

Zygmunt BAUMAN, Irena BAUMAN, Jerzy KOCIATKIEWICZ, Monika KOSTERA. *Management in a Liquid Modern World*. Cambridge: Polity, 2015. 160 pp.

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The eminent sociologist Zygmunt Bauman believes that we live in an era of 'liquid modernity'. To grasp this notion, imagine the preceding *modern* era as characterised by three profound developments: industrialisation changed the economy forever, cities became increasingly important as people left rural areas in search of work, and the individual was put in the focus of moral and political theorising. Metaphorically speaking, the modern was characterised by a steam-powered shedding of superstitions and unbent belief in moral and technological progress.

Think of *liquid* modernity as a turbo-charged version of the modern era – it is characterised by *uncertainty* in respect to our career paths, values, or role models. For example, it is common to change not only employers but careers multiple times in our lives. Liquid modernity is adrift and ever-changing; one consequence, Bauman maintains, is that individuals cannot any longer hold on to organisations or established societal structures for guidance and perspective.

This depiction of uncertainty markedly diverges from management theory and its promise of control and predictability. Management theory is based on the conviction that things *can* be managed - it promises a way to keep things orderly, predictable, and steerable. This alone seems improbable in the state of liquid modernity. Moreover, management has spread from the professional realm into nearly all areas of our private lives. Whoever gets up at 5 am to get the obligatory workout done, has tried yoga to increase attention, or swears on a Paleo-diet to keep cholesterol down will get the idea.

Given this contrast - the uncertainty of liquid modernity and management's promise of control - some questions come to mind: May managerial practice avert some of the adverse effects of liquid modernity? Was our unbent belief in management in all areas of our lives perhaps responsible for the dire state of liquid modernity? If so, how may we change our idea of management?

In this book, Bauman discusses the role of *management* in liquid modern times with three interlocutors: his daughter Irena Bauman, an architect by training, and the organisation theorists Jerzy Kociatkiewicz and Monika Kostera. The conversation is presented in the form of personal,

directly reported speeches per author, where each of the seven chapters loosely segments the conversation into different themes. Several indicators convince the authors that management no longer works. For example, the international banking crisis, the recent economic recession, and several isolated cases, such as bewilderingly vulgar food scandals in the Western world, indicate that management no longer works as promised.

Unfortunately, the book does not readily provide a direct answer how management will be of use in the liquid modern world, nor does it suggest a comprehensive answer to how management might be replaced. Granted, the conversational set-up of the book indicates that the authors did not intend to write a systematic analysis. Rather, Bauman et al. have written an entertaining book - it entertains several conceptions of the problems that we face today and musings on existing solutions that might be of use in overcoming the managerial crisis depicted by the authors.

Key Contents

The following themes are central to the book. First, in their diagnosis of the problem, the authors characterise the current malaise as a state of interregnum. In "a world hell-bent on growth of individualization, consumerism, waste and social inequality" (Z. Bauman, 99), management faces a legitimisation crisis (6). Food scandals, which indicate ever decreasing levels of accountability for managing actors, and banking crises, as well as more individualistic problems such as lower job security in some areas, are cited as indicators of the problem (3). Jerzy Kociatkiewicz suspects that the exclusion of ethical considerations from the realm of management, the separation of work and morality, might be the cause of the current state of affairs (5). Monika Kostera remarks on the growing dissatisfaction of people with public life and a tendency to retreat into the private sphere (32). Zygmunt Bauman adds that there has been a "seminal" shift in management practises that shift more and more responsibility "for the results onto the shoulders of the managed" (15). In addition to this general depiction of the problem, Irena Bauman urges to consider environmental crises, such as climate change, as an "existential threat to all humanity" as integral parts of the problem diagnosis and an indicator of managerial failure on the global level (35).

In search of solutions to the problem, the authors consider a couple of proposals, drawn mainly from the theoretical sociological and organisation literature. First, the conversations turn on whether managerial responsibility may be shifted from the macro-level of the nation states to the meso-level of cities. Cities might be effective harbingers of change in the interregnum because

they are unhampered by complex nationalist interests and thus they might provide "relatively better [...] chances of confronting and tackling conflicts, troubles and worries pestering the present-day human condition", (25-26). Next, the authors explore whether an ideal of *craftsmanship* could be embraced on a variety of levels - for our professional personae as well as a normative principle for our lives (92). At the heart of craftsmanship is expertise and intrinsic obsession with one's topic, rather than motivation by external goals (96). Alienation and exploitation might be overcome and the sprawling competitiveness that characterises our lives might be dampened to more humane levels (97). This relates to the idea of a *collaborative economy*, which places cooperation in place of competition, and somewhat linked to an idea of *management without managers*, which the authors adopt from Jeremy Rifkin's work (101). The enabling power of the internet might yield a new understanding of management that emphasises mutual benefit instead of competition and interdependence instead of individualism (103); phenomena such as crowdsourcing and open innovation might be indicators of this new understanding of management (37). In musing about the criteria for successful solutions, the authors seem to agree that simplistic utopian or dystopian visions will be unsatisfactory. Thus, they indicate that a heterotopia, a middle ground will, be wiser to aspire to, and more realistic, too (88).

1 Critical remarks

"Management in a Liquid Modern World" offers a stimulating peek into a conversation of fundamental interest: per its title, it relates to a new conception of management. Per its content, however, the authors discuss the much broader normative issue of how we should cope with modern times, both on an individual and on a global societal level. I agree with the authors that there are several questionable elements and downright negative consequences of extending managerial ideology into our private lives. Taken to the extreme, the cost-benefit analysis of actions and the careful goal-setting countermanded by management theory is harmful to our private relationships. Not only because it contradicts our nature (see Robert H Frank. *Passion within Reasons: The strategic role of the emotions*. New York: Norton, 1988) but also because it deprives us of the joy of life. Try coming up with a cost-benefit analysis of being attentive to a friend and see where you are left after defining goals for your romantic relationship. I am also in full agreement that management on a much higher level, on the global scale of international relations,

is both of existential importance for our future and not as successful as it could (and should) be. Think of climate change and other grave environmental issues.

For those interested in the work of one of the authors, the book shows how their thoughts connect to Zygmunt Bauman's notion of the 'liquid modern world'. For those interested in the work of Zygmunt Bauman's oeuvre, it might provide novel insights into his views on the topic of management. However, readers interested in management theory, narrowly construed, or the broad topic of global crisis management may wish to consider the following points.

First, management, although never properly defined, is understood to operate on different levels throughout the book, and the authors fail to distinguish these differences properly. At times, the authors refer to management as it occurs in closed organisations. Management in this sense is the coordination of activities within an organisation to achieve the organisation's objectives. Problems with this form of management that relate to 'liquid modernity' are aptly characterised in terms of the changing attitudes that people have towards their work and the altered role of managers. At other times, however, the authors refer to management in the context of global issues such as climate change. Managerial problems on this level demand fundamentally different solutions to managerial problems within closed organisations. In turn, apt reforms of management practises will likely look different in both cases. For example, to stay competitive, management within organisations faces the challenge of 'opening up' internal processes, such as the innovation process, to actors outside the organisation. In this case, paradigms such as open innovation (see Henry Chesbrough. *Open Innovation. The New Imperative for Creating and Profiting from Technology*. Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business Review Press, 2003) are signs that this is happening already.

Second, neither the problem statement nor the proposed solutions are developed rigidly, explicated clearly, or developed linearly. The indicators that the authors cite for the malaise of our current times are suggestive, but neither empirically supported nor clearly delineated: it is unclear what unites the role of management in, say, particular food scandals and the rather general observation about increased commercialisation of our private lives. In this sense, the book clearly presupposes familiarity, and perhaps agreement, with, in particular, Zygmunt Bauman's previous work, to understand the notion of "liquid modernity" and thus major parts of the authors' contempt for the current state of management.

With friendliness, the previous two points may be accepted as benign consequences of the conversational structure of the book, which emphasises lucid flow of ideas and suggestions over rigid analysis and development of novel solutions. Readers familiar with the work of some of the authors might find this inspiring and stimulating.

However, since one of the focal points of the discussion is how to deal with global crises it is striking, and regrettable, that the authors fail to consider basic principles of human behavioural ecology. To be sure, I do not advocate the primacy of human behavioural ecology, but rather that its utter neglect does not suit the aims of the book. Let me explain how this neglect compromises the indicated solutions approaches in the book. The authors end their discussion on an optimistic note about the future, emphasising our human tendency to care for others, to champion solidarity, and the recent, modern examples of hugely successful collaborative efforts (think of the promising examples of Wikipedia, Open Source software, crowd-sourcing, and more). These pleas for more solidarity and expressions of tender hope are all well and good, I agree, but they seem naive. Many of the gravest environmental issues, like deforestation, overfishing, air- and water pollution, to name a few, do not arise as a failure of management on the organisational level, nor as a failure of individual care and sympathy. The problem is rather that many of these issues can be framed as coordination problems that concern the exploitation of common-pool resources. The latter are resources that are available to all for consumption and to which access can be limited only at very high costs (see Garreth Hardin. "The Tragedy of the Commons" *Science* 162 [1968], 1243-1248). The classic example is a fishery. Fishermen face the temptation to harvest as many fish as possible, for failing to do so puts them at a potential disadvantage. In effect, increasing individual harvest lead to a depletion of the resource - individual interests conflict with group interests. It is not that the actors in such conflicts lack sympathy or empathy. It's the structure that needs to change and to understand how effective changes can be made it is crucial to comprehend the likely behaviour of the individual actors involved. We face 'tragedies of the commons', and related issues, not because people fail to keep feelings of sympathy and care alive in their breasts. Rather, it is just that our good intentions do not work on a global scale, so pleading for better intentions is misguided, where proposals for structural reforms should have been put into focus.

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