

COVID-19: INTO THE INFERNO

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It took quite some time, considering our 24-hour news cycle, before the effects of the COVID-19 coronavirus strain became well-known. During the past few months, the numerous measures to stop the spreading of COVID-19 taken by governments have brought on an additional layer of insecurity to many aspects of our lives and futures. As of August 2020, many months after it was officially identified, many aspects related to the virus still remain unknown and uncertain. How soon will we be able to get a vaccine? What will happen to the (global) economy in the aftermath of the virus? There has been a great deal of commentary on there being a possible positive momentum for change now that societies globally have been put to a halt.² Others, in their turn, have commented on how eager everyone is to get back to ‘normal’ - the normal of belief in conspiracies, the normal of massive wealth disparities, the normal of environmental exploitation.³

Several academic works by Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck, and Bruno Latour may shed some light on these questions and positions. These authors have made some remarkably apt observations in works that preceded the corona crisis, that can be applied to what is happening in the world at the present time. These authors have in common that they argue for a change of our ways, particularly: the way humanity is currently exploiting the planet and individuals on a large scale, is having disastrous effects on that planet and on humanity as a whole. The only author still alive from these three to see the crisis play out, Latour, has commented on Twitter that the global shutdown is a prime moment to refocus the political discussion on the effects of climate change.⁴ In this essay these authors’ theories will be examined and critically assessed in light of the corona crisis, while answering the question which of these theories can be applied most effectively.

Zygmunt Bauman’s Liquid Times

Zygmunt Bauman focuses in *Liquid Times* on the common anxiety, the *liquid anxiety*, felt by humans living in modernity. It is caused by fear and uncertainty, emotions which are channeled into

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² See for example: Bram Ieven, Jan Overwijk, “We created this beast. The Political Ecology of COVID-19,” *Eurozine*, March 23, 2020, <https://www.eurozine.com/we-created-this-beast/>.

³ See for example: Jelmer Mommsers, “Terugkeren naar het ‘normaal’ van voor corona is waanzin, we moeten het niet laten gebeuren,” *De Correspondent*, July 6, 2020, <https://decorrespondent.nl/11378/terugkeren-naar-het-normaal-van-voor-corona-is-waanzin-we-mogen-het-niet-laten-gebeuren/1253958002-e29f4057>.

⁴ Bruno Latour (@BrunoLatourAIME), “Next time, when ecologists are ridiculed because “the economy cannot be slowed down”, they should remember that it can grind to a halt in a matter of weeks worldwide when it is urgent enough. After all, it comes with an alarm signal,” Tweet, March 22, 2020, <https://twitter.com/BrunoLatourAIME/status/1241659151215968257>.

a political discourse, and consequently exploited. The anxiety becomes liquid due to a heightened focus on the individual, living in a world whose social forms are constantly changing. The rapid measures taken by governments to contain COVID-19 and the ensuing collective anxiety illustrate this liquidity well. This new phase of liquid modernity occurred in tandem with the deregulation of the social welfare state, increasing neoliberalist tendencies and wealth inequality, and negative globalization.⁵ Governments and the media have steered away from collective problems, and placed the political focus on the safety of the individual. This has resulted in a skewed relationship between government and individual, where the burden of responsibility is by and large placed on the latter. The anxiety that people feel due to this focus on personal safety cannot be nullified, only minimized, as it is inherent in the way society is structured.⁶

According to Bauman, this anxiety is then channeled into the things one *could* change, or where risk can be minimized. This can be exemplified by the treatment of immigrants and refugees, who are demonised to take away the freedoms, traditions, and capital of individuals in the West - while being exploited for cheap labour. Meanwhile, the existence of these refugees has largely been brought on by Western interventionist policies. Conversely, directing this anxiety into changing the position of the elite, who have gained so much political and economic power, seems futile. For this reason, Bauman calls the elite the mirror-image of these refugees.⁷ We are currently witness to a prime example of the futility of changing the position of the elite, as billionaires in the US have gained 637 billion dollars over the course of this crisis, while 40% of US citizens have filed for unemployment.⁸ Humanity cannot focus its attention to disrupt this display of gluttony, because it is mainly focused on surviving this virus, loneliness, and the oncoming economic meltdown.

Bauman has noted, likewise to Beck, that we dream of a predictable and secure world. With that world comes the utopia of modernity, the vision of the world as presented in science-fiction. It is not hard to deny that humanity has made tremendous strides in terms of technology.⁹ We can instantly connect with people from around the globe. We have the possibility to fly everywhere, although this is largely reserved to certain social classes and nations. The global south is pushed and forced to stay inside their quadrant, and only a small number of them will get to move up north.¹⁰ There is inclusion for some, and exclusion for many. The recent global resurgence of the Black Lives Matter protests can be seen as a response to a form of exclusion, institutional racism, a remnant of colonial ideologies. The most fundamental problems, such as climate change and mass migration, Bauman writes, “are globally originated and invigorated and cannot be fixed with local solutions.”¹¹

⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007) 9-25.

⁶ Bauman, *Liquid Times*, 11-12.

⁷ Bauman, *Liquid Times*, 11-48.

⁸ Hiatt Woods, “How billionaires got \$637 billion richer during the coronavirus pandemic,” *Business Insider*, August 3, 2020 <https://www.businessinsider.com/billionaires-net-worth-increases-coronavirus-pandemic-2020-7?international=true&r=US&IR=T>.

⁹ Bauman, *Liquid Times*, 95-102.

¹⁰ Bauman, *Liquid Times*, 50-52.

¹¹ Bauman, *Liquid Times*, 25.

We therefore live in a negatively globalized world, where that earlier-mentioned burden of responsibility is placed on individuals and national governments to find solutions to global issues. Progress is no longer reserved for the collective, but for the individual. The accompanying consumer-oriented economy provides only escapism. Promises of far-away lands, of being able to rebuild yourself, of achieving work-related goals.¹² Bauman does not offer a concrete solution to these issues, or a possible timeframe in which we could turn things around. Instead he nudges us to seek out the areas which give us hope and strength, through an Italo Calvino quote: “seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.”¹³

Ulrich Beck and The World Risk Society

Bauman’s work is centered around liquidity, just as Beck’s is centered around risk. In his works, Beck argues that our modern life is centered around the quantification and measurement of possible risks.¹⁴ This can be exemplified by the present continuous flow of new information regarding COVID-19 risk management strategies, reformulated in theories of “flattening the curve” and preventing a “second wave.” Such quantifications are used to create a ‘predictable’ and ‘safe’ world, and abate the perennial fear of the inevitability of death. Beck defines ‘risk’ as the anticipation of a catastrophe, and differentiates it from ‘threats’ and ‘manufactured uncertainties.’ For Beck, threats are (natural) catastrophes outside of our control, while manufactured uncertainties are new and occur due to human activity. Such manufactured uncertainties (such as climate change) shake society at its very core, because they are delocalized, incalculable, and non-compensable, so society does not know what to do with them or how to solve them.¹⁵

The World Risk Society manifests itself through the accumulation of these risks and manufactured uncertainties¹⁶. The ruling class uses the world risk society to its advantage, trying to exert more control in the areas where they are able to, all in the name of soothing the fear¹⁷. Consider Bauman’s example of the demonisation of migrants and refugees in wealthy Western countries, induced by restrictive migration policies and ‘Us vs Them’ narratives in the media. Beck, however, contra Bauman, proposes that a ‘cosmopolitan moment’ will be necessary to transition away from the world risk society towards a more sustainable future. Beck argues that the anticipation and occurrence of a global state of emergency will serve as an important lesson in how we should be leading our lives. For Beck, therefore, a global catastrophe has an enlightenment function¹⁸ - a paradoxical moment of

¹² Bauman, *Liquid Times*, 102-104.

¹³ Bauman, *Liquid Times*, 110.

¹⁴ Ulrich Beck, “Incalculable Futures: World Risk Society,” In Ulrich Beck. *Pioneer in Cosmopolitan Sociology and Risk Society*, ed. Ulrich Beck, 84-85. Springer, 2014.

¹⁵ Beck, “Incalculable Futures: World Risk Society,” 81-84.

¹⁶ Beck, “Incalculable Futures: World Risk Society,” 80.

¹⁷ Beck, “Incalculable Futures: World Risk Society,” 85.

¹⁸ Beck, “Incalculable Futures: World Risk Society,” 80.

hope, introspection, and ultimately, change.¹⁹ The corona crisis is certainly the global catastrophe of the present moment, putting pressure on health care systems worldwide and the global economy at large, if left unfettered. Is this then our cosmopolitan moment?

From the current state of affairs, it would appear that it is not. Certain governments are using this new state of emergency in a world already drenched in risk to further exert control over their citizens and sow uncertainty. For example, the Israeli²⁰ and Chinese²¹ governments are using more excessive surveillance and intimidation techniques - and the leaders of the US and Brazil have spent more time denying the effects of the virus rather than combating it. In Europe, citizens are restricted in their movements in the Schengen area, and refugees are left to their own devices altogether in overcrowded camps in the Southern States. The wealthiest European country, Germany, has spent weeks debating the intake of merely 50 unaccompanied minors from the overcrowded Greek islands.²² The Netherlands has refused to take in any, despite more than 80 municipalities' willingness to take in 500 unaccompanied minors.²³ Airplane corporations and other large businesses are being bailed out,²⁴ and no structural changes are promised to the job sectors that are being dubbed "essential" - the cleaners, teachers, nurses and doctors²⁵. The question then remains as to whether a different catastrophe will provide for Beck's cosmopolitan moment.

Bruno Latour and Climate Change

Bruno Latour has been actively writing about the other oncoming global catastrophe - climate change. In *Down to Earth*, Latour delves further into the problem of climate change through an investigation of the policies and politics that exacerbate it, such as the US pulling out of the Paris Climate Accord and the existence of climate change denialists. Latour has stated that trying to convince people of needing to know the "facts" is pointless, since they have become deeply sceptical about the institutions responsible for these facts. Bauman's liquid institutions²⁶ could be a likely contributor to this scepticism, because if these institutions are constantly shifting in terms of output,

¹⁹ Beck, "Incalculable Futures: World Risk Society," 85-88.

²⁰ Tom Bateman, "Coronavirus: Israel turns surveillance tools on itself," *BBC*, May 11, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/amp/world-middle-east-52579475>.

²¹ Raymond Zhong, "China's Virus Apps May Outlast the Outbreak, Stirring Privacy Fears," *New York Times*, May 26, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/26/technology/china-coronavirus-surveillance.html>.

²² Deutsche Welle, "Children evacuated from Greek refugee camps to arrive in Germany," April 16, 2020 <https://www.dw.com/en/children-evacuated-from-greek-refugee-camps-to-arrive-in-germany/a-53146722>.

²³ Ingeborg Beugel, "Harteloos en xenofob," *De Groene Amsterdammer*, May 27, 2020, <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/harteloos-en-xenofob>

²⁴ Climate Home News, "Coronavirus: which governments are bailing out big polluters?," April 20, 2020, <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2020/04/20/coronavirus-governments-bail-airlines-oil-gas/>.

²⁵ Gijs Herderschee, "Waarom de coalitie loonsverhoging in de zorg keer op keer tegenhoudt," *De Volkskrant*, August 13, 2020, <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/waarom-de-coalitie-loonsverhoging-in-de-zorg-keer-op-keer-tegenhoudt~b47023ad/>.

²⁶ "A condition in which social forms ([...] institutions that guard repetitions of routines, patterns of acceptable behaviour) can no longer (and are not expected) to keep their shape for long, because they decompose and melt faster than the time it takes to cast them." Bauman, *Liquid Times*, 1.

the people's trust in them erodes. Latour thus argues that we have to look at scientific institutions and their practices, and we must use a social-constructivist approach to position facts in a new light.²⁷

In *Down to Earth*, Latour urges for politics to turn the focus of its discussions away from the ideas associated with the Local and the Global, the Left and Right.²⁸ These definitions have *de facto* become meaningless, because they mean something else to everyone in different contexts. In the face of lost traditions and definitions, the political discussion should be made to include the 'Terrestrial' as an active participant in the political process. Humanity has lost its balance with nature and the Earth, and the only way to mend this broken relationship is by including them as a political actor in and of themselves. COVID-19 can arguably be seen as a consequence of this broken relationship, as the existence of wet markets has illustrated how the ecosystems of exotic animals must not mix with our own²⁹. Latour argues that reframing nature *as territory* will give it agency again, and provide the impetus to protect it as much as you would your own life and limb³⁰. Latour concludes his argument on the necessary political shift towards the Terrestrial by proposing to look to "Europe" to be the leader in such a movement.³¹

While indeed the European Union has toed the line between national sovereignty and supra-national decision-making, and been able to reach some progressive decisions over the last decades, it is a far cry from the ideal supra-national governing body. The bickering between nation-states over finances and budget constraints, even during this crisis, as well as the further consolidation and securitization of Fortress Europe are some examples of that. This trend may continue and there is a possibility we could see inequalities of power rise even more strongly.³²

Perhaps we should look at the *genuinely* cosmopolitan younger generations for the pursuit of progress and justice, instead of looking to Europe. They grew up with actual access and connections to people from across the globe, and understand the need for a habitable world for their children and their future offspring. These generations were raised on the ideal of the powerful West, with the US at its head, Europe following closely behind. Ideologically sound, with strong democratic and justice systems, wealthy, peaceful, and so forth. Alas, only to discover something sinister behind every cornerstone of democracy - corrupt politicians and governments, broken law enforcement, massive wealth inequalities, and an altogether eroding social welfare system. This crisis might prove to be a cosmopolitan moment for *them* - but this can only happen when these generations realise that their relative comforts are untenable in their current form.

²⁷ Ava Kofman, "Bruno Latour, the Post-Truth Philosopher, Mounts a Defense of Science," *New York Times*, October 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/25/magazine/bruno-latour-post-truth-philosopher-science.html>.

²⁸ Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018) 51-55, E-book.

²⁹ Bram Ieven, Jan Overwijk, "We created this beast. The Political Ecology of COVID-19," *Eurozine*, March 23, 2020, <https://www.eurozine.com/we-created-this-beast/>.

³⁰ Latour, *Down to Earth*, chap. 9, 75-77.

³¹ Latour, *Down to Earth*, chap 20.

³² Simon van Dorpe, Georgio Leali, "Coronavirus risks widening North-South divide," *Politico*, May 15, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/a-continent-divided-coronavirus-recovery-bailouts-european-commission/>.

Unfortunately, that would require us to go *deeper* into the inferno, before these (future) generations realise that drastic change to how we live our lives is necessary. For now, one could find hope in the active youth movements that seek to rediscover our connection to the earth, such as the global youth climate strikes of the past year, and initiatives such as the Slow Food Youth Network. These movements understand that the struggle for humanity's enduring survival is intersectional and urgent, and intend to change the political landscape and discourses of tomorrow. In doing so, they echo Latour's call for the inclusion of the Terrestrial; and exemplify "the who and what, amidst the inferno, are not inferno."³³ Focusing our attention on such forward-looking initiatives seems more fruitful than hoping for a cosmopolitan moment that may never come.

³³ See footnote 19