

## Liquid Love: Zygmunt Bauman's thesis on sex revisited

Zygmunt Bauman is not remembered as a theorist of love and intimacy. Amongst specialist researchers in these areas, Bauman is a relative unknown, in marked contrast with his prominence within the social sciences, in which he is one of the most cited scholars. The principal purpose of this article is to explore whether this relative lack of recognition is deserved, and hence whether the comparatively limited professional interest in Bauman's ideas on intimacy is an accurate reflection of their true scholarly value.

Whatever the answer, it must first of all be said by way of background that Bauman's more modest status in this field ought not surprise us. Put simply, Bauman did not write very much about romantic and sexual relations. These do appear throughout Bauman's published works, but are seldom the subject of a systematic or sustained analysis. By way of illustration, in *Liquid Modernity* (2000), the word "sex", "intimacy", and their inflexions appear just twice, while "love" in the sense of "romantic love", and related terms such as "lover", "partner", and so forth, number fewer than twenty. This is also reflected in Bauman's broader corpus. Of the more than sixty English-language books that Bauman authored, just one, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (2003), represents a dedicated theoretical engagement with the phenomena of sexuality and love (both passionate and compassionate) in the twenty-first century. A great many other topics receive far greater attention: class, socialism, neoliberalism, hermeneutics, critical theory, the Holocaust, modernity, postmodernity, consumerism, globalisation, surveillance, and ethics. As such, researchers can be forgiven for missing Bauman's treatment of love, which is easily lost within a corpus so voluminous and wide-ranging that it may be said (quite sincerely) that it is easier to list the significant social issues that Bauman hasn't written about.

There is also perhaps another reason for the comparative obscurity of these aspects in Bauman's thought. This is to do with his professional and personal identity, which one can imagine producing doubt over whether a 'grand social theorist' recognised for highly abstract analyses of the most general of social phenomena could possibly provide much insight into this more specialised, circumscribed and personal of domains. Moreover, a sceptic might wonder what a pale, male, and stale (Bauman was 77 when *Liquid Love* was published) European, who lived most of his life in the middle of England, possibly hope to contribute to our understanding of dating apps, pick-up artists, MGTOWs, chemsex, and dogging? Yet the reader who indulged these legitimate concerns regarding the likely fruitfulness of just such an enquiry would, in the estimation of some, including specialists in the field, be mistaken.

Feona Attwood is one such researcher, who described Bauman as one of a few "ground-breaking theorists of sexuality" who "leaves behind him an amazing and inspiring body of work" (Attwood, 2017 :1). This article begins, therefore, with an attempt to give sense to these remarks by outlining the central arguments that Bauman advances in relation to the study of love and human sexual relations. It then considers their merits in the context of the United Kingdom, the country in which Bauman lived most of his adult life. My principal source of such arguments is *Liquid Love* (2003), in which Bauman applies his understanding of the broader societal transition from a solid to a liquid form of modernity to the domains of sex, sexuality, and relationships.

Bauman's particular focus is on the dehumanizing influence of neoliberalism in these domains. However, I hope to show that while developing this argument, Bauman inadvertently reveals his prejudicial assumptions about the sphere of sexual practice, specifically in relation to a normatively established hierarchy of human value. Moreover, it will be argued that *Liquid Love* represents an unpersuasive extension of Bauman's liquefaction thesis – a trend that may be seen to have continued with *Liquid Fear* (2006), *Liquid Surveillance* (2012), and *Liquid Evil* (2016) – and which highlights some of the general flaws in Bauman's account of the process of societal

liquefaction. The shortcomings of Bauman's Liquid Love thesis also point to the problematic nature of the notion of 'modernity' itself, as the term is deployed in the conceptions of both solid and liquid modernity. How the 'urge to convert' and that the 'gardening' ambitions of the state remains central to governance within both solid and liquid modernity. Contrary to Bauman's thesis that liquid modernity has ushered in a sexual free for all rooted in individualism, sexual activity has been placed within a more strongly policed legislative framework. Moreover, since the publication of Liquid Love, relationships have not become more fluid, and indeed, there has been a demand for 'the solidities' of marriage amongst sections of the population who were previously denied the right, notably same sex couples. Thus, soon after the publication of Liquid Love, the Sexual Offences Act 2003 was passed which created several preventative orders such as the Risk of Sexual Harm Order specifically designed to criminalise the 'grooming' of children and young people with a view to committing sexual offences; possession of indecent photograph of a child; sexual assault; exposure and voyeurism. New sexual offences in relation to the 'abuse of position of trust' were introduced to criminalise some sexual relationships, including consensual relationships between 16-19-year-old students and their teachers. Schools and other education institutions have new obligations within relation to safeguarding within the sexual sphere. Abuse of position of trust criminalised activities such as: sexual activity with a child' causing or inciting a child to engage in sexual activity, sexual activity in the presence of a child and causing a child to watch a sexual act, all became offences under the 2003 Act. The National Sexual Crimes Unit was established in May 2009 and the investigation and prosecution of individuals accused of historical sexually motivated crimes have become more common. In the United Kingdom for example, the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, has redefined marriage as the legitimate route by which all intimate and relationship rights are accessed. The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 provides formal equality by entitling lesbians and gay men equal access to the same rights, duties, and obligations that were previously only extended to different-sex couples. In addition, Bauman's

work needs to be read against the backdrop of alarm from the New Right, focusing on how children were being exposed to things of a sexual nature too soon in their lives and that exploring their sexuality was something that children and young people should refrain from engaging with.

### **Bauman on liquid modern intimacy and sexual adiaphoria**

For Bauman, the boundaries between sex, eroticism and love make them distinct, but they are not isolated from one another. **To sketch briefly his position, all living creatures have biological processes that allow them to reproduce, with sex being a biological process of reproduction – and one that is not the preserve of humans. Sex retains a form of physicality, which is manifested in the mechanics of arousal. By contrast, eroticism places sexual practices within the cultural sphere, and encompasses the inventive cultural manipulation of sexual acts for pleasure. Erotic for Bauman is the adding of surplus value to the sexual act, so that the sexual act becomes something that we desire as an end in itself, unlike eroticism, which can be seen to be potentially dangerous for the participants or viewers. In addition, the erotic placing of sexual acts in the cultural sphere is done in such a way as to make reproduction the unwelcome outcome of the erotic encounter – something to be avoided. In conditions of postmodernity, says Bauman, eroticism has taken on a life of its own. As a result, people engage in eroticism freely, and disengage from it out of convenience. At the same time, eroticism has become a seductive resource, a kind of commodity, with sex having become disengaged from morality.** Left unconstrained, sexuality can be dangerous, volatile and threatening, undermining morality and the strength of social relations. Within this culture, the desire to achieve stronger and more satisfying orgasm as an end in itself provides what Bauman sees as the sole motivation to engage in sexual activity. Alternatively love becomes somewhat 'out of place' in the contemporary world as it demands sexual loyalty from the one we love.

This new commodified form of eroticism, argues Bauman, is rooted in a 'discourse of consumerism' which emerges with the collapse of Foucault's panoptic model for securing and maintaining the social order – in other words, the decline in the use of discipline to generate obedience and 'good' habits. **But if not the discipline of panopticism, what, if anything, is responsible for the maintenance of order within contemporary society? For Bauman the answer is seduction, people have become culturally trained to become sensation-seekers rather than producers; we today have a need for greater stimuli. Bauman refers to this development as a "sort of 'impatience complex'" (2010: 23), for which he provides the following by way of elaboration:**

"getting sex is now 'like ordering a pizza ... now you can just go on line and order genitalia'. Flirting or making passes are no longer needed, there is no need to work hard for a partner's approval, no need to lean over backwards in order to deserve and earn a partner's consent, to ingratiate oneself in her or his eyes, or to wait a long time, perhaps infinitely, for all those efforts to bring fruit" (Bauman, 2010: 22).

**For eroticism, as with all commodity forms,** there is a need to enjoy it without the fear of unwelcome consequences. All pleasures and satisfactions of desire that are not mediated via the purchase and use of a commodity are not regarded by liquid moderns as particularly attractive. Commodification brings about a "weakening and impairment of interhuman bonds" and in particular "the pulverization of love relationships" (Bauman and Mazzeo, 2012: 117).

**In addition to these interpersonal and cultural trends there is for Bauman another: the state's disengagement from policing the sexual sphere. This is of no small importance, because, according to Bauman, it leads to a void within sexual mores. As Bauman writes:**

"The void created by the absence of external constraints, by the retreat or neutral disinterestedness of legislating powers, must be filled or at least an attempt must be made to fill it" (Bauman, 1999: 26).

But what, in Bauman's view, could fill this void? For Bauman the answer is found in consumerism. To understand Bauman's explanation for this it will be necessary to first examine his perspective on ethics. In his writings on sexuality, one of Bauman's central ideas is that individuals are unable to exercise their moral agency when they act as sexual beings because of the impact upon their decision-making of what he terms adiaphorization. By this, Bauman means a process by which human sexual behaviour becomes divorced from moral considerations. For Bauman, the main cause of adiaphorization – of actions being purged of ethical significance, leading to a bypassing of moral agency – is consumerism. Bauman takes as his ethical foundation a secular reading of Levinas, most notably the idea that, in contexts of face-to-face interaction, all people have an innate moral impulse to be both for, and with, the Other – where being with the Other is roughly akin to putting oneself in their shoes (i.e., empathising with them); and where being for the Other means, again somewhat loosely, taking responsibility for their wellbeing. For Bauman, being with the Other presupposes being for them, as we can only take responsibility for those Others with whom we can identify. Actions become 'morally adiaphoric' (not moral or immoral, but amoral) when the responsibility for a given action is shifted away from the actor, who becomes a mere functionary carrying out the wishes of another. This is the so-called 'agentic state', a term Bauman borrows from Stanley Milgram (1974), in which the actor does not have to face the moral consequences of their actions – what Bauman describes as a situation of 'floated responsibility' (Bauman, 1993: 126). Importantly, although we all have an innate moral impulse to be for and with the Other, we are not in all situations able to follow through on that impulse. One such situation would be when we are in an agentic state, in which our moral responsibility is assumed by someone else, such as a person in authority. For Bauman, it is precisely the processes of adiaphoria that prevent the individual from exercising that innate moral impulse. We feel an obligation to treat the Other in the way that is customary within the culture; we view the Other as a set of characteristics. The social processes underpinning consumerism impact directly upon the

central nervous system of the individual sexual being, as a determining or conditioning force that is external to the individual, suspending the individual's conscience to the degree that the moral content of an action is placed outside of the consciousness of the human agent. Thus, consumerism appears to generate a 'substitute conscience' in the minds of the sexual being, thereby filling the void in sexual morality that was left by the retreat of the state in the policing of the sex lives of its citizens.

Bauman is not **much** in favour of the developments that have brought about liquid sexuality. In his estimation, such developments are the product of unmatched moral irresponsibility disguised as sexual liberation. Bauman is similarly unimpressed by liquid sexuality itself, which he views as undermining the social and biological imperatives of reproduction. **On these matters, Bauman's interview with Feona Attwood is instructive. In the latter part of his interview, Bauman defends heterosexuality, marriage, and the family, against what he perceives as the threat of liquid sexuality. When asked about same sex marriage, he provides the following remark:**

"Why not, therefore, allow people to play family?" (Attwood, 2017: 6).

**As in allow gay people to pretend to be heterosexual parents?**

**Attwood also asked Bauman how the cultural trends regarding intimacy and eroticism that he had identified in 1999 – in his influential article 'On Postmodern Uses of Sex' – had developed since. In his response, Bauman discussed neither the central thesis of this article nor *Liquid Love* (2003), instead speculating on the changing perception of childhood masturbation, Foucault, and parental fear of child sexual abuse.** However, Bauman's writings reveal that he is critical of how sexual relations have developed since the publication of these texts, with his opinions broadly consistent with the **traditional conservative** critique of permissiveness and sexual self-determination from the 1980s and 1990s.

**The transition from solid to liquid modernity**

**To be able to best understand Bauman's ideas about sex and love in the contemporary period, one must place them within their appropriate theoretical frame, namely, Bauman's broader account of the transformation from a modern to a liquid modern world.**

Academics have tended to focus on the mechanisms that Bauman claims bring about the transition from solid to liquid modernity. In so doing, they have largely ignored the meaning and content of what Bauman means by 'modernity'. Liquid life is a consumerist or 'consuming life' for Bauman, a life that: "casts the world and all its animate and inanimate fragments as objects of consumption" (Bauman, 2005: 9). Arguably the clearest statement on the transition from solid to liquid modernity is found in Bauman's short books *Liquid Life* (2005) and *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (2007) in which he describes the transition in terms of several overlapping lines of reasoning.

Bauman maintains that there has been a dissolution of 'the social', with structures that were once assumed to provide security and stability becoming increasingly deregulated, individualised and privatised, ideas that underpin the neo-liberal position of 'There is no alternative' (TINA) and Thatcher's other well-known view that 'That there is no such thing as society, only individuals and their families'. Individuals are now solely responsible for their misfortunes, and personal problems in liquid modernity are no longer seen as public issues. Additionally, there has been a separation of power from politics, which means that politicians are less able to protect us from the (increasingly international or global) problems that face us. Amongst liquid moderns, there has been a decline in ideas about a 'common good' and social justice. Consequently, in liquid modernity there has been a rejection of long term state planning and investment.

There is no one event or date that Bauman identifies as the symbolic moment marking the transition from solid to liquid modernity. **This need not undermine the extent of the difference between these respective types of social age, though it is important to note that the terms'** retention of the concept of 'modernity' implies that whilst the liquid form constitutes an epochal-scale



transformation of solid modernity, the two societal types must be thought by Bauman to share some fundamental things in common. What are these common components or qualities of modernity that these two distinct phases of history share? In 'Modernity and Ambivalence' (1991) **Bauman provides the following explanation:**

"existence is modern in as far as it is affected and sustained by design, manipulation, engineering. .. administered by resourceful (that is, possessing knowledge, skill and technology), sovereign agencies. Agencies are sovereign in as far as they claim and successfully defend the right to manage and administer existence: the right to define order" (Bauman, 1991: 7).

In *Liquid Modernity* (2000), Bauman expands further on the point:

"The society which enters the twenty-first century is no less 'modern' than the society which entered the twentieth; the most one can say is that it is modern in a different way. What makes it as modern as it was a century or so ago is what sets modernity apart from all other historical forms of human cohabitation: the compulsive and obsessive, continuous, unstoppable, forever incomplete modernization; the overwhelming and ineradicable, unquenchable thirst for creative destruction or of destructive creativity, as the case might be: of 'clearing the site' in the name of a 'new and improved' design; of 'dismantling', 'cutting out', 'phasing out', 'merging' or 'downsizing', all for the sake of a greater capacity for doing more of the same in the future - enhancing productivity or competitiveness" (Bauman, 2000: 28).

Solid modernity is described as structured, rational and bureaucratic whilst liquid modernity is formless, shapeless and unstructured, irrational and flexible. In *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989) Bauman defines 'modernity' as a 'compulsive modernization' in which there is a design for the social order, a rationalising of social life, 'an inherently transgressive mode of being-in-the-world'; in which the social order is shaped by 'the rule of economic and monetary values' that underpins state power and who comes to be defined as having a legitimate claim of citizenship; a social formation in which

science and technology take away people's dependence on nature. During his postmodern phase of writing, Bauman located modernity within the twentieth century: "Modernity was a long march to prison", suggested Bauman. Not everyone got there, but many did such as Stalin's Russia, Hitler's Germany, or Mao's China (Bauman, 1992: xvii).

In contrast to 'order-obsessed' solid modernity, which Bauman describes as a "society of all-embracing, compulsory and enforced homogeneity" (Bauman, 2000: 25), liquid modernity is described as a: "phase in the history of modernity" that is "in many ways novel" (Bauman, 2000: 2), characterised by "the dissolution of forces which could keep the question of order and system on the political agenda" (Bauman, 2000: 6). For Bauman, liquid modernity signals "a radical change in the arrangement of human cohabitation and in social conditions under which life-politics is nowadays conducted" (Bauman, 2000: 10).

Liquid modernity does **not, however**, "herald the end of human misery" (Bauman, 2000: 28) and is described as "above all, post-Panoptical" and not hospitable; a form of society ruled by a "nomadic and exterritorial elite" (Bauman, 2000: 13).

There is, however, a rich variety of societal forms within solid modernity, from the iron age of totalitarianism to liberalism and forms of social democracy. The differences between Nazism and Stalinism on the one hand, and social democracy on the other, appear to be greater than the differences between social democracy and liquid modernity, for example. This should make us question the value of dividing history into distinct phases each with a well-defined set of characteristics. The transition from solid to liquid modernity is then based upon an unconvincing idea of a definitive 'break': that history progresses by moving forward from one well-defined and distinct stage or temporal sequence to another, each with some unique and incomparable characteristics.

**Bauman provides no analytic definition of 'modernity' and instead provides lists of possible characteristics.** It is important to keep in mind that the word 'modernity' is not used by Bauman descriptively, to distinguish it, say, from the term 'contemporary'. In *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Bauman uses the term 'modernity' polemically, and identifies the quest for order within solid modernity as genocidal in nature. Also, while he traces the qualitative differences between modernity in its solid and liquid forms, it is important to note that many of the key features of the latter, such as the corrosive impact of consumerism on self and identity, were identified in the 1940s by Erich Fromm.

In *Consuming Life* (2007a), Bauman argues that in a society of consumers people must “recast themselves as commodities” (Bauman, 2007a: 6). He continues: “men and women must meet the conditions of eligibility defined by market standards (Bauman, 2007a: 62), with consumers “driven by the need to ‘commoditize’ themselves – remake themselves into attractive commodities” (Bauman, 2007a :111). **Liquid moderns engage in consumerism** to lift themselves out of that grey and flat invisibility and insubstantiality. Making themselves stand out from the mass of indistinguishable objects. The liquid modern consumer must engage in: “perpetually resuscitating, resurrecting and replenishing the capacities expected and required of a sellable commodity” (Bauman, 2007a: 12). In terms of the aspirations of the liquid modern consumer Bauman explains that: “In a society of consumers, turning into a desirable and desired commodity is the stuff of which dreams, and fairy tales are made” (Bauman, 2007a: 13). **What makes these developments especially pernicious is that they are not limited to the markets of labour or goods and services – but have penetrated the most intimate aspects of our lives. This brings us to one of the central arguments within *Liquid Love*: that consumerism has a significant impact on the relationships we have with our partners, especially life partners, because they do not fit neatly into the broader society of consumers:**

“just as on the commodity markets, partners are entitled to treat each other as they treat the objects of consumption ... partners are cast in the status of consumer objects” (Bauman, 2007a: 21).

These and other similar ideas had been explored by Erich Fromm in what he terms ‘marketing orientation’ or the ‘marketing character’: the condition of an individual characterised by corrosive consumerist practices which lead to the paralysis and eventual destruction of **that person’s** self.

People with a marketing orientation treat people as they treat consumer products. Fromm describes the marketing character as consumption hungry, though the buying behaviour of people with this orientation is both compulsive and irrational because the pleasure derived from using the purchased objects is secondary. Like Bauman, Fromm also applies his ideas on the corrosive nature of consumption to the subjects of sex and relationships:

“While nature has devised, as it were, the prototype – or perhaps the symbol – of shared enjoyment in the sexual act, empirically the sexual act is not necessarily an enjoyment that is shared; the partners are frequently so narcissistic, self-involved that one can speak only of simultaneous, but not of shared pleasure” (Fromm, 1976: 116).

For Fromm the puzzling question is explaining this ‘empty life of consumption’, most notably why people love to buy and to consume but appear to have so little attachment to the things they buy. In the modern era, a marketing orientation has developed in which people experience one’s self as a commodity. A person’s value is one’s exchange value in the personality market:

“A person is not concerned with his life and happiness, but with becoming saleable” (Fromm, 1948: 70).

On this view, people strive relentlessly to be seen to be successful, with any setback liable to result in feelings of helplessness, insecurity, and low self-esteem. For Fromm, “the package, the label, the brand have become important in people as well as in commodities” (Fromm, 1948: 81) to the extent that, “The premise of the marketing orientation is emptiness, the lack of any specific quality which

could not be subject to change, since any persistent trait of character might conflict some day with the requirements of the market” (Fromm, 1948: 77-78).

Having fun also requires the consumption of commodities – “sights, food, drinks, cigarettes, people, lectures, books, movies” (Fromm, 1955: 161). Modern consumers identify themselves by what they consume. Although the consumer assumes that consumption brings pleasure, the things we have soon lose their satisfying or pleasing character, thereby compelling us to consume more. This orientation is summed up by Fromm in the phrase: “the more I *am* the more I *have*”; in other words, for Fromm the pursuit of happiness through the unrestricted satisfaction of all desires via consuming and possessing is not conducive to well-being or happiness. Anything and everything can become an object to desire and consume: friends, lovers, health, travel, art – all objects that become resources from which we can build the image we desire for ourselves and that we wish to present to others.

**In Bauman’s thought**, a key characteristic of modernity, in both its solid and liquid forms, remains social exclusion. Both variants contain a centralised state that is responsible for the protection of what are considered key aspects of the totality. **However, a major difference is** that the liquid modern state has withdrawn from several areas of social life, most notably in its provision of a ‘social state’ that protected citizens from periods of unemployment and other misfortunes. The social state was essential to the smooth running of society under conditions of solid **modernity. But** under conditions of liquid modernity, the individual is now viewed as responsible for the economic and social circumstances in which they find themselves. **And crucially, in Bauman’s perspective the bedroom is not exempt from this development. But to what extent is the conduct of an individual as a sexual being, and the nature of an individual’s sex life, really viewed as being the sole responsibility of that individual and, moreover, something over which the state can have no legitimate say? Contrary to Bauman’s view**, it is possible to identify several areas of social life, **including those related to sex**, which the state continues to regulate and police in much the same ways as it did under conditions of solid modernity.

**Furthermore, in much the same way that the state's constraints upon sexual behaviour are claimed to have loosened or even disappeared in the liquid world, so the more self-imposed chains of long-term romantic commitment have become,** within liquid modernity, rather 'thin on the ground'. Echoing Fromm, Bauman argues that human bonds, including intimate relationships, are increasingly defined in terms of a desire to 'consume' the desired other within a consumer culture, making the basis for true intimacy frail and insecure: "the denizens of the liquid modern world ... abhors everything that is solid and durable, that is unfit for instant use and allows no end to effort, such a prospect may be more than one would willingly bargain for" (Bauman, 2003: 29). Under conditions of unrestrained individualisation, the liquid moderns are engaged in a de-learning of love in which long term or demanding relationships can become "troublesome incarnations of ambivalence" (Bauman, 2003: viii). **Sex within liquid modernity has no deeper significance beyond its providing pleasure.** In contrast with the aspirations of the solid modern individual, the liquid modern expects no long-term commitment, and is focused on the short-term pleasures that can be derived from a relationship. **The most desirable relationships offer** instantaneous satisfaction and are easy to enter and exit. Anything more permanent or binding is viewed as potentially oppressive. To illustrate, Bauman quotes an "expert counsellor" **writing in a magazine's 'relationship' column:** "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" (Bauman, 2003: x). In a liquid modern consumer culture, **sexual practice comes to emulate shopping patterns** (Bauman, 2003: 50) **in terms of being motivated and shaped by a desire to consume.** If something cannot be viewed as a commodity, it is regarded as being without value to the liquid modern. Again echoing Fromm, Bauman argues that liquid moderns treat: "other humans as objects of consumption and judge them after the pattern of consumer objects by the volume of pleasure they are likely to offer, and in 'value for money' terms" (Bauman, 2003: 75). **As such, the desire to consume the other in this sense is what attracts us to them. But in contrast to the solid modern**

maxim of love as an expression of 'till death do us part', which signified a form of intimacy embedded in humility, courage, faith and discipline, to the liquid modern, relationships are "like Ribena", says Bauman (distilling a view popular amongst the aforementioned expert counsellors). Bauman provides two remarks that explain his analogy between the popular blackcurrant drink and romantic relationships: "imbibed in concentration, they are nauseating and may prove dangerous to their health", and (stretching the metaphor to breaking point) "...like Ribena, relations should be diluted when consumed" (Bauman, 2003: x).

In this perspective, sexual liaisons are viewed as 'top pocket relationships': sweet and short lived and sweet because they are short lived. If the relationship is less than satisfactory it can be disposed of like a poor investment: "The smaller your mortgage loan, the less insecure you'd feel when exposed to the fluctuations of the future housing market; the less you invest in the relationship, the less insecure you'd feel when exposed to the fluctuations of your future emotions" (Bauman, 2003: 21).

In *Liquid Love*, Bauman also identifies how the solid modern state intervened in the lives of the population:

"That state strove for meticulous and ubiquitous control over the aspects of human life which past powers had left to local collective ways and means. It claimed the right and devised means to interfere in areas from which past powers, however oppressive and exploitative, kept their distance" (Bauman, 2003: 71).

Bauman does not celebrate liquid modern sexuality. Rather Bauman assumes that within both solid and liquid modernity sexuality should be primarily understood as a "natural" phenomenon, intrinsic to an individual's biological constitution. In this sense sexuality is located within the realm of "nature" and within the confines of a moral obligation. Liquid modern sexuality generates adiphoria, the pursuit of pleasure and desire underpinning the practices of sex and sexuality

excludes some categories of people from claiming to be moral subjects and, as such, they are treated with moral insensitivity. When people engage in liquid modern sexual relations as consumers in the sexual sphere they lose the ability to view the other in terms of their intrinsic value; the liquid modern has lost their concern for the other. Liquid modern individuals do not define their relationship towards the other in terms of the moral content of their actions but rather in terms of their ability to gain pleasure from that other.

For Bauman sexuality should be a central aspect of the affective characteristics of human life and affect must have an objective moral aspect beyond feelings of pleasure and personal satisfaction. Within the sphere of pleasure and satisfaction some aspects eroticism and the conscious enjoyment of sexual relations are identified by Bauman as unavoidably immoral even when the activities are engaged in by consenting adults for the purposes of fun and amusement. Bauman argues that such form of enjoyment when “severed from its age old-integration with reproduction, kinship and the generations” makes identity fragment into episodes and prevents a unified and consistent life strategy to emerge and leads to the floating of responsibility. Bauman continues by stating that the enjoyment of sexuality in this manner: “denies the moral significance of even the most intimate inter-human interaction. As a result, it exempts core elements of human interrelationships from moral evaluation. It adiaphorizes the parts of human existence which the adiaphoric mechanisms of bureaucracy and business could not (nor did not need, or wish, to) reach” (Bauman, 1995: 269).

Bauman continues to view sexuality in terms of the natural cycle of generations. These unsupported comments by Bauman suggest that he views eroticism and the conscious enjoyment of sexual relations as an end or as a leisure activity as untamed or ‘bad’ desire; and that such ‘bad’ desires should be rejected. Such a definition of good and bad sexual relations, including relations between consenting adults, damages the ‘harmonious world for humans’. Bauman’s unsupported view of good and bad sexuality is also reflected in the attempts by the state to regulate the sexual activities of its citizens. In contrast to the arguments that Bauman presents about a complete absence of



regulation within the liquid modern sexual sphere; within liquid modernity the state retains a motivation to generate 'societal self-improvement' in the sphere of sexuality based on the "urge to construct a perfect, harmonious world for humans" (Bauman, 1995: 173). In both solid and liquid modernity, the state continues with its role as the 'gardener', maintaining the borders of legitimate sexuality and identifying and dealing with sexual weeds; the presence of uninvited guests that disrupts the order of the garden.

In contrast to Bauman's view that liquid modernity reduces sexuality to a commodity, reducing all participants in a sexual relationship to sexual providers and consumers we can draw on research into sex and relationship education from across the globe to present a counter view. Caitlin Howlett (2016) for example identifies how in schools' sex and relationships education is concerned with promoting marriage, albeit as a kind of sexual labour and in addition that sex and relationships education is concerned with the stigmatization of sex workers, particularly non-white, female sex workers. In the United States there is a long history of federal funding for sex abstinence-only-until-marriage programmes. President Obama's Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP) (2010) funded programmes for Title V's abstinence education—and thus the commitment to an increasingly economic understanding of marriage. PREP grants continue to be awarded to State agencies to educate young people on the value of abstinence and contraception and sexually transmitted infections, notably HIV/AIDS.

Louisa Allen (2007) in one of several articles examines some of the discourses and practices through which schools produce and regulate student sexual identities. Allen has identified the role of schools' 'official culture' in term of a discursive strategy which recognises the preferred state sponsored student subjectivity as that of a 'non-sexual' being. Official school culture around student sexuality positions young people as 'childlike' attempting to undermine sexual agency. Allen develops the argument that sex, and relationships curriculum focuses on biological factors such as sexually transmitted infections, HIV/AIDS, reproductive systems, personal hygiene and abortion and

at the same time ignoring any discussion around issues of desire and pleasure. In addition, within sex and relationships education the emphasis is almost always on what can go on wrong with sexual activity.

The role of sex and relationships education in the United Kingdom, as in many other countries can be characterised as regulating the moral and sexual behaviour of pupils in an effort to shape or determine the construction of conventional heterosexual sexual identities (Aggleton and Campbell 2000; Allen 2001, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2011, 2012; Allen et al, 2014; Cameron-Lewis and Allen 2013a, 2013b; Carmody 2003, 2005, 2009a, 2009b; Ingham, 2005, Lenskyj,1990; Measor, Tiffin, and Miller, 2000).

The 2000 Guidance in the UK made it clear that:

- All children should be taught about the importance of marriage and stable relationships.
- Secondary school pupils should learn about human sexuality, the reasons for delaying sexual activity, the benefits from delaying, and sexual health.
- Early sexual experimentation is not encouraged.
- Pupils should learn about contraception, reproduction and emotions.
- Pupils should also be taught about avoiding unplanned pregnancies.

In summary, even within conditions of liquid modernity schools privilege rationality and the mind and marginalise the body and its desires. Schools in the UK and elsewhere, are expected to adopt a medical and reproductive approach to sex and relationships education that encourages heterosexually, encourages a stable family life, prevent promiscuity, combat the spread of sexually transmissible infections and ‘unplanned’ pregnancies. An approach to sex and sexuality that Lenskyj (1990) described as a ‘plumbing and prevention’ approach to sex and relationships education. As the guidance to schools makes clear:

“It is lifelong learning about physical, moral and emotional development. It is about the understanding of the importance of marriage for family life, stable and loving relationships, respect, love and care. It is also about the teaching of sex, sexuality, and sexual health. It is not about the promotion of sexual orientation or sexual activity – this would be inappropriate teaching” (DfEE, 2000: 5).

Bauman draws upon Mary Douglas to argue that solid modernity contained within itself a ‘dream of purity’. The person who does not conform is regarded as impure, dirt and slimy; as reflected in Bauman’s conception of the stranger. The stranger, including the sexual stranger do not fit into a binary scheme of ‘friend’ or ‘enemy’ that modern people use to define and maintain order. As such because the stranger falls outside of definitional boundaries, being unknown and unknowable the presence of the stranger generates feeling of ambivalence that disrupts the smooth running of modernity. Ambivalence generates fear and discomfort for ‘the planner’ because the stranger may be impure and contagious.

In contrast to Bauman’s view a central aspect of liquid modernity remains the management of social life by a centralised state; albeit this management is presented as the pastoral power of the state and often takes the form of regulation rather than direct control via the agencies of the state. The state within liquid modernity has exited responsibility for many aspects of the social state however it is still attempts to deploy totalizing mechanisms for the management of social life attempting to impose state sponsored forms of knowing and acting in a range of areas of social and personal life; including the most intimate human life processes in relation to interpersonal relationships and sexuality. The state encourages the individual to engage in private acts of self-governance.

Individuals are encouraged to work on themselves to diminish what are presented to them in for example sex and relationship education classes as individual or collective threats to life or health. A parallel can be drawn between Bauman’s understanding of ‘urge to convert’ and what Hardt and

Negri describe as the extension of regulatory networks; as a power that is "expressed as a control that extends throughout the depths of the consciousnesses and bodies of the population" (2000: 24) and the imposition of order over desire in the constitution of subjectivity. A form of power which operates blur the boundaries between self and other, inside and outside, to shape how subjects come to know themselves. What Dean (1999) described as "regimes of practices" through which subjects are both realized and self-realized. Or as Miller observes: "Power in this respect is a more intimate phenomenon. It knows the individual better, it does not act on individuals at a distance and from the outside. It acts on the interior of the person, through their self" (1987: 2).

In the United Kingdom as in all liquid modern societies people have experienced a high degree of individualisation. However, the state has not stepped back from attempting to regulate the sexual behaviours or sexual identities of children and young people. Sexuality is a central aspect of human existence, but remains subject to political and ethical constraints, notably as children are regarded as innocent, vulnerable and as needing protection from abuse. The assumption of childhood vulnerability is still present within liquid modernity and this can make the delivery of sex and relationships education problematical. In her analysis of SRE documentation in the UK Karen Corteen (2003, 2006) concluded that young people's access to information is institutionally limited and partial. In the schools she investigated there was a failure to equip children and young people with an appropriate knowledge and understanding of sexuality, which reflected the realities of their lives in a diverse society. The SRE curriculum does not encourage early sexual activity, promotes ideas about what is normal and what is deviant and significantly underemphasises pleasure and desire.

## **Conclusion**

In *Liquid Love* (2003) Bauman presented a vision of human sexuality within liquid modernity as an unregulated and pleasure driven aspect of rampant individualisation. Sexual practices were treated

like any other aspect of consumption and like other aspects of consumption were engaged in by people in an agentic state who generated adiaphoria as a by-product of their self-serving quest to satisfy self-driven pleasure and desire. Sex and sexuality were described by Bauman as aspects of social life from which the state had disengaged, privatised or lost interest in. State disengagement from the regulation of sexuality is clearly not the case. Since the publication of *Liquid Love* the state has become much more actively involved in the regulation and criminalisation of numerous areas of the sex lives of its citizens. *Liquid Love* is one application too far for Bauman's liquefaction thesis in that book highlights the commonality that exists in terms of the regulation of personal life. Individuals who were sexually the Other and subjected to the state's 'urge to convert', notably people who engaged in same sex relationships are encouraged to view their sexuality on heterosexual terms – and get married. More and more sexual activities have become criminalised and more populations are regulated in terms of their most intimate of behaviours. A central aspect of liquid modernity remains the management of social life by a centralised state. In contrast to Bauman's view that liquid modernity has opened sexuality to forms of unregulated individualised forms of sexual practice; the liquid modern state still attempts to shape people's conduct and regards human sexuality as a legitimate area for regulation and control.

Bauman is not supportive of the consequences of liquid modernity on human intimacy and sexuality. Underneath the metaphors of liquefaction, Bauman presents a negative, personal and conventional understanding of developments in the field of intimacy and sexuality. Underpinning Bauman's analysis is a rejection of what he sees as an anything-goes libertarianism, in which sex becomes a vehicle for negative values and practices free from moral anxieties. In Bauman's view the global flows that comprise the processes of liquefaction have not allowed new forms of sexual agency to emerge; rather consumerism has invaded intimacy and sexuality and limited human agency and choice. Sex is a biological imperative for Bauman, a natural phenomenon that is shaped by social and historical forces. Bauman would like to see a return to forms of intimacy and sexual practice in which

bodily self-determination was limited through traditional patriarchal authority in which emotional security that physical intimacy can only be truly found in the neat and orderly heterosexual marriage. Bauman does not want people to stop engaging in sexual acts, but he does view sexual choices, diverse tastes and practices he disagrees with as morally failing. He views the commodification of sexuality as having damaging moral and ethical consequences for individuals and the wider society; what Bauman's terms *adiaphoria*. Bauman's underpinning dislike of liquid sexuality is based upon his own preference for a more traditional form of sexual experience that he presents as emerging from true love and from a 'legitimacy of naturalness'. For Bauman sexuality should be confined to heterosexual marriage based upon love, and emotional security. However, Bauman's personal views on sex and sexuality are as equally socially constructed and as arbitrary as the choices he assumes that liquid moderns make in relation to the way they choose to conduct themselves as sexual beings.

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