs as they would a commodity, as a statement, an affirmation, a badge of identity, then the liquid organization seeks to make the workplace one that offers aesthetic fulfilment and proximity to good transport links and housing. Being in a conventional edge of the city industrial park just doesn't cut it in these terms.

More established liquid organizations will prefer a signature architect, preferably a starchitect. To be a starchitect the designer must have achieved celebrity and critical acclaim that has transformed them into major figures in the world of architecture, usually indicated by the award of major prizes and the commissioning of landmark buildings. Those that are best known have a name recognition that extends to a degree of fame amongst the general public. To become a starchitect requires some pretensions to the avant-garde – nothing classical or classically modern will do. The essential feature is the aestheticization of the workplace, whereby 'aspects of objects, places, events, people and experiences of everyday life are made more

appealing through the decoration, enhancement or other embellishment of their appearance' (Warren, 2014, p. 71). De rigueur are highly designed spaces and finishes, coupled with laid back open spaces, bicycle spaces – very important symbolically – and the provision of quality fit outs in terms of kitchens, cafes, coffee ports etc. The occasional sculpture or modern art piece helps also, which an art consultancy can supply on lease; occasional musicians, artists, poets or writers in residence can also help create a suitably funky sense of place.

Hancock (2003) suggests that liquid organizations will seek to structure fun, novelty and excitement into the experience of being at work. Above all, the spaces must be flexible: they should not be solidified into structures that cannot adapt and change easily. Open spaces, hot desking, bookable meeting rooms, no anchoring in offices – these are all preferred. Of course, the opportunities for both synoptical and panoptical power increase as visibility and transparency of working conditions increases. Nonetheless, these characteristics signify 'coolness' – the accolade that a liquid organization and liquid leaders must have (see Lancione and Clegg, 2014). The contrast is with the constructions of earlier modes of organization such as factories, modernist towers and desolate warehouse spaces of the industrial park. Aesthetically liquid organizations cannot be authentic if they occupy such spaces. Authenticity has to be signified by style and the style must be cool.

Conclusion

Taking together the characteristics constituting the conditions for increasingly liquid modernity it is not surprising that projects emerge as the point at which all the

contradictions of the new liquidity are concentrated. Looked at from below, from the perspective of the subaltern, contemporary organizations are shape-shifters, project-based, with teams composing and decomposing, locations shifting as projects are completed, KPIs changing with projects, and one's individual organizational future uncertain. From the perspective of the leaders the story is quite different. They know that they are over the threshold where the golden chains are evident. The largest problem that they must deal with is using the project shape shifting that goes on outside the threshold as the basis for competitions and tournaments that will decide who of the subaltern may cross the threshold into leadership. Looked at by the outsiders to liquefying modernity, the rural poor, the underemployed and unemployed, the marginal non-cosmopolitans, their sense of traditional identity rooted in old certainties of relations of production are being eroded as employing organizations disappear to other states and as newer cosmopolitan identities increasingly fill representational space in the media they consume. Politically, those whose sense of identity is eroding, become increasingly susceptible to 'populist authoritarianism' orchestrated by the 1%, as Weigel (2016) argues.

Organizationally, the hybrid political structure of liquid organizing needs both leadership differentiation to ensure a credible competition among various centres of power (individuals and/or sub-groups) and unification to ensure a relative consensus on basic values and on the legitimate rules of the internal political arena. Leaders are differentiated from sub-elites who, in turn, are distinguished from the population of knowledge workers, experts, and professionals, with regard to values, demographic

characteristics and types of aspirations. Beyond their everyday concern are the distant global margins where the objects of desire are produced as are the local spaces marginalized by liquefying processes.

Corporate leaders have a direct interest in shaping, grooming and educating selected aspirants, constituting subjects with an appropriate comportment, etiquette, and equipage to qualify as disciplined. Running projects with paradoxical criteria of performativity (on time, on budget, on specification, while delivering innovation) successfully hints, in a weak way, that one has been spotted as someone with potential which the elites wish to test out, to see if the project leader can display certain indispensable characteristics for the leadership elite. Mostly, these characteristics pertain to an ability to accept and work creatively with an existing order and existing rules; thus, they go far beyond merely technical and professional expertise. They are the new way of re-invigorating *habitus* when organizational borders have become porous, careers liquid, leadership identities contingent on project success and, for many others, employment is increasingly self-managed and precarious.

What the conditions of liquid organization and leadership offer those ostensibly being led is a great propensity for anomie. Anomie is usually taken to mean a state of normlessness, detachment and non-solidarity created by a mismatch between personal or group standards and wider social standards.³ The gap occurs because of the lack of social ethics integrating individuals into broader moral sentiments. When

³ The term is ineluctably associated with the sociologist Emile Durkheim but was, in fact, coined by Jean-Marie Guyau (1886; see Orru, 1983).

behavioural norms of leadership practice spread indifference to the fate of others, when the decomposition of the corporation becomes the norm, when social relations become predominantly digitally mediated, anomie will escalate not only as existing corporate ranks are diminished through increasing culls on membership but also as, in the digital 'sharing' economy, the vast majority of people working become self-employed, precarious and marginal employees or are outsourced sub-contractors of the corporate behemoths remaining (Clegg, Cunha & Rego, 2016). The corporation becomes an increasingly remote citadel that few can breach. When there are few people left to lead and many that feel cast asunder by the leaders of the past and present, through increasingly liquid states and organizations, leadership as an ethical claim to significance and difference tends to be an option with diminishing prospects other than the inflation of rhetoric with which to Trump.

End-of-chapter exercises

1. Traditionally, organizations relied on planning to regulate their relations with the market and its evolution. How can organizations prepare for the future in liquid times?
2. The career was a progression in a hierarchical system, involving some predictability. How will careers be reimagined in liquid organizations?
3. What challenges confront managers in terms of their leadership roles in liquid organizations?
4. What is the connection between liquid times and post-hierarchical organizations, such as the holacracy?
5. Put yourself in the position of an "organizational man" of the 1950s. When facing a liquid organization what could his thoughts be?
6. From the perspective of the employee what is the promise and peril of working in a liquid organization?
7. Have the politics of consumption now replaced the politics of production in the creation of social identity?

Glossary

1. **Adiaphorization:** According to Bauman, adiaphorization occurs when 'systems and processes become split off from any consideration of morality.'
2. **Bureaucracy:** According to Weber, bureaucracy was a legal rational instrument for organizing. It had three essential clusters of characteristics: those that were *scalar* (hierarchy, discipline, formal authority, rule orientation); those that were *functional* (a defined sphere of competence; selection and advancement on the basis of formal qualifications), and those that related to *career* (free selection and contract; separation of the bureaucrat from the means of administration as a rational legal relation, and a full-time salaried career based appointment and tenure).
3. **Digitalization:** the use of digital technologies to change a business model and provide new revenue and value-producing opportunities; it is the process of moving to a digital business by enabling, improving and/or transforming business operations and/or business functions and/or business models/processes and/or activities, using digital tools such as the mobile devices and technologies that make them mobile and/or using social collaboration and unified communication platforms, leveraging digital technologies and a broader use and context of digitized data, turned into actionable, knowledge, with a specific benefit in mind.
4. **Emotional intelligence** the capacity to be aware of, control, and express one's emotions and other people's emotions, to be able to discern between different feelings and label them appropriately, to use emotional information to guide thinking and behaviour, and to manage and/or adjust emotions to different environments, contexts or goals.
5. **Liquid organizations:** Liquefying an organization means disrupting bureaucratic assumptions of rigid structures and making it adaptive, dynamic and resilient. Often based on lean management and open collaboration principles, the liquid organization model is flat, meritocratic and value-driven, enabling indirect coordination, collaboration and organic effectiveness
6. **Liquid selves:** the liquid self is an identity shaped by consumption and the gaze of others on the material signs of one's selfhood. Unlike the solid self of industrial society, embedded in class relations, it is fluid, dynamic, and highly dependent on a sense of belonging to specific identity categories.
7. **Liquid times:** In 'liquid' times, the times of liquid modernity social forms and institutions no longer have enough time to solidify and cannot serve as frames of reference for human actions and long-term life plans, so individuals have to find other ways to organise their lives. They have to splice together an unending series of short-term projects and episodes that don't add up to the kind of sequence that gave birth to ideas of 'career' and 'progress'. Liquid times produce fragmented lives that require individuals to be flexible and adaptable – to be constantly ready

and willing to change tactics at short notice, to abandon commitments and loyalties without regret and to pursue opportunities according to their current availability. In liquid times the person becomes a strategist constantly calibrating their self in the face of endemic uncertainty.

8. **Panopticism:** Panopticism describes a form of secular Protestantism where the self is always the subject not of God's gaze but of an awareness that they are always under surveillance by secular authorities at work, in the street, shopping centres and so on. The important thing is not so much the surveillance per se as the inscription of an awareness of being under surveillance in the consciousness of the subject. It creates a form of neurotic self-control, constantly checking on self.
9. **Post-bureaucracy:** Literally, after bureaucracy. Usually post-bureaucratic organizations are described in terms of structural design features that are the opposite of those of bureaucracy. They are flatter, more flexible, more informal.
10. **Project-based organizations:** these are seen as the increasingly liquid form of organizing where teams of specialists come together for a specific project, be it an innovation project, a design challenge or a major work. They collaborate and disperse after the project is accomplished to reform in other new projects. Project based organizations often have to juggle complex and contradictory directives: being on time and being on budget; being creative and delivering to specifications, etc.
11. **Projects:** any project, literally, is a forward throwing projection of an imagined future and the means of attaining it.
12. **Synopticism:** synopticism is a situation in which the many can see the few, in which social media and the Internet are altering our perceptions of what is acceptable when it comes to surveillance as we inform the world about ourselves on Facebook or other social media – we become a potential object of the gaze of the many whom we do not know in any face-to-face sense.

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