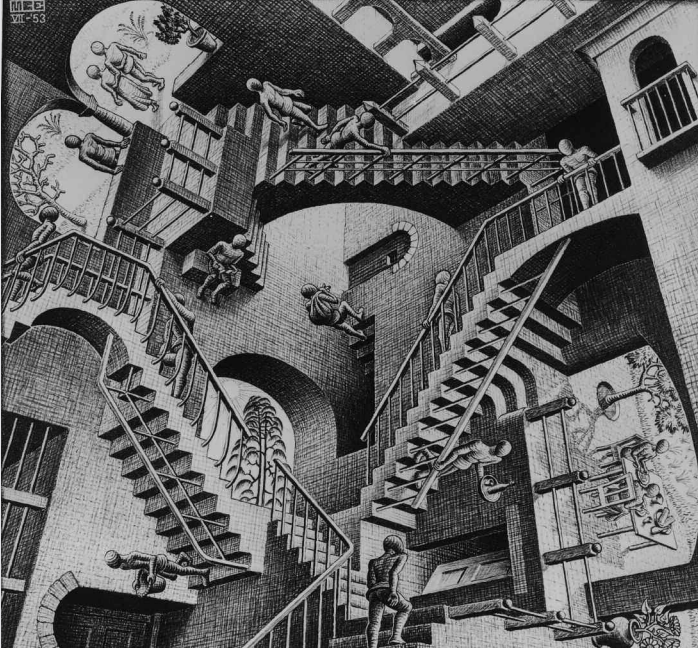


# *Mapping the Secular Mind*

## Modernity's Quest for a Godless Utopia



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HAGGAG ALI

IIIT Books-In-Brief Series

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MODERNITY'S QUEST FOR  
A GODLESS UTOPIA

Haggag Ali

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978-1-56564-559-2

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*Typesetting by Sideek Ali*

*Cover design by Shiraz Khan*

*Printed in Malta by Gutenberg Press Ltd*

## IIIT Books-In-Brief Series

The IIIT Books-In-Brief Series is a valuable collection of the Institute's key publications written in condensed form designed to give readers a core understanding of the main contents of the original. Produced in a short, easy to read, time-saving format, these companion synopses offer a close, carefully written overview of the larger publication and it is hoped will stimulate readers into further exploration of the original.

Hagga Ali's study **Mapping the Secular Mind: Modernity's Quest for a Godless Utopia** was published in complete form in 2013. The secular mind had a grand plan, to establish an earthly paradise, a utopia of the here and now, a modern civilization governed by human reason, rationality, and the triumph of progress. Whilst ideals are one thing, the means to realize them is something else. Away from the hype, emancipating humanity from the 'shackles' of God and religion has proved no easy matter.

**Mapping the Secular Mind** critically examines issues of reason, rationality, and secular materialism, to explore how these mental perceptions, or ways of mapping the world, have affected human interaction and sociological development. It does this by comparing and contrasting the ideas of Abdelwahab M. Elmessiri (1938–2008), a leading Arab intellectual, and Zygmunt Bauman (1925), one of the world's foremost sociologists. In the last few decades, an emergent Western critique of modernity has inspired Muslim intellectuals to develop new ideas, images, terms and concepts that state their positions towards the tendencies of secular modernity, its transformations and consequences, and how it manipulates perceptions of reality.

The book challenges foundations of secular ideology to argue that its aspirations have deeply transformed human consciousness and man's sense of self, leaving him a creature of purposeless consumption, wearied by the search for fulfilment, and controlled by materialistic laws governing physical phenomena. It also offers a more darker thesis, that Fascist Germany and the Eugenics movement were a form of Social Darwinism taken to its logical course. These were not an aberration from the principles of modernity, Ali argues, but a consistent outcome of the modern world view, with the seeds of self-destruction woven into the very fabric of the philosophy.

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**Abridged Edition by Haggag Ali of his Original**

*MAPPING THE SECULAR MIND: MODERNITY'S QUEST  
FOR A GODLESS UTOPIA*

Haggag Ali

ISBN hbk: 978-1-56564-594-3

ISBN pbk: 978-1-56564-593-6

2013

## Chapter One

### Introduction

In the last few decades, Western critique of modernity has inspired Muslim intellectuals to develop new ideas, images, terms and concepts that state their positions towards the tendencies of secular modernity, its transformations and consequences. Modernity is usually equated with the lofty ideals of the Enlightenment, particularly the promise of nature, reason and progress to establish a rational and progressive system. This perspective changed to large extent after the Second World War and the development of a very sophisticated Western self-scrutiny discourse, heightened by the works of the Frankfurt school. In his attempt to deconstruct the dominant perception of modernity, the Arab Egyptian Muslim intellectual Abdelwahab Elmessiri (1938-2008) benefitted from this Western critical legacy. Elmessiri's critique of modernity can be seen as an attempt to Islamize modernity but ironically via Western critique itself.

For almost four decades, Elmessiri was engaged in a philosophically oriented study of Western modernity and its relationship with Nazism and Zionism. Elmessiri usually refers to his sojourn in the United States during two separate periods (1963-69/1975-79) as a very crucial moment that had shaped his understanding of the transformation of Western modernity as a "paradigmatic sequence" that starts with solid rational materialism and ends with liquid non-rational materialism.<sup>1</sup> The 1970s, however, are very crucial in understanding Elmessiri's critique of modernity because this period witnessed the rise of political Islam which managed, after the Arab defeat by Israel in 1967, to fill the vacuum left by the leftist movements, their rhetoric of technological progress as well as their idealistic discourse of Arab socialism, one that was (mis)used to justify the loss of political freedom in exchange for the rhetoric of national development and technological progress. The 1970s can be seen as the charismatic period of political Islam which

was embraced by many of the prominent Egyptian leftists as a vehicle of popular contestation and national liberation.<sup>2</sup>

In both Western and Arab discourses modernity is almost always related to the ideals of the Enlightenment, particularly the promise of Reason and science to promote our human and social existence. Elmessiri refers to this understanding of modernity as “partial secularism,” which he describes as “moral secularism” or “humanistic secularism.”<sup>3</sup> According to Elmessiri, the acceptance of this moderate secularism as an integral part of pluralism is embraced by the major Islamic trend, which is advocated by Fahmi Huwaidi, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Mohammed Selim al-Awa, Abu al-Ela Madi, and Adel Husain (Egypt), Rachid Ghannouchi (Tunisia), Taha Jabir Alalwani (Iraq), AbdulHamid AbuSulayman (Saudi Arabia), Azzam Tamimi (Palestine), Parviz Manzur (Pakistan), and Ahmet Davutoğlu (Turkey). This Islamic trend accepts the legitimacy of moderate secularism and the role of its advocates as partners in the political life of Islamic society.<sup>4</sup>

In *Dirāsāt Maʿrifīyyah fī al-Ḥadāthah al-Gharbiyyah* (Epistemological Studies in Western Modernity), Elmessiri deconstructs the mainstream understanding of Western secular modernity and defines it as the “use of value-free science and technology.”<sup>5</sup> It is a form of comprehensive secularism which does not aim merely at the independence of science and technology from human subjectivity or the separation of church and state, but at “the separation of all values (be they religious, moral, human) not from only ‘the state’ but also from public and private life, and from the world at large. In other words, it strives for the creation of a value-free world.”<sup>6</sup>

In the introduction to the third edition of *Al-Ṣuhyūniyyah wa al-Nāziyyah wa Nihāyat al-Tārīkh* (Zionism, Nazism and the End of History), dedicated to the formerly Marxist French intellectual Roger Garaudy, Elmessiri expresses his astonishment at the fact that before the late 1980s Western scholarship had hardly recognized or approached Nazism and Zionism within the framework of a value-free, rationalistic and imperialistic modernity. Elmessiri, however, lavishes praise on Zygmunt Bauman’s interpretation of modernity saying that his writings, particularly *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), are among the most important references he has drawn upon to develop his cognitive mapping of modernity.<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere he stresses that Bauman’s writings are among the works he has read avidly as they uncover the dark sides that lie beneath the joyful glittering surface of modernity.<sup>8</sup>

Though belonging to different religions, nationalities and cultures, Elmessiri (Arab- Egyptian- former Marxist- Muslim) and Bauman (Polish- British- former Marxist- Jew), have used the allegories of the Jew to approach much wider questions of secular modernity, including Nazism, racism, imperialism and the Jewish experience in modern Europe. The fact that Bauman comes originally from Poland gives this comparison a unique dimension, since when we talk about the Jews of the Western world, we are talking in fact, according to Elmessiri, about the Jews of Poland! It was only in the 1980s that Elmessiri came to realize that the vast majority of Jews in the West by the end of the eighteenth century were in Poland, and that they were divided among Russia, Austria and Germany by the division of Poland itself; thousands and millions of them emigrated to England, Austria, Canada, the United States, South Africa and Palestine.<sup>9</sup> It was also in Poland that the other face of secular modernity fully emerged; in Poland alone six Nazi concentration camps were established, of which the biggest and most popular was Auschwitz. Reliable statistics, according to Gilbert Achcar, show that in 1948, almost 170,000 Jews from Poland constituted the largest segment of the community of Jews living in Palestine.<sup>10</sup> Bauman himself was forced to immigrate to Israel in the late 1960s, but he opted for England immediately after receiving a job offer from the University of Leeds.

Bauman was born in Poland in 1925, and his family escaped to the Soviet zone of occupation, following the Nazi invasion of Poland at the beginning of the Second World War. By the late 1950s, Bauman, like Elmessiri, had been playing a significant role in humanist Marxism, and he has remained faithful to the major principles of Marxism and its repudiation of false consciousness. In the 1960s, Bauman became a member of the governing Polish United Workers's Party, but he never approved of the practices of the communist regime. In the late 1960s, to be precise in 1968, Bauman renounced his party membership and in the same year, in an anti-Jewish campaign, he, alongside many Jewish intellectuals, was driven out of Poland and stripped of his Polish citizenship on the accusation of fomenting student riots. Bauman had to go first to Israel where he stayed no more than three years. Janina Bauman, his wife, uncovers in a conversation with Madeleine Bunting the true reason behind their decision to leave Israel: "[I]t was a nationalistic country, and we had just run away from nationalism. We didn't want to go from being the victims of one nationalism to being the perpetrators of another."<sup>11</sup> In a conversation with Benedetto Vecchi, Bauman himself does not hesitate to say, "I suppose that my Jewishness



is confirmed by Israeli inequities painng me still more than atrocities committed by other countries.”<sup>12</sup>

The nationalistic drive that characterizes Western modernity has a great impact on Bauman’s mapping of modernity and postmodernity. The uniqueness of his critique came into prominence with the publication of his metaphorical trilogy: *Legislators and Interpreters* (1987), *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989) and *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991). Bauman has never abandoned his belief in the strong relationship between modernity and modernism, arguing that modernists gave their allegiance to the discoveries of modern science and developed their theories on scientific premises. He stresses that the impressionists took inspiration from optics, cubists from the relativity theory, and surrealists from psychoanalysis.<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere, Bauman argues that modernism would have never come into existence without the acceptance of the premises of modernity, especially the construction of contemptible people into a collective image of the bourgeois, philistines, or vulgar and uncultured masses.<sup>14</sup>

It is true that the Nazi Holocaust did not have a direct impact on Bauman’s personal life, but his wife Janina had suffered as a young Jewish girl in the Warsaw ghetto. Janina wrote her memoirs *Winter in the Morning*, which aroused Bauman’s interest in the Holocaust as a window to modernity or as one of its possibilities. More importantly, Bauman, in a conversation with Anver Shapira, criticizes the Israeli abuse and “privatization” of the Holocaust, arguing that the “Jews can be safe only in a world free of nationalisms, and that includes Jewish nationalism.”<sup>15</sup> Bauman’s anti-nationalistic stance shows in his membership of a well-known British group called Jews for Justice for the Palestinians. The group cooperates with other groups such as Writers against the Occupation and Jewish Students for Justice for Palestinians, all of which promote the idea that there is no hope for Israel without justice for the Palestinians. This is why they direct their efforts at building a broad-based End the Occupation campaign, one that supports the rights of the Palestinians and condemns Israeli occupation, illegal settlement and the abuse of military coercive force and violence against armless and impoverished Palestinians.

Bauman’s exile from Poland played a crucial role in his mapping of the consequences of modernity; it has given him the advantages of marginality that led him to focus on the position of strangers, exiles and outsiders. Bauman has intellectually led the nomadic existence of

the stranger, and he summarizes this intellectually fertile mode of existence in the eloquent statements made by Frederic Raphael, George Steiner and Ludwig Wittgenstein, respectively: (1) “The meaning of my being a Jew is that I am everywhere out of place,” (2) “My homeland is my typewriter,” and (3) “The only place where real philosophical problems could be tackled and resolved is the railway station.”<sup>16</sup>

In *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991), Bauman traces the failure of the liberalist utopia of Western modernity and stresses that exclusivist nationalism was not confined to Poland, since it manifested itself clearly in the failure of the assimilatory ambitions in almost all European countries. Phony assimilation, as Bauman describes it, involved the dismissal of the mystical and messianic trends as un-Jewish, granting credibility of cultural adjustment only to the relations of the *salon*: the Bible of Luther, Hermann Cohen and Kant, Steintal and Wilhelm von Humboldt. The majority of the Jews were thus encouraged to acquire “refined manners” and new standards of “cleanliness.” The call for physical and moral “cleanliness” was accompanied with a call for linguistic cleanliness, and Yiddish, the language of the *Ostjuden* (East European Jews from Russia, Poland, Ukraine and Galicia) became a target of ridicule among German Jews. Like Yiddish, Polish language was disdained as inferior to German. The *Ostjuden* were conceived of as “disease- and epidemic-carriers,” “filthy, ignorant and immoral savages,” and “unwelcome strangers.”<sup>17</sup>

Bauman’s analysis of the history of Jewish assimilation in the West is closely related and defined against the stereotype of the unassimilated *Ostjude*, the Jew of East and Central Europe. Bauman holds that the Holocaust had much sway on the meaning of Judaism because some theologians viewed it as a sign of the “absence of God,” the “failure of God,” the “Jewish exilic tradition” and the choice of the Jews as the “carriers of the truth” of modern civilization. Since the mid-nineteenth century, France, England and Russia directed their efforts at eliminating the increase in the numbers of the so-called poor, uneducated, backward and uncivilized Jewish immigrants who had two major options of salvation: Zionism and socialism. In Poland, the situation was much worse because there had been a strong belief that the Jews were an alien and poisonous body in the emerging Polish national organism.<sup>18</sup>

The saddest irony is that the success of individuals in almost all walks of life was not a sufficient guarantee of political equality and social acceptance. As a nation without a state, Jewish communities in Europe

attempted to gain “a state-like sovereignty,” but the failure of this ambition has led, in the final analysis, to the emergence of political Zionism and its programme of a new “Jewish liberal state:”

There is little doubt that the birth of political Zionism, most certainly in its most consequential, Herzl’s version, was the product of the disintegration of assimilatory efforts, rather than a fruition of the Judaist tradition and the resurrection of the love of Zion.<sup>19</sup>

## Chapter Two

### Radical Enlightenment

The metaphor of progress, in Bauman’s view, has turned metaphysical eschatology into a secular version immanent in history. *Les philosophes* were obsessed with the idea of progress, since “modern culture is a garden culture. It defines itself as the design for an ideal life and a perfect arrangement of human conditions.”<sup>1</sup> Modernity, unlike the long rule of Christianity, “rebuffed the obsession with the after-life, focused on the life ‘here and now,’ redeployed life activities around different narratives with earthly targets and values, and all-in-all attempted to defuse the horror of death.”<sup>2</sup>

Bauman introduces a key metaphor that shapes his understanding of foundational modernity: “[M]odern rulers and modern philosophers were first and foremost legislators; they found chaos, and set out to tame it and replace it with order.”<sup>3</sup> The legislators are not ordinary human beings but supermen who can transcend the existing reality and examine it from the outside using their God-like gaze.<sup>4</sup> The “gardener” and the “legislator” metaphors are meant to foreground the intricate relationship between culture and power. Richard Kilminster and Ian Varcoe uncover this motif in Bauman’s works, showing how he sees modernity as a general structuring or ordering drive, and how the urge to structure has always created new “problems.”<sup>5</sup>

Bauman stresses that Reason was embraced by the intellectuals of Enlightenment in order to promote human emancipation and to eliminate prejudice, ignorance, superstition and dogmatism. The saddest irony is that it has led, in the final analysis, to “a new bondage,” “terror,” and “monopolistic knowledge.”<sup>6</sup> The liberal vision of cultural assimilation, Bauman believes, is one of the main contradictions of

modernity because “the game of emancipation was in fact the game of domination.” The irony that lies at the heart of this matter is that emancipation was not a call for diversity, cultural exchange, cultural diffusion or pluralism but a call for uniformity, homogeneity and comprehensive unification of the population. This orientation led to a growing atmosphere of “intolerance to difference.”<sup>7</sup>

Bauman reveals the stimulating idea, contrary to dominant secular Western and Arab beliefs, that the Enlightenment project was not a noble dream of spreading the light of wisdom and freedom. Rather, it aimed at promoting the ambitions of the state and creating a “social mechanism of disciplining action.”<sup>8</sup> The Enlightenment is not seen as a metaphor for light, liberty, illuminating reason and freedom. The Enlightenment mapped by Bauman unmasks “instrumental and terroristic reason” as well as “racism of the intellectuals.”<sup>9</sup>

As for Elmessiri, he conceives the Enlightenment as “the philosophical basis of comprehensive secularism,”<sup>10</sup> arguing that the Enlightenment reached its paradigmatic, monistic and rationalistic moment in the thought of the eighteenth-century French *encyclopédistes*. Not surprisingly, he focussed only on their materialist philosophy which reflected the mechanistic and/or organismic paradigms of the Enlightenment. In other words, the manifestations of radical Enlightenment are discussed in reference to the writings that celebrate the world as a mechanistic and/or organismic existence: La Mettrie’s *Histoire naturelle de l’âme* (1745) and *L’Homme machine* (1748); Claude Adrien Helvétius’s *De l’Esprit* (1758) and *De l’Homme* (1773); Paul d’Holbach’s *Système de la nature ou des lois du monde physique & du monde moral* (1770); Pierre Jan Cabanis’s *Rapports du physique et du moral de l’homme* (1802); and Marquis de Condorcet’s *Esquisse d’un tableau historique des progrès de l’esprit humain* (1795).<sup>11</sup>

Elmessiri’s critique of the Enlightenment has much in common with the fierce attack launched by twentieth-century historiography against the materialists in general and Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709-1751) in particular. *Les philosophes* as a group have been accused of being responsible for the rise of the totalitarian state, the ills of the twentieth century and nihilism, which denied man a special place in the universe. The Enlightenment legacy is reduced to a materialist view that shows perfectly in La Mettrie’s fundamental works on the philosophy of nature: *L’Histoire naturelle de l’âme*, *L’Homme machine*, *L’Homme plante* and *Le Système d’épicure*. The repudiations of materialists as

“purveyors of scandalous ideas” are attributed to the fact that they were singled out by Karl Marx, thus making it easy for historians to hold them accountable for the ills of the twentieth century, the practices of communist regimes, the rise of totalitarian governments and even the Holocaust.<sup>12</sup>

This view might be seen as nothing but a reduction of modernity to the “dark side of modern society” which was anticipated by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, originally published in 1944 under the title *Philosophische Fragmente*. This critique was later taken to an extreme by Herbert Marcuse in his *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). Elmessiri might be easily accused of being influenced by the tragic and pessimistic cultural critique of the Frankfurt School, the Weberian critique of rationalism and the metaphors of the ‘iron cage’ of modernity and the ‘disenchantment of the world.’ As Bernstein suggests, we can see clearly that twentieth-century critiques of the Enlightenment and rationalism “can be understood as variations of Weberian themes.”<sup>13</sup> It comes as no surprise then that Elmessiri has devoted an entire chapter in his book *Epistemological Studies in Western Modernity* to the representation and analysis of Weber’s theory of rationalization. Elmessiri is thus close to all Western critiques that prophesied that the twentieth century would be the era of rationalization that colonizes and reshapes our everyday life.

### Chapter Three

## Modernity as a Gnostic Narrative

In his childhood, Elmessiri used to go to the library, and he first saw the word “Gnosticism” in one of Abdul Rahman Badawi’s books. The tone and strangeness of the word made him tremble to the extent that he kept thinking of it throughout his life. In the second volume of *Mawsūʿat al-Falsafah* (The Encyclopedia of Philosophy), Badawi included entries on monism and pantheism and devoted a four-page entry on Gnosticism, which he defines as a “mystic religious and philosophical orientation .... Gnosis of God is the way to salvation because God is man; the basis of gnosis is man’s realization of himself as God; this knowledge leads to man’s salvation.”<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this definition helped Elmessiri distance the Islamic world view from Gnosticism, throwing modernity and secularism back to the legacy of heresiology in ancient Christianity.

Elmessiri saw Gnosticism as the most prominent form of both immanentism and pantheism, both of which are represented as inconsistent with a purely monotheistic world view. Immanence is almost synonymous with pantheism, and Elmessiri sees no fundamental difference between them, yet he opts for each word according to the context.

Gnosticism, in Elmessiri's view, started as a form of spiritual pantheism till the eighteenth century and then transformed into materialist pantheism in the Kabbalah, the philosophy of both Spinoza and Hegel and contemporary comprehensive materialist secularism. In the early stages of writing his *Mawsū'at*, Elmessiri devoted only a few lines to the Spinoza entry, but when the paradigm of immanentism was crystallized in Elmessiri's mind in the 1990s, the Spinoza entry was enlarged and extended into many pages.

Bauman's critique has much in common with that of Elmessiri. The death of God thesis and the "so-called secularization" have given rise to new secular gods, including not only the Nietzschean superman but also Nature, Laws of History, Reason and Progress. The signifier "God" acquired new implications and connotations that go beyond the theological dispute on the existence or non-existence of God. God has not been secularized, and he has incarnated in such non-personal categories as Reason, the laws of History, the invisible hand or Historical Inevitability.<sup>2</sup> Monism and monopoly of Truth have never left the scene:

God stands for the idea of the 'one and only,' for the 'thou shalt have no other gods before me' idea in all its countless renditions and costumes: of ein *Volk*, ein *Reich*, ein *Führer*, of one party, one verdict of history, one line of progress, one way of being human, one (scientific) ideology, one true meaning, one proper philosophy. In all such cases 'one and only' conveys the one and only message: the right to the monopoly of power for some, the duty of total disobedience for others.<sup>3</sup>

Like Bauman, Elmessiri saw modernity as a paradigmatic sequence that starts with partial immanentism (partial secularism) and culminates with comprehensive immanentism (comprehensive secularism). He repudiated all reductionist and monistic paradigms that attribute the movement and the end of History to only one force, whether spiritual or materialistic. Elmessiri saw the whole process of immanentization/modernization/secularization in terms of secular incarnations of God in mankind as a whole (humanism and the solipsistic subject); in one

people (racism and imperialism); in one leader (fascism) and in nature (pantheism), affirming that there no is lack of other incarnations and signifiers.<sup>4</sup>

Elmessiri and Bauman repudiated all nationalistic and ideological movements as forms of immanentization and organismic/mechanistic paradigms. Elmessiri's position and analysis however are more explicit, decisive and comprehensive when he affirms that such movements promise their adherents with the "end of struggle and the establishment of technocratic utopia, whether in Zion, the Third Reich, the Welfare society or the communist society."<sup>5</sup> Modern ideologies are depicted as expressing nothing but the "realm of human action" and "will to immanentization" because all gnostic movements attempt to abolish the constitution of being, with its origin in divine, transcendent being, and to replace it with a world-immanent order of being.<sup>6</sup>

Elmessiri's understanding of Western modernity, as well as his dualistic understanding of the distinction between immanence and transcendence, is based on his repudiation of pantheism, which appears in different names in Arabic and Islamic lexicon, including *wiḥdat al-wujūd* (the unity of being), *ḥulūl* (indwelling) and *fanā'* (literally annihilation), all of which aim at the "complete absorption of the human into the divine," a stage that Elmessiri describes as the "embryonic state" and the ultimate "organic monism" as opposed to the state of full and complex humanity.<sup>7</sup> Elmessiri refers to these variations as the unconscious, yet pleasurable mode of being, which stands for the biological and utopian comfort of the mother's womb. The problem is that the contours between the microcosm (fetus-placenta) and the macrocosm (political structures) are blurred. Elmessiri does not hesitate to describe political and technocratic utopias as a "real and sincere desire to find final solutions to all problems, to create a worldly paradise and put an end to history."<sup>8</sup>

As designers of the perfect society, the Nazis conceived of '*unwertes Leben*' as the fundamental target that had to be distanced form the *lebensraum* or even exterminated.<sup>9</sup> *Unwertes Leben* included the Gypsies, communists, the mentally-retarded and all those who were perceived as harmful weeds threatening the harmony of the garden of modernity; the six million Jews were among more than twenty million people annihilated at Hitler's behest. Not surprisingly, Bauman does not conceive of the Holocaust as a Jewish affair or a German problem but as one of the possibilities of modernity at large; it is more than a "cancerous

growth on the otherwise healthy body of the civilized society.”<sup>10</sup> Other victims of the Holocaust, according to Janina Bauman, are thrown into oblivion simply because they lack the means to publicize their cause. The Gypsies, unlike the Jews, did not have many professors, writers and journalists to foreground their suffering and advocate their rights.<sup>11</sup>

## Chapter Four

### Mapping the Consequences of Modernity

Bauman repudiates the Western imperialistic vision that attempted to transform the “virgin lands” into a “dumping ground for those unwanted” and into a “promised land” for the proponents of progress. The populations of conquered, invaded and colonized lands were recasted as a “collective *homo sacer* of the metropolis.”<sup>1</sup> Science and technology promoted a strong belief in the superiority of Western modernity and its inevitable ascendancy i.e. a conception of modernity as the highest point of development as opposed to the idea of static cultures. This cognitive map made Western modernity the transcendental locus of all authority i.e. it became autonomous, self-contained, self-referential and self-validating.<sup>2</sup>

Bauman argues that the significance of Holocaust for sociology will be belittled, misjudged, and thus instrumentalized, if the Holocaust is seen as “something that happened to the Jews,” as “an event in Jewish History” or as one of the “many similar cases of conflict or prejudice or aggression.”<sup>3</sup> More importantly, Bauman underlines the fact that German anti-semitism alone cannot be a sufficient explanation of the Holocaust. According to Bauman, the term anti-Semitism, which was coined and came into general use toward the end of the nineteenth-century, cannot provide a complex explanation of the Holocaust; it lacks historical or contemporary evidence.<sup>4</sup>

Prejudice and hatred cannot explain modern genocide; irrational and barbaric emotions were neither the major causes nor the means of the Holocaust. The ultimate aim of Nazism was a utopian world and a perfect design. The perfect society or design in the case of the Holocaust was the thousand-year Reich or the kingdom of the liberated German Spirit.<sup>5</sup> Modern science, technology and bureaucracy, rather than irrational emotions, were all employed to realize this goal.<sup>6</sup>



Drawing on Max Weber's analysis of bureaucratic and rationalized culture, Bauman underlined the "bureaucratic rationalization" of the Holocaust; the official name of the Department in the SS headquarters in charge of the destruction of the Jews was "the Section of Administration and Economy." The very idea of the Final Solution (*Endlösung*) was "an outcome of the bureaucratic culture;" the Nazis thought of exterminating the Jews only when they failed to find a "dumping ground for the Jewry" inhabiting Europe, whether in Nisko, Madagascar or beyond the Archangel-Astrakhan line. Bauman repudiates the notion that the Holocaust was an "irrational outflow of the not-yet-fully-eradicated residue of pre-modern barbarity," arguing instead that it was a "legitimate resident in the house of modernity." To support this argument, he refers to the line of defence adopted by Dr. Servatius, who was Adolf Eichmann's counsel in Jerusalem during his trial in 1961: "Eichmann committed acts for which one is decorated if one wins, and goes to the gallows if one loses." In other words, bureaucratic and rational actions in the map of the modern world "have no intrinsic moral value," and moral evaluation is something "external to the action itself."<sup>7</sup>

Scientific institutes under Nazism were established to investigate the 'Jewish question' and to provide rationally designed solutions. The elimination of the Jews was referred to as the *Gesundung* (healing) of Europe, *Selbstreinigung* (self-cleansing), *Judensäuberung* (cleansing-of-Jews), hygienic prophylactic, and *eine Frage der politischen Hygiene* (a question of political hygiene). The murder of the Jews was thus portrayed as an "exercise in the rational management of society" and a "systematic attempt to deploy in its service the stance, the philosophy and precepts of applied science."<sup>8</sup> The authority of science, however, was not confined to Germany. German universities, in Bauman's view, were like their counterparts in other modern countries, all of them "carefully cultivated the ideal of science as an emphatically value-free activity."<sup>9</sup> Science as a body of ideas and a network of institutions "cleared the way to genocide through sapping the authority, and questioning the binding force, of all normative thinking, particularly that of religion and ethics."<sup>10</sup>

The significance of Bauman's argument lies in the fact that it repudiates the assumption that the Holocaust is a Jewish affair, a German problem, a Nazi invention or a product of National Socialism. Rather, it is one of the possibilities of the instrumental rationality of modernity; one which is politically and morally neutral. In *Sociology after the*

*Holocaust* (1988), an early version of the introduction to *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), Bauman argues that the Holocaust is a rationally calculated activity that cannot be reduced to a merely uncontrolled outburst of passions. Modernity, in Bauman's view, aspired for a state of ultimate and stable perfection, even though this aspiration might entail the suppression or neutralization of individual action as well as the universal domination of system and the absence of man. It comes as no surprise then that Bauman also repudiates the interpretation of the Holocaust as the culmination of European-Christian anti-semitism or as an interruption caused in the normal flow of history by German anti-Semitism and Nazi bestiality. Bauman's humanistic vision reaches its climax when he repudiates Israel's abuse of the Holocaust and its tragic memories as a certificate of Israeli political legitimacy and as an advance payment for the injustices it might itself commit against Palestinians in particular and the Arabs in general. The Holocaust, in Bauman's view, was not the result of irrational Hobbesian emotions but the product of the most scientifically advanced and sophisticated weapons and the most scientifically managed organization. It is true that instrumental rationality cannot be regarded as the Holocaust's major cause but it was a necessary condition.<sup>11</sup> Bauman, however, conceives of the Holocaust neither as the normal state of modernity nor as its paradigmatic moment. Rather, he represents it as one of the possibilities of modernity, a window to modernity and more generally the test of modernity that the West avoids to confront.

In mapping the consequences of modernity, Elmessiri is critical of all closed systems that seek full control and absolute perfection: Marxism and its call for a communist society devoid of any manifestations of conflict and contradiction; liberalism and its desire to employ science and technology in gratifying people's desires; Nazism and its dream of full control and perfect rationalization; the New World Order and its ambitions of reaching a universal natural law that ignores the differences among cultures and finally Zionism and its deification, like Nazism, of *Blut, Boden und Volk*. Here the Zionist vision and praxis are always perceived within the context of Western materialism and imperialism.

Like Bauman, Elmessiri focused on the Holocaust as the "paradigmatic moment" of solid rational materialism which has given rise to a universal human condition that can be grasped in Elmessiri's metaphor of the "functional group." This metaphor is very close to Bauman's metaphors of strangeness and vagabondage. Elmessiri refers to key

Western figures and their influence on his understanding of the role of functional groups; among them are Georg Simmel, Karl Marx, Max Weber and Werner Sombart.<sup>12</sup> Elmessiri, however, criticized Western scholarship for its failure to incorporate the stranger metaphor into a more comprehensive interpretative paradigm. Replacing the stranger metaphor with the metaphor of “functional group,” Elmessiri attempts to introduce a more comprehensive paradigm that can cover a wide range of people who are either imported from outside society or recruited from within its ranks and who are generally defined in terms of a definite function rather than their complex humanity.

As Bauman suggests, the proponents of National Socialism identified modernity as the “rule of economic and monetary values,” and they assumed that Jewish racial characteristics were the major reason behind the disappearance of “the *volkisch* mode of life and standards of human worth.”<sup>13</sup> It is precisely for this reason that they were conceived of as leeches and vampires, sucking the lifeblood from others, and therefore, they deserve death without redemption. The saddest irony, according to Elmessiri, is that the abstraction of the Jew into a permanent victim or a permanent parasite in Zionist discourse is countered by an equal, and even unjust, abstraction of the gentile into a “permanent wolf.”<sup>14</sup>

## Chapter Five

### **Bauman and the Postmodern Secular Dilemma**

The term postmodernity, in Bauman’s view, underlines the defining traits of the conditions that emerged throughout the affluent countries in the course of the twentieth century, and took its present shape in the second half of that century.<sup>1</sup> Bauman, however, abandoned the term postmodernity altogether, opting instead for the term “liquid modernity.”

“Liquid modernity” is the new metaphor Bauman introduces to map the transformation of Western modernity. In *Liquid Life*, Bauman defines the present mode of being as “liquid life” dominated by a growing atmosphere of “uncertainty” and “fast-moving events,” a “succession of new beginnings” or “the swift and painless endings.”<sup>2</sup> This liquid mode of existence is compared to a risky and fearful game of musical chairs that threatens to exclude the powerless, the poor, and

all those who cannot or do not want to cope with the fast-changing liquid life. Progress is no longer a metaphor of “sweet dreams and expectations,” “radical optimism” and a “promise of universally shared and lasting happiness” but a terrible nightmare and a sinister real “game of musical chairs” in which a second’s inattention results in irreversible defeat and exclusion.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike solid modernity, liquid modernity is associated with “free reign of the pleasure principle in the realm of consumption” because reality is no longer the enemy of pleasure. On the contrary, “spending is a duty,” since it gives “symbolic rivalry” and monopolizes the “definition of good life.”<sup>4</sup> Here Bauman’s thesis is set in sharp contrast with Freud’s old lamentations because the reality principle “has today to defend itself in the court of justice in which the pleasure principle is the presiding judge.”<sup>5</sup>

In the modern liquid era, the cognitive map of prospective consumers is manipulated by seductive commodity symbols: (1) the authority of celebrities (public personalities, great athletes, popular actors and singers) and (2) the authority of science (authority of scientific surveys, numbers and algebraic formulae). These authorities are “symbols of social approval,” “rational and solid knowledge” and “well-informed choice.”<sup>6</sup> Bauman suggests that liquid modernity can be seen as a “casino-like culture,” in which life is turned into individual games of “self-enclosed, self-referential and self-centred episodes,” a “series of new beginnings” or a “collection of short stories.”<sup>7</sup> The saddest irony, according to Bauman, is that lavish consumption becomes the sign of success and fame. The possession and consumption of certain objects are seen as a necessary condition of happiness and perhaps even of human dignity.<sup>8</sup>

As Bauman suggests in his thought-provoking paper “On Postmodern Uses of Sex,” sexual activity in its postmodern rendition is “focused narrowly on its orgasmic effect...Its paramount task is to supply ever stronger, infinitely variable, perfectly novel and unprecedented *Erlebnisse*.”<sup>9</sup> The celebration of sex is accompanied not only with the liquefaction of the family as a basic social unit but also with the new danger of paternal love and intimacy.<sup>10</sup> Tourists and vagabonds are represented as the major “metaphors of contemporary life” because we all are plotted on a continuum stretched between the poles of the “perfect tourist” and the “vagabond beyond remedy.”<sup>11</sup>

## Chapter Six

**Elmessiri and Postmodern Liquidity**

Unlike Bauman, whose critique of modernity anticipated his early celebration of postmodernity, Elmessiri never saw postmodernity as a new horizon of emancipation, pluralism or tolerance of difference. On the contrary, he regarded it as a nihilistic and relativistic kind of philosophy with a highly sophisticated sense of pragmatism. Unlike Bauman, who had great and lofty expectations from the postmodern turn, Elmessiri insists from the outset that postmodernity celebrates the world as nothing but a purely materialistic matter in perpetual flux without any origin or purpose. Unlike Bauman, who has remained faithful to the project of modernity and had great expectations to be realized through postmodernity, Elmessiri has never abandoned his basic assumption that postmodernity is almost synonymous with the failure of modernity and its bankruptcy.<sup>1</sup>

In the phase of liquid non-rational materialism, almost all human beings have been turned into functional groups or Mamluks. We can say that the postmodern condition is the condition of, to borrow Ernest Gellner's phrase, *the universal Mamluk*, or to borrow Elmessiri, *the functional group*. The latter is the code of the age of comprehensive secularism, and it includes, in Elmessiri's view, immigrants in both the West and the Gulf countries, workers in the pleasure industry (prostitutes, secretaries, hostesses, movie stars, men and women of sport, models and sex queens), tourists, military elites, cultural and political elites and even functional or client states.<sup>2</sup>

Like Bauman, who has traced the prominence of sex as one of the prime metaphors of postmodernity, Elmessiri holds that the increasing levels of rationalization, secularization and immanentization have led to the emergence and the development of new organismic metaphors: "the human body has been the fundamental metaphor in the era of modernization. Now sex becomes the major metaphor of the postmodern era *par excellence*."<sup>3</sup> Elmessiri even argues that modern Western philosophy gives sex "epistemological primacy over all things."<sup>4</sup> This primacy can be attributed to the endeavour to withdraw from the complex world of values, duties, obligations and responsibilities.<sup>5</sup>

The celebration of sex is also accompanied with the liquefaction of the family and the emergence of new liquid signifiers. With the celebration of casual sex, or what Elmessiri usually refers to as "instant sex," sex

and value have been conspicuously separated and reduced to a temporary physical relationship that aims at immediate gratification. Not surprisingly, prostitution, for example, becomes a merely “economic activity” and the linguistic sign “prostitute” is transformed into “sex worker,” a new sign with new signifier and signified, representing the prostitute as a labourer and an economic force in society.<sup>6</sup>

The same process of liquefaction, according to Elmessiri, can be seen in the change of other signifiers such as “illegitimate children” who have become “children of unwed mothers,” “children of a single parent family,” “children out of wedlock,” “natural babies” and “love babies.” In short, they are the children of nature. Elmessiri argues that liquid postmodern sex or, to be more precise, the secularization as well as the de-sanctification of sex, deconstructs man as a “complex human being” (father/mother, husband/wife, male/female). In an ironic, yet serious, tone, Elmessiri argues that the “natural evolution” of the liquefaction of sex shows in the indifference to incest taboo, homosexuality and celebration of zoophilia.<sup>7</sup>

The interest in ‘philosophia’ (the love of wisdom) is now replaced with an interest in pedophilia and zoophilia.<sup>8</sup> The saddest irony is that sexual abnormality, which is an assault on human nature, is defended in the name of human rights. Human beings are reduced into mere flesh to be utilized and exploited as a source of sensual enjoyment.<sup>9</sup>

Postmodernists, according to Elmessiri, aspire to establish a world devoid of any reference to the notions of identity, memory, history, time, logos, origins, truth and sanctity, transcendence i.e. a world that celebrates the will to power, free play and desire. In his analysis of the postmodern celebration of the body, Elmessiri refers to Bauman’s belief that the absence of a transcendental subject, divine or human, means the reign of absurdity and that the absence of religious absolutes have led, in Bauman’s view, to the celebration of the body. When the body becomes the only, the ultimate point of reference, “the ideas of community, society and collective identity, all of which presuppose the transcendence of self/body, no longer exist.”<sup>10</sup>

Elmessiri enumerates the examples that uncover the centrality of sex in the postmodern world view: Derrida’s description of deconstruction as “continuous orgasm,” Barthes’s “pleasure of the text” as an act of sexual gratification, the call for the celebration of invagination (a symbol of immanence) instead of imagination (as a symbol of transcendence)

and the assimilation of logocentrism into phallogocentrism, aesthetics and hermeneutics into erotics, textuality into sexuality, discourse into intercourse, eschatology into scatology.<sup>11</sup>

Sex becomes the ‘substitute of language’ that defies interpretation as it becomes the actual, implicit, material point of reference that ridicules transcendence. As Elmessiri suggests, the postmodern era now relates aesthetics to erotics and intertextuality to sexuality.<sup>12</sup>

Elmessiri is very conscious of his subjectivity and ideology, and therefore he never confuses Judaism, Jewishness and Zionism. All and above, he repudiates the conspiracy theory that suggests that postmodernity or deconstruction is a Jewish trend aimed at the liquefaction of all solids. Elmessiri attributes this common, yet mistaken, belief among Western scholars to the Jewish historical experience of Jewish Diaspora (the pariah *Volk*) and the cognitive mapping of the Jew as the resident/eternal wanderer who dreams of the land of promise. The Jew is thus represented as a signifier separated from the signified or a signifier with overloaded and infinite meanings. Elmessiri’s interest in the significance of the Jews in the interpretation of postmodernity can not be attributed only to his cultural bias but also to a dominant paradigm that embraces the existential situation of the Jews before and after the Second World War as an expression of the consequences of both modernity and postmodernity. As Max Silverman suggests, post-Holocaust allegories of the Jew are very crucial to approach much wider questions of modernity and postmodernity.<sup>13</sup>

Elmessiri, however, repudiates the assumption that the Jews can be seen as promoters of the tenets of postmodernity (nihilism, deconstruction, fragmentation etc) in an attempt to take revenge from the civilization that persecuted them since early Christianity. This common belief, according to Elmessiri, expresses a racist ideology as it transforms the Jews into one of the terrifying and evil forces of darkness.<sup>14</sup>

Elmessiri is not surprised at such demonization of the Jews, and he affirms that it is consistent with the Western arsenal of racist discourse. Instead of viewing the Jew as an ordinary human being endowed with both good and evil, the West represents all the Jews as a symbol of either functionalism or nihilism. The writing of the history of Jewish communities is characterized, in Elmessiri’s view, by an apparent dualism because it presents them as a totality, i.e. as the “Jewry” or as the “Jewish chosen people,” not as minorities belonging to different

cultures and backgrounds. Above all, Jewish communities have been presented, paradoxically, as functional groups, i.e. as traders, money lenders and human capital or, to borrow Elmessiri, as “human utilized matter” that can be transferred to serve the interests of others.<sup>15</sup>

Like Bauman, Elmessiri argues that the West conceived of the world as a “vacuum,” an “instrumental matter for its own interest,” a barbaric wasteland, an empty space, waiting for the civilizing mission. Unlike Bauman, however, Elmessiri always argues that Zionism is the legitimate offspring of European imperial legacy. Ruling out Arab and Islamic history, Zionists conceive of Palestine as ‘a land without people,’ a geographical space without history and an empty space inhabited by scattered and divided people. Elmessiri argues that what is common between postmodernity and Zionism is a feverish attempt to separate the signifier from the signified so that the identities of both Jews and Arabs can be easily deconstructed, reducing them to rootless objects that can be easily transferred to another place and endowed with a new identity. It comes as no surprise that the Jew becomes the Zionist settler; the Arab the Palestinian refugee; Palestine, Israel; the West Bank (*al-Difa al-Gharbiyya*) Judea and Samaria; and the Arab world the Middle East Market, consisting of “Turkish water,” “Arab Gulf capital,” “Egyptian labor” and “Israeli know-how.”<sup>16</sup>

The concept of the region is very important as it is usually used to refer to the Middle East. It denotes a purely geographical reality without any reference to history, language and religion and thus pan-regionalism, as opposed to pan-Arabism or pan-Islamism, has been promoted by Europe and the United States. Within this vision, the whole Middle East, including Israel, could be integrated into the Western globalized world. Like postmodernity, Zionism believes in absolute relativity and thus denies the notions of right and truth. It comes as no surprise then that violence becomes the ultimate pragmatic point of reference that decides the rules of the struggle game.<sup>17</sup>

Zionism is no exception from the imperial map because Zionist action is largely determined by the Zionist cognitive map which is based on power, myths, hopes, fears and divine promises rather than on a direct response to the complex reality and the contradictions surrounding it. Elmessiri always argues that Israel is not a Jewish state but a settler colonial depopulatory state that serves two major pragmatic and functional purposes: ridding Europe of its surplus Jews, and acting as a functional state to serve the interests of Western imperialism.<sup>18</sup>



Elmessiri uses the paradigm of “functional groups” to refer to Jewish communities and the term “functional state” to refer to Israel; the latter is nothing but a functional state serving the interests of the West in the Middle East. Bauman himself refers *en passant* to the role of the United States in guaranteeing the “survival of countries from Israel to South Korea.”<sup>19</sup>

In this context, Elmessiri defines postmodernity as the ideology of the pragmatic acceptance, the surrender and the adaptation of the weak to the status quo; it is the free and unbounded play with reality instead of seriously dealing with its contradictions and changing it.<sup>20</sup>

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## Notes

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- <sup>4</sup> Elmessiri, *Al-ʿAlmāniyyah al-Juzʿiyyah wa al-ʿAlmāniyyah al-Shāmilah*, [Partial Secularism and Comprehensive Secularism], (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2002), vol.1, pp.101-126.
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**Chapter Two: Radical Enlightenment**

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### Chapter Three: Modernity as a Gnostic Narrative

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### Chapter Five: Bauman and the Postmodern Secular Dilemma

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.68.  
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### Chapter Six: Elmessiri and Postmodern Liquidity

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<sup>11</sup> Elmessiri, *Al-Lughah wa al-Majāz*, pp.74-88.  
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<sup>20</sup> Elmessiri, *Al-Ḥadāthah wa mā Baʿda al-Ḥadāthah*, p.93.

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The secular mind had a grand plan, to establish an earthly paradise, a utopia of the here and now, a modern civilization governed by human reason, rationality, and the triumph of progress. Whilst ideals are one thing, the means to realize them is something else. Away from the hype, emancipating humanity from the 'shackles' of God and religion has proved no easy matter.

