

On Postmodern Uses of Sex

Zygmunt Bauman

IN HIS BEAUTIFUL book-long essay *La llama doble – Amor y erotismo*, published in 1993, the great Mexican thinker Octavio Paz explores the complex interaction between sex, eroticism and love – three close relatives yet so unlike each other that each needs a separate language to account for its own existence. The central metaphor of the book, most fittingly, is one of fire: above the primordial fire of sex, lit by nature long before the first stirrings of humanity, rises the red flame of eroticism, above which quivers and shivers the delicate blue flame of love. There would be no flame without fire; yet there is more, much more, to the red and blue flames, and to each one of them, than there is in the fire from which they arise.

Sex, eroticism and love are linked yet separate. They can hardly exist without each other, and yet their existence is spent in the ongoing war of independence. The boundaries between them are hotly contested – alternatively, but often simultaneously, the sites of defensive battles and of invasions. Sometimes the logic of war demands that the cross-border dependencies are denied or suppressed; sometimes the invading armies cross the boundary in force with the intention of overpowering and colonizing the territory. Torn between such contradictory impulses, the three areas are notorious for the unclarity of their frontiers and the three discourses that serve (or perhaps produce) them are known to be confused and inhospitable to pedantry and precision.

Sex, so Octavio Paz reminds us, is the least human of the three. Indeed, sex is natural, not a cultural product: we share it with a large part of non-human species. In its natural form untainted by culture sex is always the same; as Theodore Zeldin (1994: 86ff) observed, ‘there has been more progress in cooking than in sex’. It is but the erotic sublimation of sex, fantasy and sex-substitutes, that are infinitely variable. All ‘*history* of sex’ is therefore the history of the *cultural manipulation* of sex. It began with the birth of eroticism – through the cultural trick of separating sexual *experience*

-
- *Theory, Culture & Society* 1998 (SAGE, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi), Vol. 15(3–4): 19–33
[0263-2764(199808/11)15:3–4;19–33;006057]

(in the sense of *Erlebnis*, not *Erfahrung*), and especially the *pleasure* associated with that experience, from reproduction, that primary function of sex and its *raison d'être*. Nature, we may say, is taking no chances and for that reason it cannot but be wasteful; it showers its targets with bullets so that at least one bullet will hit the bull's eye. Sex is no exception; sexually reproducing species are as a rule supplied with quantities of sexual energy and capacity for sexual encounters far in excess of what reproduction proper would require. And so eroticism is not just a purely cultural feat and in no way is it an act of violence committed on nature, an 'unnatural' act; nature virtually tempted human wits into the invention, lavish as nature is in turning out huge, redundant and untapped volumes of sexual energy and desire. That surplus is a standing invitation to cultural inventiveness. Yet the uses to which that reproductively redundant and wasted excess may be put is a cultural creation.

Eroticism is about recycling that waste. It depends on filling the sexual act with a surplus value – over and above its reproductive function. Human beings would not be erotic creatures were they not first sexual beings; sexuality is the only soil in which the cultural seeds of eroticism may be sown and grow – but this soil has limited fertility. Eroticism begins from reproduction, but it transcends it from the start; reproduction, its life-giving force, soon turns into a constraint. To freely manipulate, to process at will the surplus capacity for sexuality, eroticism must be 'replanted' into other soils of greater potency and additional nutritional power; culture must emancipate sexual delight from reproduction, its primary utilitarian application. Hence the reproductive function of sex is simultaneously the indispensable condition and a thorn in the flesh of eroticism; there is an unbreakable link, but also a constant tension between the two – that tension being as incurable as the link is unbreakable.

Theoretically speaking, there are several tension-management strategies. They were all tried, and the 'history of sex' may be told in terms of the focus shifting from one strategy to another, different strategies gaining temporary cultural dominance in various historical eras. The choice, however, is limited. By and large it is confined to the redeployment of cultural forces either on the sex/eroticism or eroticism/love frontier, and certain combinations between the troop movements in both territories.

Greatly simplifying, we may say that throughout the modern era two cultural strategies vied with each other for domination. One – officially promoted and supported by the legislative powers of the state and ideological powers of the Church and the School, was the strategy of reinforcing the limits imposed by the reproductive functions of sex upon the freedom of erotic imagination – relegating the unmanageable surplus of sexual energy to culturally suppressed and socially degraded spheres of pornography, prostitution and illicit – extramarital – liaisons. The other – always carrying a tinge of dissent and rebelliousness – was the romantic strategy of cutting the ties linking eroticism to sex and tying it instead to love.

In the first strategy, eroticism had to justify itself in terms of its sexual

(reproductive) utility, with the third element – love – being a welcome, yet supernumerary, embellishment. Sex was ‘culturally silent’ – it had no language of its own, no language recognized as public vernacular and a means of public communication. Mid-19th-century intercourse, as Stephen Kern (1992) noted, was by comparison with 20th-century sex ‘deadly serious’ and ‘abruptly over’; it was ‘abruptly over’ since ‘the post-coital interlude was particularly embarrassing, because eyes opened, lights came on, and couples were obliged to look at one another or else away and begin to speak or else endure a nerve-breaking silence’. In the second strategy, love was accorded the sole legitimizing power, and eroticism was cast in the image of a handmaiden of love, while its link with sexuality was either frowned upon or reduced to the role of a non-essential, even if pleasurable, attribute. In both strategies, eroticism sought anchorage in something other than itself – either in sex or in love; both strategies were variants of the policy of alliance, and the potential allies were sought beyond the borders of eroticism. Both strategies assumed that the cultural manipulation and redeployment of surplus sexual energy needed a functional justification, not being able to stand on its own and be ‘its own purpose’ or a value in its own right. Both strategies stemmed as well from the tacit assumption that, left to itself, human erotic inventiveness would easily run out of control, playing havoc with the delicate tissue of human relations; it needs therefore outside, authoritative and resourceful powers to contain it within acceptable limits and stave off its potentially destructive potential.

Seen against that background, the late modern or postmodern rendition of eroticism appears unprecedented – a genuine breakthrough and novelty. It enters alliance with neither sexual reproduction nor love, claiming independence from both neighbours and flatly refusing all responsibility for the impact it may make on their fate; it proudly and boldly proclaims itself to be its only, and sufficient, reason and purpose. As Marc C. Taylor and Esa Saarinen (1994) put it, with a wonderful epigrammatic precision, ‘desire does not desire satisfaction. To the contrary, desire desires desire.’ When (seldom, and in a whisper) voiced before, such claims were classified as the heresy of libertinism and exiled to the Devil’s Island of sexual disorder and perversion. Now the self-sufficiency of eroticism, the freedom to seek sexual delights for their own sake, has risen to the level of cultural norm, changing places with its critics, now assigned to the *Kunstkammer* of cultural oddities and relics of extinct species. Nowadays eroticism has acquired substance it was never before able to carry on its own shoulders, but also an unheard-of lightness and volatility. Being an eroticism ‘with no strings attached’, untied, unbridled, let loose – the postmodern eroticism is free to enter and leave any association of convenience, but also an easy prey to forces eager to exploit its seductive powers.

It has become the folklore of social science to lay the responsibility for the ‘erotic revolution’ at the door of the ‘market forces’ (an address all the more convenient for the mystery surrounding its notoriously elusive resident). Eager to fill the void left by the Divine Providence and laws of

progress, scientifically oriented study of changing human behaviour seeks a candidate for the vacant position of 'main determinant' – and 'market forces' are no worse, and in many respects better, than the others. I for once am not particularly worried by the void staying empty and the position remaining unfilled. 'Market forces' can be blamed, at the utmost, for exploiting without scruples the resources already at hand, and for exploiting them while being guided solely by their commercial potential and oblivious to all other, including the culturally devastating or morally iniquitous, aspects of the matter. Charging them with the powers to conjure up the resources themselves would be like accepting the alchemist's authorship of the gold found in the test-tube: an exercise in magical rather than scientific reasoning (though, frankly, the difference between the two within social studies is far from unambiguous). It takes more than the greed for profit, free competition and the refinement of the advertising media to accomplish a cultural revolution of a scale and depth equal to that of the emancipation of eroticism from sexual reproduction and love. To be redeployed as an economic factor, eroticism must have been first culturally processed and given a form fit for a would-be commodity.

So let me leave aside the 'commercial' uses of eroticism, not really surprising in a society in which the care for whatever is seen as a human need is increasingly mediatized by the commodity market – and concentrate instead on the somewhat less obvious, and certainly less fully described and much too little discussed links between the erotic revolution and other aspects of the emergent postmodern culture. Among such aspects, two in particular seem to be directly relevant to our topic.

The first is the collapse of the 'panoptic' model of securing and perpetuating social order. That model, as you know, has been described in detail by Michel Foucault, in reference to Jeremy Bentham's idea of the universal solution to all tasks requiring the instilling of discipline and so obtaining the desirable sort of conduct from a great number of people. That solution, according to Bentham, was *seeing without being seen*, a surreptitious surveillance with its objects made aware that they might be closely scrutinized at every moment yet having no way of knowing when they are indeed under observation. Foucault used Bentham's idea as a paradigm of the order-making activity of modern powers. Factories, workhouses, prisons, schools, hospitals, asylums or barracks, whatever their manifest functions, were also throughout the modern era manufacturers of order; in this lay their latent, yet arguably their paramount social function. Among all the panoptical institutions two were decisive for the performance of that latter function due to their vast catchment area. The two panoptical institutions in question were industrial factories and conscript armies. Most male members of society could reasonably be expected to pass through their disciplining treadmill and acquire the habits that would guarantee their obedience to the order-constituting rules (and later to enforce those habits on the female members in their capacity of the 'heads of families'). Yet in order to perform their role such panoptical institutions needed men capable of undertaking

industrial work and army duties – able to endure the hardships of industrial work and army life. Industrial invalidity and disqualification from army service meant exclusion from panoptical control and drill. Ability to work and to fight became therefore the measure of the ‘norm’, while inability was tantamount to social abnormality, deviation from the norm, alternatively subjected to medical or penological treatment. Modern medicine gave that norm the name of ‘health’. A ‘healthy man’ was a person capable of a certain amount of physical exertion, required by productive work and/or military exploits; the norm guiding the assessment of the state of health and the infinite variety of possible abnormalities was therefore ‘objectively measurable’. It could be easily set as a target; hitting or missing the target could be defined with considerable precision.

Contemporary society needs neither mass industrial labour nor mass (conscript) armies. The era when factories and troops were the decisive order-sustaining institution is (at least in our part of the world) over. But so is, as well, panoptical power as the main vehicle of social integration, and normative regulation as the major strategy of order-maintenance. The great majority of people – men as well as women – are today integrated through seduction rather than policing, advertising rather than indoctrinating, need-creation rather than normative regulation. Most of us are socially and culturally trained and shaped as sensation-seekers and gatherers, rather than producers and soldiers. Constant openness to new sensations and greed for ever new experience, always stronger and deeper than before, is a condition *sine qua non* of being amenable to seduction. It is not ‘health’, with its connotation of a steady state, of an immobile target on which all properly trained bodies converge – but ‘fitness’, implying being always on the move or ready to move, capacity for imbibing and digesting ever greater volumes of stimuli, flexibility and resistance to all closure, that grasps the quality expected from the experience-collector, the quality she or he must indeed possess to seek and absorb sensations. And if the mark of ‘disease’ was incapacity for factory or army life, the mark of ‘unfitness’ is the lack of *élan vital*, *ennui*, *acedia*, inability to feel strongly, lack of energy, stamina, interest in what the colourful life has to offer, desire and desire to desire. . . .

‘Fitness’ as a definition of a desirable bodily state, however, presents problems of which the norm of ‘health’ was free.

First – ‘health’ is a norm, and norms are clearly delineated from above and below alike. ‘Fitness’ has perhaps its lower, though rather blurred and murky threshold, but cannot, by definition, have an upper limit; ‘fitness’ is, after all, about the constant ability to move further on, to rise to ever higher levels of experience. Hence ‘fitness’ will never acquire the comforting exactitude and precision of a norm. ‘Fitness’ is a never-to-be-reached horizon looming forever in the future, a spur to unstoppable efforts, none of which can be seen as fully satisfactory, let alone the ultimate. Pursuit of fitness, its little triumphs notwithstanding, is shot through with incurable anxiety and is an inexhaustible source of self-reproach and self-indignation.

Second – since it is solely about the *Erlebnis*, the subjectively lived-through sensations, fitness cannot be intersubjectively compared nor objectively measured; it can hardly even be reported in interpersonally meaningful terms and so confronted with other subjects' experience. Much as counsel is needed to make up for that immanent un-graspability of evidence, there is possibly an ultimate limit to the counsellors' intervention; name-giving and quotations of statistical averages will stop short of breaking open the loneliness of the sensation-seeker. As we know from Ludwig Wittgenstein, there is no such thing as private language, but one would need nothing less than a private language to express sensations – that most thoroughly and uncompromisingly private ingredient of the *Lebenswelt*. This is, indeed, a Catch 22 – demanding no less than the squaring of a circle.

One way or the other, since certainty can be only an interpersonal, social achievement, the fitness-seekers can never be sure how far they got and how far they still need to go. Third – in the game called fitness, the player is simultaneously the fiddle and the fiddler. It is the bodily pleasurable, exciting or thrilling sensations which a fit person seeks – but the sensations-collector is *that body* and, at the same time, that body's owner, guardian, *trainer and director*. The two roles are inherently incompatible. The first requires total immersion and self-abandonment, the second calls for a distance and sober judgement. Reconciliation of the two demands is a tall order – if attainable at all, which is doubtful. Added to the two previously signalled troubles, that additional worry makes the plight of the fitness-seeker an agony of which our health-conscious ancestors had no inkling. All three troubles daily generate a great deal of anxiety; what is more, however, that anxiety – the specifically *postmodern* affliction – is unlikely ever to be cured and stopped. It is also diffuse, as Jean Baudrillard pointed out; and diffuse, unfocused anxieties admit no specific remedies. . . .

Sexual delight is arguably the topmost of pleasurable sensations; indeed, a pattern by which all other pleasures tend to be measured and of which they are, by common consent, but pale reflections at best, inferior or counterfeit imitations at worst. Whatever has been said above about the sensation-gathering life strategy in general, applies in a magnified measure to the specifically postmodern rendition of eroticism, that 'cultural processing' of sex. All the contradictions inherent to the life of a sensation-collector in general hit sexual life with concentrated power – but there is an extra difficulty arising from the inborn monotonous inflexibility of sex (sex, let us remember, being a phenomenon of nature and not of culture, leaves little room for the inventiveness typical of culture). In its postmodern rendition, sexual activity is focused narrowly on its orgasmic effect; for all practical intents and purposes, postmodern sex is *about orgasm*. Its paramount task is to supply ever stronger, infinitely variable, preferably novel and unprecedented *Erlebnisse*; little can be done however in this field and so the ultimate sexual experience remains forever a task ahead and no actual sexual experience is truly satisfying, none makes further training, instruction, counsel, recipe, drug or gadget unnecessary.

There is another aspect of the relation between the present-day erotic revolution and the wider postmodern cultural transformations which I wish now to bring to your attention.

Sex, as we know, is nature's evolutionary solution to the issue of continuity, durability of life forms; it sets mortality of every individual living organism against immortality of the species. Only humans know that this is the case; only humans know that they are bound to die, and only humans may imagine the perpetuity of humankind; only for them does the transient existence of the body run its course in the shadow of the perpetuity of humanity as a whole. Such knowledge has tremendous consequences; it is by no means fanciful to suppose that it lies behind the notorious dynamics of human cultural inventions which all, as a rule, are contraptions meant to render the duration of social forms immune to the transience and inborn perishability of human individual lives; or, rather, the ingenious workshops where durability is continually produced out of the transient – where the fragile, time-bound existence of human bodies is reformed into the solid perpetuity of humanity.

Sex lies at the heart of that alchemy. Sex is the material substratum of that cultural production of immortality and the pattern or supreme metaphor for the effort to transcend individual mortality and stretch human existence beyond the life-span of individual humans. Sex is involved – centrally and inextricably – in the greatest feat and the most awe-inspiring of cultural miracles: that of conjuring up immortality out of mortality, the interminable out of the temporal, the imperishable out of the evanescent. The enigma of that logic-defying miracle, that mind-boggling puzzle of the most vulnerable and abstruse accomplishment of culture saturates every sexual act: the communion of two mortal beings is lived through as the birth of immortality.... With the advent of human awareness of mortality sex loses its innocence irretrievably.

Located on the other side of eroticism, love is the emotional/intellectual superstructure which culture built upon the sexual differences and their sexual reunion, thereby investing sex with rich and infinitely expandable meaning which protects and reinforces its power to recast mortality into immortality. Love is a cultural replica or a refined likeness of that overcoming of the opposition between the transience of sexual bodies and the durability of their reproduction, which is matter-of-factly accomplished in the sexual act. Like sex itself, love is therefore burdened with ambiguity, residing as it does on the thin line dividing the natural from the supernatural, the familiar present and the enigmatic, impenetrable future. Love of another mortal person is one of the principal cultural ventures into immortality; it is, we may say, a spiritual mirror held to the sexually created biological eternity. Like sex, love is a source of incurable anxiety, though perhaps an anxiety deeper still for being soaked through with the premonition of failure. In love, the hope and the promise of 'eternal love' is invested here in the body which is anything but eternal; the eternity of love and of the beloved is culture's saving lie, helping to assimilate what in fact defies

comprehension. A mortal person is loved as if he or she were immortal, and is loved by a mortal person in a way accessible only to eternal beings.

We have noted before that a most prominent mark of the postmodern erotic revolution is cutting the ties connecting eroticism on one side to sex (in its essential reproductive function) and on the other to love. Precautions are taken in the postmodern culture to secure the emancipation of erotically inspired activity from the constraints imposed biologically by the reproductive potential of sex and culturally by love's demands of eternal and strictly selective, in fact exclusive, loyalty. Eroticism has thereby been set free of both links tying it to the production of immortality, physical or spiritual. But in this spectacular liberation it was not alone; it followed the much more universal trends which affect in equal measure arts, politics, life strategies and virtually every other area of culture.

It is a general feature of postmodern condition that it flattens time and condenses the perception of the infinitely expendable flow of time into the experience (*Erlebnis*) of *Jetztzeit*, or slices it into a series of self-sustained episodes, each to be lived through as an intense experience of the fleeting moment and cut off as thoroughly as possible from both its past and its future consequences. Politics of movements is being replaced with the politics of campaigns, aimed at instant results and unconcerned with their long-term repercussions; concern with lasting (everlasting!) fame gives way to the desire for notoriety; historical duration is identified with instant (and in principle effaceable) recording; works of art, once meant to last 'beyond the grave', are replaced with deliberately short-lived happenings and once-off installations; identities of a kind meant to be built diligently and to last for life's duration are exchanged for identity kits fit for immediate assembly and equally instant dismantling. The new postmodern version of immortality is meant to be lived instantly and enjoyed here and now; no longer it is a hostage to the merciless and uncontrollable flow of objective time.

The postmodern 'deconstruction of immortality' – the tendency to cut off the present from both past and future – is paralleled by tearing eroticism apart from both sexual reproduction and love. This offers erotic imagination and practice, like the rest of postmodern life-politics, a freedom of experimentation which they never enjoyed before. Postmodern eroticism is free-floating; it can enter chemical reaction with virtually any other substance, feed and draw juices from any other human emotion or activity. It has become an unattached signifier capable of being wedded semiotically to virtually unlimited numbers of signifieds, but also a signified ready to be represented by any of the available signifiers. Only in such a liberated and detached version may eroticism sail freely under the banner of pleasure-seeking, undaunted and undiverted from its pursuits by any other than aesthetic, that is *Erlebnis*-oriented, concerns. It is free now to establish and negotiate its own rules as it goes, but this freedom is its fate which eroticism can neither change nor ignore. 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. The newly

acquired underdetermination is the basis of an exhilaratingly vast freedom but also the cause of extreme uncertainty and anxiety. No authoritative solutions to go by, everything to be negotiated anew and ad hoc. . . .

Eroticism, in other words, has become a sort of a Jack-of-all-trades desperately seeking a secure abode and steady job yet fearing the prospect of finding them. . . . This circumstance makes it available for new kinds of social uses, sharply different from the ones known from most of modern history. Two in particular need to be briefly discussed here.

The first is the deployment of eroticism in the postmodern construction of identity. The second is the role played by eroticism in servicing the network of interpersonal bonds on the one hand, the separatist battles of individualization on the other.

Identity ceased to be the 'given', the product of the 'Divine chain of being', and became instead a 'problem' and an individual task with the dawn of modern times. In this respect there is no difference between the 'classic' modernity and its postmodern phase. What is new is the nature of the problem and the way the resulting tasks are tackled. In its classic modern form, the problem of identity consisted, for most men and women, in the need to *acquire* their social definitions, to build them using their own efforts and resources, out of performances and appropriations, rather than inherited properties. The task was to be approached through setting a target – a model of identity desired – and then doggedly sticking throughout one's life to the itinerary determined by the target set. At the sunset of the classic era of modernity, Jean-Paul Sartre summed up that time-honoured experience in his concept of the 'life project', which does not so much express as create the 'essence' of the human individual. Identities of postmodern men and women remain, like the identities of their ancestors, human-made. But no longer do they need to be meticulously designed, carefully built and rock-solid. Their most coveted virtue is *flexibility*: all structures should be light and mobile so that they can be rearranged at short notice, one-way streets should be avoided, no commitment should be strongly binding enough to cramp free movement. Solidity is an anathema as is all permanence – now the sign of dangerous maladjustment to the rapidly and unpredictably changing world, to the surprise opportunities it holds and the speed with which it transforms yesterday's assets into today's liabilities.

Eroticism cut free from its reproductive and amorous constraints fits the bill very well; it is as if it were made to measure for the multiple, flexible, evanescent identities of postmodern men and women. Sex free of reproductive consequences and stubborn, lingering love attachments can be securely enclosed in the frame of an episode, as it will engrave no deep grooves on the constantly re-groomed face being thus insured against limiting the freedom of further experimentation. Free-floating eroticism is therefore eminently suitable for the task of tending to the kind of identity which, like all other postmodern cultural products, is (in George Steiner's memorable words) calculated for 'maximal impact and instant obsolescence'.

Free-floating eroticism stands as well behind what Anthony Giddens has dubbed 'plastic sex'. A hundred years or so ago, when eroticism was tightly wrapped around sexual reproduction, given no right to independent existence and denied having its own *telos*, men and women were culturally expected and pressed to live up to the fairly precise standards of maleness and femininity, organized around their respective roles in reproductive sex and protected by the requirement of the lasting attachment of partners. That was the era of norm, and the boundary between the normal and the abnormal was clearly drawn and closely guarded. The difference between sex and its 'perversion' left little to the imagination. This has not got to be the case, and is not, now – when but a small parcel of the vast erotic territory is dedicated to the reproductive aspects of sex and the territory as a whole allows for free movement and has but a few long-lease residences. For males and females alike, the way their sexuality is erotically exploited bears no direct relation to their reproductive role and there is no reason why it should be limited to the experience obtainable through the performance of that role. Much richer sensual fruits of sexuality can be harvested through experimenting as well with other than straightforwardly heterosexual activities. As in so many other areas, so too in sexuality the realm once thought to be ruled by nature alone is invaded and colonized by cultural troops; the gender aspect of identity, like all other aspects, is not *given* once and for all – it has to be *chosen*, and may be discarded if it is deemed unsatisfactory or not satisfying enough. This aspect, like all other constituents of postmodern identity, is therefore permanently underdetermined, incomplete, open to change, and so a realm of uncertainty and an inexhaustible source of anxiety and soul-searching, as well as fear that some precious kinds of sensation have been missed and the pleasure-giving potential of the body has not been squeezed to the last drop.

Let me say now a few words about the role assigned to eroticism in the weaving and unstitching of the tissue of interpersonal relations.

In his 'Introduction' to *The History of Sexuality* Michel Foucault (1990: 40–4, 103–7) argued convincingly that in all its manifestations, whether those known since time immemorial or such as have been discovered or named for the first time, sex served the articulation of new – modern – mechanisms of power and social control. The medical and educational discourses of the 19th century construed, among other notions, also the phenomenon of infantile sexuality, later to be turned by Freud, *ex post facto*, into the cornerstone of psychoanalysis. The central role in this articulation was played by the panic contrived around the child's proclivity to masturbate – perceived simultaneously as a natural inclination and a disease, a vice impossible to uproot and a danger of an incalculably damaging potential. It was the task of parents and teachers to defend children against this danger – but in order to make the protection effective, it was necessary to spy the affliction in every change of demeanour, every gesture and facial expression, to order strictly the whole of the children's lives to make the morbid practice impossible. Around the never-ending struggle against the threat of masturbation a whole system was constructed

of parental, medical and pedagogical invigilation and surveillance. In Foucault's words, 'control of infantile sexuality hoped to reach it through a simultaneous propagation of its own power and of the object on which it was brought to bear'. The indomitable and merciless parental control needed to be justified in terms of the universality and resilience of the infantile vice, and so the vice must have been shown – by the universality and resilience of the controlling practices – to be itself universal and resilient.

Wherever there was the chance [that the temptation] may appear, devices of surveillance were installed; traps were laid for compelling admissions; inexhaustible and corrective discourses were imposed; parents and teachers were alerted, and left with the suspicion that all children are guilty, and with fear of being themselves at fault if their suspicions were not sufficiently strong; they were kept in readiness in the face of this recurrent danger; their conduct was prescribed and their pedagogy recodified; an entire medico-sexual regime took hold of the family milieu. The child 'vice' was not so much an enemy as a support. . . .

More than the old taboos, this form of power demanded constant, attentive and curious presences for its exercise; it presupposed proximities; it proceeded through examination and insistent observation; it required an exchange of discourses, through questions that extorted admissions, and confidences that went beyond the questions that were asked. It implied a physical proximity and an interplay of intense sensations. . . . The power which thus took charge of sexuality set about contacting bodies, caressing them with its eyes, intensifying areas, electrifying surfaces, dramatizing troubled moments. It wrapped the sexual body in its embrace.

The manifest or latent, awakened or dormant sexuality of the child used to be a powerful instrument in the articulation of modern family relationships. It provided the reason and the impetus for the comprehensive and obtrusive parental interference with children's lives; it called the parents to be constantly 'in touch', to keep children constantly within the parental sight, to engage in intimate conversations, encourage confessions and require confidence and secret-sharing.

Today, on the contrary, the sexuality of children is becoming an equally powerful factor in loosening human bonds and thus liberating the individual power of choice, and particularly in the matter of parents–children separation and 'keeping distance'. Today's fears emanate from the sexual desire of the parents, not of the children; it is not in what children do on their own impulse, but in what they do or may do at the behest of their parents, that we are inclined to suspect sexual undertones; it is what parents like to do with (and to) their children that frightens and calls for vigilance – only this is a kind of vigilance which advises caution, parental withdrawal and reticence. Children are now perceived mainly as sexual *objects* and potential victims of their parents as sexual *subjects*; and since the parents are by nature stronger than their children and placed in the position of power, parental sexuality may easily lead to the abuse of that power in the

service of the parents' sexual instincts. The spectre of sex, therefore, also haunts family homes. To exorcize it, one needs to keep children at a distance – and above all abstain from intimacy and overt, tangible manifestations of parental love....

Some time ago Great Britain witnessed a virtual epidemic of the 'sexual exploitation of children'. In a widely publicized campaign, social workers, in cooperation with doctors and teachers, charged dozens of parents (mainly fathers, but also a growing number of mothers) with incestuous assaults against their children; child victims were forcibly removed from parental homes, while readers of the popular press were treated to blood-curdling stories about the dens of debauchery into which family bedrooms and bathrooms have been turned. Newspapers brought news about sexual abuse of the infantile wards in one care home or borstal after another.

Only a few of the publicly discussed cases were brought to trial. In some cases the accused parents managed to prove their innocence and get their children back. But what happened, had happened. Parental tenderness lost its innocence. It has been brought to public awareness that children are always and everywhere sexual objects, that there is a potentially explosive sexual underside in any act of parental love, that every caress has its erotic aspect and every loving gesture may hide a sexual advance. As Suzanne Moore (1995) noted, an NSPCC survey reported that 'one in six of us was a victim of "sexual interference" as a child', while according to a Barnardo's report 'six out of 10 women and a quarter of men "experience some kind of sexual assault or interference before they are 18"'. Suzanne Moore agrees that 'sexual abuse is far more widespread than we are prepared to accept', but she points out nevertheless that 'the word abuse is now so over-used that almost any situation can be constructed as abusive'. In the once unproblematic area of parental love and care an abyss of ambivalence has been revealed. Nothing is clear and obvious any more, everything is shot through with ambiguity – and from things ambiguous one is advised to steer clear.

In one of the widely publicized cases 3-year-old Amy was found in school making plasticine sausage- or snake-like objects (which the teacher identified as penises) and talked of things that 'squirt white stuff'. The parents' explanation that the mysterious object squirting white stuff was a nasal spray against congestion, while the sausage-like things were images of Amy's favourite jelly sweets, did not help. Amy's name was placed on the list of 'children at risk', and her parents went into battle to clear their names. As Rosie Waterhouse (1995) comments on this and other cases:

Hugging, kissing, bathing, even sleeping with your children – are these natural patterns of parental behaviour or are they inappropriate, over-sexualised acts of abuse?

And what are normal childish pastimes? When children draw pictures of witches and snakes, does this mean they are symbols of frightening,

abusive events? These are fundamental questions with which teachers, social workers and other professionals involved in caring for children frequently have to grapple.

Maureen Freely (1997) has recently vividly described the panic that haunts the postmodern family homes as the result:

If you're a man, you are likely to think twice about going over to a sobbing, lost child and offering your help. You'll be reluctant to grab a 13-year-old daughter's hand when crossing a dangerous intersection, and ... you will balk at taking film containing pictures of naked children of any age into Boots. If *Pretty Baby* came out today, it would most certainly be picketed. If *Lolita* were published for the first time in 1997, no one would dare call it classic.

Parent-child relationships are not the only ones which are presently undergoing a thorough check-up and are in the process of being re-assessed and renegotiated in the times of the postmodern erotic revolution. All other kinds of human relations are – keenly, vigilantly, obsessively, sometimes in a panic-stricken fashion – being purified of even the palest of sexual undertones which stand the slightest chance of condensing those relations into permanence. Sexual undertones are suspected and sniffed out in every emotion reaching beyond the meagre inventory of feelings permitted in the framework of mismeeting (or quasi-encounter, fleeting encounter, inconsequential encounter – see the chapter 'Forms of Togetherness' in *Life in Fragments*, Bauman, 1996), in every offer of friendship and every manifestation of a deeper-than-average interest in another person. A casual remark on the beauty or charm of a workmate is likely to be censured as sexual provocation, and an offer of a cup of coffee as sexual harassment. The spectre of sex now haunts company offices and college seminar rooms; there is a threat involved in every smile, gaze, form of address. The overall outcome is the rapid emaciation of human relations, stripping them of intimacy and emotionality, and the wilting of the desire to enter them and keep them alive. But not just companies and colleges are affected.

In one country after another, the courts legalize the concept of 'marital rape'; sexual services are no longer marital rights and duties, and insisting on them can be classified as a punishable crime. Since it is notoriously difficult to interpret one's partner's conduct 'objectively', unambiguously, as either consent or refusal (particularly if the partners share the bed each night), and since to define the event as a rape calls for the decision of one partner only, virtually every sexual act can be with a modicum of good (or rather ill) will presented as an act of rape (which certain radical feminist writers were quick to proclaim the 'truth of the male sex as such'). Sexual partners need to remember on every occasion, therefore, that discretion is the better part of valour. The ostensible obviousness and unproblematic character of marital rights, which was once meant to encourage the partners

to prefer marital sex over sex outside marriage, allegedly a more risky affair, is now more and more often perceived as a trap; as a result, the reasons for associating the satisfaction of erotic desire with marriage become less and less evident or convincing – particularly when satisfaction without strings attached is so easy to obtain elsewhere.

The weakening of bonds is an important condition of successful social production of sensation-gatherers who happen as well to be fully fledged, effective consumers. If once upon a time, at the threshold of the modern era, the separation of business from household allowed the first to submit to the stern and unemotional demands of competition and remain deaf to all other, notably moral, norms and values – the present-day separation of eroticism from other interhuman relations allows it to submit without qualification to the aesthetic criteria of strong experience and sensual gratification. But there are huge costs to be paid for this gain. In the time of the re-evaluation of all values and the revision of historically shaped habits no norm of human conduct can be taken for granted, and none is likely to stay uncontested for long. All pursuit of delight is therefore shot through with fear; habitual social skills are looked upon with suspicion, while the new ones, particularly such as are commonly accepted, are in short supply and slow in coming. To make the plight of postmodern men and women worse still, the few rules of thumb which emerge from the confusion add more fog of their own because of their seemingly insoluble contradictions. Postmodern culture eulogizes the delights of sex and encourages the investment of every nook and cranny of the *Lebenswelt* with erotic significance. It prompts the postmodern sensation-seeker to develop in full the potential of the sexual subject. On the other hand, though, the same culture explicitly forbids treating another sensation-seeker as a sex object. The trouble is, however, that in every erotic encounter we are subjects as well as objects of desire and – as every lover knows only too well – no erotic encounter is conceivable without the partners assuming both roles, or, better still, merging them into one. Contradictory cultural signals covertly undermine what they overtly praise and encourage. This is a situation pregnant with psychic neuroses all the more grave for the fact that it is no longer clear what the ‘norm’ is and therefore what kind of ‘conformity to the norm’ could heal them.

References

- Bauman, Z. (1996) *Life in Fragments*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Foucault, Michel (1990) *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1. London: Penguin.
- Freely, Maureen (1997) ‘Let Girls Be Girls’, *Independent on Sunday* 2 March.
- Giddens, Anthony (1992) *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Kern, Stephen (1992) *The Culture of Love: Victorians to Moderns*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Moore, Suzanne (1995) ‘For the Good of the Kids – and Us’, *Guardian* 15 June.

Paz, Octavio (1993) *La llama doble – Amor y erotismo*. Polish translation, *Podwójny Płomien*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1996.

Taylor, Marc C. and Esa Saarinen (1994) *Imagologies: Media Philosophy*. London: Routledge.

Waterhouse, Rosie (1995) 'So what is Child Abuse?', *Independent on Sunday* 23 July.

Zeldin, Theodore (1994) *An Intimate History of Humanity*. New York: Harper-Collins.

Zygmunt Bauman is Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of Leeds. His latest publications include *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (Polity Press, 1998) and *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor* (Open University Press, 1998).