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Fall 2018 Third Prize Essay

CONGEALING MODERNITY

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From the darkest depths of history, the greatest minds arise. While much of humanity finds unity in the joy of family life, the comfort of national stability, and the carefree sentiments of youth, two of the most prominent, philosophical minds of the twentieth century find their common ground in the fear and uncertainty of today's world. Regardless of the ten-year gap in publications, Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Times* and Pope John Paul II's address at World Youth Day XII expertly complement one another. Despite their seemingly contradictory writings, Bauman and Pope John Paul II share a profound cognizance of the constant, terrifying precariousness of the modern world, allowing their works to effectively converse decades after publication.

To comprehend the similar nature of these texts, one must acknowledge the parallel origins of the authors. Polish nationals John Paul II and Bauman were born in 1925 and 1920, respectively. As a result of their unfortunate historical timing, these men frequently faced an inordinate amount of uncertainty at an early age. By the age of twenty-one, John Paul II had lost his mother, brother, sister, father, and, similar to Bauman, his homeland. After the Nazi overthrow of Poland in 1939, both men found themselves expatriates in their own country. Bauman's Jewish heritage exposed him to a new level of human atrocity and fear during an age of genocide, and John Paul II's devotion to preserving Polish culture as well as the lives of his Jewish companions placed him at high risk of imprisonment and death. With the danger of Nazism and the utter despair of the Holocaust breathing down their necks, John Paul II and Bauman dared to defy their oppressors. Although their paths never directly crossed, both John Paul II and Bauman fought in the Polish resistance during World War II. After the war, both men found themselves unwelcome in Poland for their political views. Bauman was exiled from Poland in 1968, and throughout much of his papacy, John Paul II received intense backlash from the Soviet government while attempting to enter the country and speak on the benefit of true democracy. These uniquely traumatic lives fostered a philosophic perspective based primarily on the influence of fear of the unknown in the modern world.

For instance, one can observe the commonalities in the world views of Bauman and John Paul II through the idea of liquid modernity. Bauman describes, "a 'liquid' phase of modernity: that is, into a condition in which social forms (structures that limit individual choices, institutions that guard repetitions of routines, patterns of acceptable behavior) can no longer (and are not expected) to keep their shape for long" (Bauman 1). He comments on the everchanging and rapid rate of societal movement in the modern era. Because modernized societies continue to change the status quo so quickly, most traditional social structures have disappeared due to their refusal to change with the times. This leaves humanity in limbo: constantly questioning what the daunting future might hold for the next generation as he defines, "Uncertainty means fear" (Bauman 94). Although the term "liquid modernity" was not coined by Bauman until the publication of *Liquid Times* in 2007, John Paul II echoes this idea in his speech from a decade earlier as he notes, "We are living in an era of great changes: the rapid decline of ideologies that seemed to promise a long resistance to the wear and tear of time; the tracing out on the planet of new confines and frontiers. Humanity often finds itself uncertain, bewildered and anxious" Both men recognize the radical shift away from tradition and towards a new variation of perpetually changing moral relativism.

Bauman leaves this situation at the level of superficial warning.

On the contrary, John Paul II refuses to desert his audience in the anxiety of this liquid state. Instead he prophetically answers Bauman's work with a message of guidance and hope. He bolsters humanity by proclaiming, "But the word of God knows no decline; throughout history and among changing events, it remains firm and gives light." Amidst the chaos of the modern world, many ponder the purpose to human existence, frequently to no avail. John Paul II offers humanity an island to rest on in the sea of uncertainty through the immutability of God. While this solution may not appeal to all, one must acknowledge the entice of hope over despair in times of radical societal upheaval.

This perpetual desire to uplift humanity and cultivate a culture of hope sets John Paul II apart from Bauman. Although their upbringings and philosophies on fear unite these men, Bauman, without directly naming John Paul II, clearly describes the one fundamental difference between the two men. Bauman, by his own definition, is a hunter, and John Paul II is a gardener. Bauman defines, "The sole task hunters pursue is another 'kill', big enough to fill their game-bags to capacity" (Bauman 100). Throughout his book, Bauman consistently alarms his audience with the worst possible outcomes instead of pragmatic practicalities. He only seeks to make his audience more aware of their fears and abandons any thought of how to conquer them. With his unnerving tone, Bauman fires frequent intellectual warning shots and moves on to his next intellectual target. As a true hunter he desires only to warn and never to guide humanity towards a brighter tomorrow. Contrastingly, John Paul II is a gardener. He "assumes that there would be no order in the world at all (or at least in the small part of that world entrusted to his wardenship) were it not for his constant attention and effort" (Bauman 99). John Paul II accepts the modern world's need for individuals who tend to the garden of humanity with justice and dignity. The former pope urges the youth to work for a better tomorrow as he states, "In this world you are called to live fraternally, not as utopia but as a real possibility." He includes this call to action in the hopes that his audiences understand "even the desert can then become a garden." With a communal, gardener mentality, the waves of liquid modernity subside, and the individualistic hunters begin to drown in their own chaos.

Consequently, John Paul II urges his audience to question whether they are a hunter or a gardener. In the age of rampant capitalism and individualism, each person must decide if they are interested in serving humanity or the interests of a single man. While the lure of personal wealth and success at the misfortune of others deeply resonates with the modern generation, John Paul II questions the young people of the world if liquid modernity is truly what they desire. "But – I ask you – is it better to be resigned to a life without ideals, to a world made in our image and likeness, or rather, generously to seek truth, goodness, justice, working for a world that reflects the beauty of God, even at the cost of facing the trials it may involve?" He argues that it is better to march into hell for the heavenly cause of human unity than to sit by the wayside collecting one's own riches at the expense of the less fortunate. Bauman rejects the notion of generosity from the upper class; he cannot fathom the idea of freely giving of one's self for the benefit of someone less fortunate. He comments, "they (the urban elite) need not be concerned, and apparently nothing can compel them to be concerned if they decide not to be" (Bauman 75). The fear and uncertainty of his childhood has so damaged Bauman that he cannot see beyond the looming dread of uncertainty. Where Bauman's fear of the unknown paralyzes him, John Paul II sprints forward into the unknown to set an example for the youth of the world, showing them that society needs more gardeners who will serve their fellow man, and less hunters who will only serve themselves.

Moreover, John Paul II conquers the despair of his past while Bauman remains defeated by his past on the subject of human dignity. Bauman shocks his readers as he declares, "Refugees are the very embodiment of 'human waste'" (Bauman 41). This statement is a vivid representation of how Bauman views himself, as he was a refugee for much of his early life. After years of mistreatment due to his refugee

status, Bauman has come to believe all refugees -all those without a home nation- cannot function productively in society. In the context of modernized nations, refugees serve no purpose and therefore are waste in the age of efficiency. Despite his similar circumstances, John Paul II denies his past the right to embitter him. Without belittling the intense degree of suffering in the world, he reminds his audience “Jesus’ dwelling is wherever a human person is suffering because rights are denied, hopes betrayed, anxieties ignored.” Suffering does not devalue human dignity but enriches the human experience in order to allow man to accept that his purpose is greater than momentary happiness. John Paul II embraces uncertainty for the sake of the redemptive quality of suffering. He overcomes the pain and fear of his past as well as the precariousness of the future by grounding himself in the service of others. It is in his connection to his fellow man that John Paul II pieces together the broken scraps of the modern world.

However, John Paul II’s bonds to humanity are not reserved only for the elite. He proclaims, “In reality, every human being is a fellow citizen of Christ.” He upholds human dignity. In the everchanging and chaotic world of fear and uncertainty, one piece must remain, or all civilization will collapse: human dignity. As long as man can respect himself and his fellow members of the human race, Bauman’s writings are only post-apocalyptic, fear-mongering ramblings. With the maintenance of human dignity comes hope.

Particularly, the threat to human dignity is highly visible in the present living conditions in most modern metropolitan areas. Bauman comments on cities, “one feature has remained constant: cities are spaces where strangers stay and move in close proximity to one another” (Bauman 85). Similarly, John Paul II observes the degradation of human dignity as he notes, “the huge metropolises, where millions of human beings live often as strangers.” Bauman identifies the origins of the fear that encapsulates modern society as the apprehension associated with uncertainty. This uncertainty is amplified when the modern man sees his neighbor as a terrifying, unknown entity, and not a fellow traveler on the road of life. To label another human being as dangerous, just because he is unfamiliar is a frequent act of ignorance in the modern world. The term stranger degrades human dignity because it fashions a divide between the known and unknown, ostracizing those who, by a sheer trick of fate, have not yet entered one’s isolated circle of daily life. These men remark on the lack of humanity in cities perpetuates the cycle of anonymity, creating nameless faces out of valuable human beings.

This disturbing paradox of loneliness in a crowd of thousands is defined by Bauman and John Paul II as the makings of nightmares. Although cities used to be a haven for artists, immigrants, and those seeking for greater job opportunities, they quickly deteriorated into a hellhole of crime, cyclical poverty, isolation, and uncertainty. Bauman quotes Michael Schwarzer as he describes cities as “places where ‘dreams have been replaced by nightmares and danger and violence are more commonplace than elsewhere’” (Bauman 73). He speaks of the decline of urban prosperity, and its effect on the morale of city-dwellers. Conversely, John Paul II again notices a problem and offers a solution. When discussing how to repair the damage of liquid modernity on modern cities, he encourages young people to get in touch with their humanity and welcome the stranger and outcast. When young people take action to mend the broken bonds of humanity, “You will discover the truth about yourselves and your inner unity, and you will find a Thou who gives the cure for anxieties, for nightmares and for the unbridled subjectivism that leaves you no peace.” In service to others, the loneliness of the modern age will melt away. These places of nightmarish prisons can be reborn as the sanctuaries of dreamers.

Lastly, the anachronist conversation between Bauman and John Paul II concludes with their mutual disgust for the effect of the age of efficiency on humankind. Modernity decimates the human spirit through its placement of productivity over humanity. John Paul II refers to inhabitants of the modernized world as “victims of an unjust model of development, in which profit is given first place and the human being is made a means rather than an end.” John Paul II notices the detrimental effects of uneven

modernization. He realized that when human beings become a commodity and not stewards of their own destiny, the gears of society come to a grinding halt and promptly fall apart. Bauman upholds this sentiment as he blatantly states, “possibly the most fatal result of modernity’s global triumph, is the acute crisis of the ‘human waste’ disposal industry” (Bauman 28). Modernity kills the modern man in favor of machines and a life of ease for the wealthy. Bauman and John Paul II witnessed the dangers of modernity as the Nazi Party attempted to eradicate all “human waste” from their new empire. Through violent and unspeakable acts of genocide against Jews, Christians, political adversaries, homosexuals, gypsies, and the disabled, the darkest and most gruesome aspects of modernity were displayed to Bauman and John Paul II in their early childhoods. Both men came to realize the unbeatable dangers and utterly distorted brainwashing one must endure to place efficiency above the fundamental rights of man. Man cannot be treated as a means to an end, but as the caretakers of the future.

Although terror and despair unite Zygmunt Bauman and Pope John Paul II, their similar backgrounds illuminate the origins of their philosophies. From the ashes of war-torn Poland arose two men who recognize the terrifying precariousness of the modern world. While Bauman merely fires warning shots into the oblivion of the modern era with complex intellectualized arguments, his contemporary, John Paul II, swallows the fear and uncertainty all men face daily and guides humanity towards hope. Their core acknowledgement of perpetual fear permits their writings to converse decades after publication. Where Bauman alerts the public, John Paul II ushers them and attempts to assuage their fears. John Paul II instructs the young people of the world, “Break down the barriers of superficiality and fear.” To attempt to congeal the watery mess of the modern world, one must listen to the warnings of the Jewish hunter and the counsel of the Catholic gardener.