

# **Bauman, *Wasted Lives* and the Eclipse of the Political**

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In the modern world, political tradition faces a variety of new challenges. Forces of globalisation, consumerism and postmodernism have broken the bonds between us and made us into individualised individuals, multiple units of self-identification that have more interest in consumption than citizenship (Bauman 2001). In this climate, social theory has emerged as a new and very real threat to the space reserved by political theory. In recent history we have seen a colonisation of political theory by social theory (Walsh 2002b) and there has been a shift away from the political towards the social (Arendt 1958). This has had important implications for our understanding of the divide between public and private, freedom, and the human condition. The rise of mass society where 'various social groups have suffered...absorption into one society' (Arendt 1958, 41) and the complete recession of the public realm have resulted in once private concerns becoming public issues. In the age of the social, the new politically empty quasi-public realm is complemented by individualised private lives filled with a search for identity through consumption.

In this context, the work of sociologist Zygmunt Bauman is highly influential. This paper examines Bauman's 2004 work *Wasted Lives* and undertakes a comprehensive analysis and comparison in light of the political theory of Hannah Arendt. With regard to Bauman's other works and the field of sociology more generally, this paper explores the extent to which Bauman addresses concerns about the merging of political and social theory and argues that the social understanding of a 'wasted life' is very different from the already established political understanding. While *Wasted Lives* is situated in the contemporary phenomena of globalisation and consumerism, Bauman's discussion of human waste, while perhaps offering a social theory, ignores the political understanding of the potential of human life and its capacity for freedom and immortality as theorised by Arendt. With this in mind, this paper assesses the implications of Bauman's work for the future of political theory and advocates an understanding of the full significance of a wasted political life.

### **Bauman on *Wasted Lives***

Bauman's *Wasted Lives* (2004) aims primarily to produce a social theory about the production and disposal of human waste in order to examine human inclusion and exclusion. In order to do this, Bauman introduces the concept of waste by examining the form of waste (and waste disposal) that is most familiar to us - rubbish. To live in the modern world means to produce vast amounts of rubbish as we throw out the old to make room for the newer and better models and appliances we want in our homes and offices. As a consequence, rubbish disposal is an issue of utmost importance and Bauman believes that 'rubbish collectors are the unsung heroes of modernity' (2004, 28). By extrapolating this example of modern consumption and waste to apply to the human dimension, Bauman implies that modernisation and consumption not only produce material waste, but also human waste. Wasted humans are the excess, the superfluous and redundant who no longer fit into society or who for one reason or another are not allowed to stay. Material waste implies something that no longer has a use or purpose, has a lack of distinction from other waste, and once designated waste it is of little consequence. Similarly, human waste is of little or no use to modern society and must be dealt with accordingly.

The production of waste itself is not a problem for Bauman, since waste has always been a necessary (and yet unspoken) component of production. Drawing another comparison with the material world, he states that 'two kinds of trucks leave factory yards daily - one kind of truck proceeds to the warehouses and department stores, the other to the rubbish tips' (2004, 27). What matters in this example is that we value the first truck and do not mention the second because it is nothing - waste implies nothingness or at least something of no value. In the same way that material waste is a by-product of production, human waste is the by-product of modernisation and wasted lives are the 'collateral casualties of progress' (2004,15). For Bauman, what has become a major global concern are the methods of *human waste disposal* available in the modern world. Prior to

the global stranglehold of modernisation, waste disposal for developed countries was a simple matter of relocation. In other words, our waste could be 'dumped' in other 'premodern' countries which were the 'natural destinations for the export of "redundant humans" and obvious, ready-made dumping sites for the human waste of modernisation' (2004, 5-6). But now Bauman argues that 'the world is full' (2004, 4) and there are no more empty lands in which we can dump our waste. What this means essentially is that the world is faced with 'an acute crisis of the human waste disposal industry' (2004, 6).

Bauman identifies two main categories of human waste. Firstly there are the redundant who no longer have a source of labour or work. Bauman classifies ours as a society that 'cast[s] employment as a key - *the* key - to the resolution of the issues of, simultaneously, socially acceptable personal identity, secure social position, individual and collective survival, social order and systemic reproduction' (2004,11). In this way, work is seen as the sole purpose of life and individuals have worth only as producers. The redundant are distinct from the unemployed as 'unemployment' suggests a temporary ailment for which the simple cure is employment. On the other hand, redundancy 'whispers permanence and hints at the ordinariness of the condition' (2004, 11). There is no cure for being made redundant, 'the others do not need you, they can do as well, and better, without you' (2004, 12) and having nothing to offer, the redundant become human waste. While the unemployed can be recycled back into active employment, the 'destination of the redundant is the waste yard' (2004, 12).

The second group identified by Bauman as human waste are refugees. These are people who have been excluded from their own societies and have become excess population, and therefore human waste, as by-products of globalisation. For Bauman, refugee human waste presents a particular problem because it is a new source of insecurity and fear. We are each individually anxious about the ease with which we ourselves could become collateral casualties and be turned into waste, and 'immigrants embody - visibly, tangibly, in the flesh - the inarticulate yet hurtful and painful presentiment of

their own disposability' (2004, 56). It is this notion of disposability that deepens our sense of vulnerability and fear, as we do not want to see our own faces amongst those relegated to the trash heap. In addition to this, we are plagued by a new global fear of terrorism. We have a new focus on personal safety and refugees remind us that our security is tenuous. They threaten the outside/inside divide that is meant to protect 'us' from the very real threat of 'them' and blur the once very clear distinction that defined just who 'them' and 'us' were. Refugee human waste makes us vulnerable and insecure and this insecurity characterises life in the modern age.

This insecurity leads to Bauman's concern with inclusion and exclusion. Human waste must be excluded because it is the unspoken and 'dark and shameful secret of all production' (2004, 27), and its removal becomes the 'activity of separation' (2004, 28). In reference to the two forms of human waste, Bauman further classifies redundant human waste as 'insiders' (2004, 80). While we move to separate and exclude this waste from mainstream society, we must devise new methods for its disposal as the fullness of the planet means that the old method of 'dumping' is no longer viable. Instead we must ensure that the waste is 'sealed off in tightly closed containers' (2004, 85) within society. These can be in the form of 'new ghettos' (2004, 81) which not only exclude human waste but group it together and ensure that dependence on public housing and welfare keeps them at arms length and reduces the possibility of recycling; or prisons which offer a 'final, definitive disposal' (2004, 86) and represent a shift from social state inclusion to criminal exclusion and no chance of recycling. On the other hand, refugees are 'outsiders' (2004, 80) and in fact reverse the flow of waste disposal. Not only are we producing our own waste, but we must deal with a new influx of waste from somewhere else. Refugees are in the peculiar situation of not only being unwanted, but their loss of identity makes them 'stateless, placeless, [and] functionless' (2004, 76) and this lack of both distinction and worth earmarks them as immediate candidates for waste. Waste disposal becomes of primary concern and for refugees the detention camp is the final act of separation and exclusion since once inside they can be forgotten.

For Bauman, *Wasted Lives* highlights the fact that 'liquid modernity is a civilization of excess, redundancy, waste and waste disposal' (2004, 97). However, in contradiction to the idea that waste is useless, human waste does perform one vital task. It provides us with a scapegoat for our individual insecurities and offers an 'easy target for unloading anxieties prompted by the widespread fears of social redundancy' (2004, 63). However, while our current preoccupation with human waste alleviates our anxiety, it is also responsible for its creation. As humans, Bauman believes that we 'live ahead of the present' (2004, 114), and as such we are always after something better, something newer and more improved that can attain the status of perfection. But perfection implies the end of the journey, as once we have it there is 'nothing left to transgress and transcend' (2004, 114). Paradoxically, this 'dream of stillness' (2004, 115) can only be achieved through rapid change. It is this change that creates uncertainty. It also represents a shift from material consumption to human consumption. In the modern globalised world, humans have become the new consumables on the production line of society, and can be deemed waste or otherwise, facing either exclusion or inclusion at society's own discretion, therefore ensuring that insecurity and fear become core features of modern life.

### **Bauman on Politics**

Bauman's *In Search of Politics* (1999) attempts to characterise politics from a social perspective by examining public space, agency, and providing a vision for the future of political endeavour. He begins with a discussion of modern liberty where the individual freedoms that we take for granted in our everyday lives are undermined by a sense that collectively we can do nothing to change the things that concern us. Bauman asks how we can live with such a contradiction (1999, 2) and argues that 'individual liberty can be only a product of collective work' (1999, 7). While we live in a world that increasingly moves towards privatising the means to assuring individual liberty through individualisation and consumerism, we must find ways of transforming private concern into public action. Bauman concludes that this contradiction surrounding liberty is a consequence of the divide between public and private and our lack of ability to

‘translate private worries into public issues and, conversely, to discern and pinpoint public issues in private troubles’ (1999, 2). He believes that this has occurred because ‘the bridges built between private and public life are dismantled or were never built to start with’ (1999, 2). What is needed is not to build these bridges or even to ensure that the public/private divide is maintained, but instead Bauman advocates the construction of the agora, ‘the space neither private nor public, but more exactly private and public at the same time’ (1999, 3). This implies a merging of the two once distinct realms into a hybrid space ‘where private problems meet in a meaningful way’ (1999, 3).

For Bauman, the construction of the agora is of utmost importance, but its conceptualisation is fraught with difficulty. While he identifies the divide between public and private as ancient in origin and relating to the original Greek understanding of politics (1999, 87), he incorrectly assumes that the agora is able to bridge the divide. The distinct nature of the public and private realms was theorised by Arendt (1958) such that the private encompasses all things pertaining to survival and necessity (wants and needs); and the public relates to the political realm of freedom actualised through speech and action. Further to this, Arendt argued that both realms are necessary for human life – one cannot exist without the other, nor can a human survive in one realm alone. In political terms the public realm is of utmost importance because it allows individuals to create a common world through appearance (Arendt 1958, 50) and a space where our individual ideas can compete to be seen and heard through speech and persuasion. Similarly, Castoriadis argues that ‘the emergence of a public space means that a political domain is created which “belongs to all”’ (1992, 112), which echoes Arendt’s assertion that the public realm allows us all to be free and equal but still able to retain individual differences (1958, 41). In other words, the public realm exists not only as the realm of the political but also as an extension to, and augmentation of human life itself. This understanding of the political is distinct in contemporary political theory, and as such, Cavarero argues that since Arendtian politics is founded on plural interactions between humans and thus boundless and unpredictable, it is capable of expressing human uniqueness and ‘a space for reciprocal self-evaluation’ (2004, 63).

By contrast, Arendt highlights the modern birth of a third realm, the social, which is neither public nor private. In fact, Arendt argues that the social is like the private realm escalated from an individual to a national scale, 'the nation-wide administration of housekeeping' (1958, 28). Far from enhancing public life, the social realm has actually reversed the roles of the public and private and forced matters that were once a private concern into issues of public significance. The rise of mass society has meant that as individuals we are forced to conform to some notion of the 'common good' where only one opinion can flourish and where difference has been made a private concern to be pursued by individuals (Arendt 1958, 41). In these terms, the very constructions of social and political are incompatible. While the political embraces difference, freedom and public appearance, the social is based on conformity, the rise of necessity and the lack of anything distinctly political. For Benhabib, Arendt's discussion of the 'rise of the social' sheds light on 'the institutional differentiation of modern societies into the narrowly political realm on one hand and the economic market and the family on the other' (1992, 74). In this way, the rise of the social and the subsequent demise of the public realm, is symptomatic of the demise of the political more generally, and the wider trend to limit political theory to governance and public policy, ensuring that the contemporary public realm remains confined to a very 'restricted, impersonal sphere of administration' (Arendt 1958, 60).

Bauman's construction of the agora merges the once distinct public and private realms and fuses them into one all-assuming whole that attempts to explain the emergence of the social, constructing it to be *both* public and private. Bauman believes that this agora has social significance and through its ability to act as 'translator' between public and private is able to provide solutions to the current inadequacies of individual liberty. However this understanding of the social is in direct contradiction to Arendt's political understanding of the social as *neither* public nor private. In the Arendtian sense, the social precludes action and rather than providing a means for individuals to gather together, mass society makes individuals lose the ability to relate to one another and

represents the demise of the common world. This has important consequences for the political, as reconstructing the private as a new form of 'empty' public, in fact denies the political altogether, as the public realm can only exist as both a function of, and in opposition to, the private realm. But for Bauman, making the private public is a simple fact of life. Beilharz captures Bauman's sentiment that "we show our humanity not in claims to the sublime, or the final, but in the care with which we attend to the routines of everyday life and to each other" (Beilharz 2001, 15). This statement highlights Bauman's elevation of the necessities of everyday life over (political) freedom and serves to reinforce Arendt's notion that the social limits us to a restricted existence of unfreedom and work, denying us the chance to reach our full potential and ultimately claim immortality.

Bauman's reliance on the agora as a solution for social problems is symptomatic of the larger problem of understanding the human condition in economic and market-based terms. Benhabib demonstrates that this presented a particular problem for Arendt who saw that 'the occluding of the political by the social and the transformation of the public space of politics [leads] into a pseudospace of interaction in which individuals no longer "act" but "merely behave" as economic producers, consumers and urban city dwellers' (1992, 75). In actuality, Bauman's agora existed in ancient Greece 'not [as] a meeting place of citizens, but a market place where craftsmen could show and exchange their products' (Arendt 1958, 160). The construction of the agora as a means to secure collective freedom is therefore a thinly disguised way to secure consumer freedom, rather than the more broad based freedoms offered by the political. The agora, as the market place, and the symbolism attached to it, entrenches the idea that ours is a consumer-product driven society where a human's worth is determined solely by its ability to consume. This follows Bauman's 1988 arguments that modern freedom can be best understood as freedom to consume and that as such, consumer behaviour is well placed to describe modern life. Bauman's 1999 shift to the agora further develops the idea that the stranglehold of consumerism and subsequent market-based understandings of the human condition can provide some explanation for the rise of

individual insecurity and isolation. While Bauman believes that the agora can assist in translating private concerns into public issues, in reality it is merely a vehicle to ensure that private concerns about consumption and production take the place of any meaningful public action.

Interestingly, Bauman does not identify this discussion of public and private as being of political concern. Instead, his explicit understanding of politics is limited to a discussion of state institutions of governance and their use of political power for the protection of security and individual liberty. For Bauman, politics is synonymous with the state and the political describes a narrow field associated with models of state governance.

Everything else can be best understood in terms of the social. However, Arendt has already clearly demonstrated that politics operates on a much grander scale than mere administration and encompasses not only speech and action, but beauty and immortality. While traditional political theory places a specific emphasis on the state, justice and liberty, Arendtian political theory forges a space where we can demonstrate courage and display our uniqueness to others, demonstrating 'who' we are (as opposed to 'what') and a means in which to explore the infinite nature of our own humanity. In this way, Arendt's 'elaboration of the dignity of the political...provides a landmark contribution unsurpassed by many contemporary political theories' (Walsh 2002a, 2). Further to this, Kristeva argues that the originality of the Arendtian concept of political action lies in the fact that 'she sees it as an actualisation – of a who that is hypothetical, dangerous, and dependent on hope rather than an improbable claim for its existence' (2001, 55).

Bauman's misunderstanding (and misrepresentation) of the political as a narrow sphere of state administration has wide reaching consequences for his later work in *Wasted Lives*. While *Wasted Lives* is based upon inherently political concerns such as freedom, language, relationships between individuals, reality, and immortality, Bauman does not engage with the political nature of his arguments and attempts to disguise them as social theory. Utilising his 1999 framework that reduces the sphere of the political,

*Wasted Lives* again limits Bauman's concern with politics to a minor discussion of state based power and institutions. This is centred on the political use of human waste as scapegoats for the growing anxiety felt in society. Politics is only of relevance in that state power can be used as a tool for both waste control and disposal by determining the criteria for inclusion and exclusion and by enforcing a border that attempts control refugee migration and therefore stem the tide of uncertainty. In this way, Bauman does not address the significance of a wasted political life and neglects the specific political understanding of human waste which offers insight into freedom, humanity and the construction of a common world.

This limiting of the political and the shift to the agora where private concerns are of public significance are Bauman's attempt to define the spread of the social. However, his conceptualisation of the social is very different to the one already provided by the political theory of Arendt. What Bauman's work is successful in doing, is highlighting the existence and supremacy of mass society and therefore entrenching the values of individualisation and conformity. In *Wasted Lives*, his discussion of waste as lacking distinction and purpose and human waste being faceless, nameless individuals stripped of identity, shows that we have become isolated in our multiple singularities and able to be classified as only waste or useful product. Far from embracing difference, the production line of modernisation has forced us to become carbon copies of sameness afraid of being made redundant and forced into some form of waste disposal. While trying to provide solutions to the dilemma of collective freedom and security, Bauman does not acknowledge that the freedom guaranteed by the public realm cannot be replaced by the gathering together of a group of unrelated individuals in mass society. For Arendt, mass society means that individuals are all 'imprisoned in the subjectivity of their own singular experience, which does not cease to be singular if the same experience is multiplied innumerable times' (1958, 58). From this political perspective, Bauman's collectivity does not ensure freedom, nor abate modern insecurity and fear. Rather it ensures that isolation and singularity become defining characteristics of the modern age. The lives to which Bauman refers are empty and two-dimensional and are

devoid of meaning outside the realms of consumption and work. On top of this, his so-called solution offers little hope in the reduction of fear and insecurity and a shaky foundation on which to establish meaning in contemporary individual life.

### **Implications for Political Theory**

Bauman's work in *Wasted Lives* follows on from his more recent attempts to colonise political theory (2002 & 2003). In a post-political age, sociologists believe that social theory has the tools necessary to understand the complexities of human life and they utilise a conceptual hierarchy where social theory is positioned at the top and political theory is buried somewhere below (Walsh 2002b, 10). This means that political theory becomes almost a subset of social theory and consequently appears as a sociological derivative. However, what Bauman does not address is that his concerns with public/private, beauty, freedom, immortality and language are concerns that are political in nature. The space for these ideas has long been held by political theorists such as Arendt, however Bauman presents his ideas as though he is doing so for the first time. Not only this, but he discards the established political understandings and reworks them into 'new' social theory where their meaning and significance is obscured to the point where their original intention is lost. In some ways, it is as though he has placed Arendt's work into a huge conceptual blender and returned something that although contains all the original elements, is very different in taste and texture and bears little resemblance to its parent form. As such, *Wasted Lives* is largely a sociological re-rendering of political theory. This complements the work of Beck (1997) who claims that this new hybrid theory can be best described as 'sub-politics' – a sociological reinvention of politics and public life that is distinct from political theory as a whole.

Bauman's latest attempt to understand the circumstances surrounding the modern human condition sees him compare the human world to the material world. By classifying people as either waste or useful product, Bauman identifies our worth in material terms and firmly establishes consumerism as the single most influential factor

in human lives. The reoccurring theme in Bauman's work is individualisation and its resulting insecurity, and *Wasted Lives* is situated in the context of the global threat of terrorism and a heightened state of fear. His discussion of the relational aspects of life including inclusion and exclusion, wanted and unwanted, outside and inside, shows us the polarised nature of human existence but offers little in the way of a solution or even an explanation for the new forms of uncertainty that Bauman has identified as growing in magnitude. For Bauman, freedom is a multi-edged sword, but in the traditional (political) sense, it is clear that his wasted lives are lacking it. In Bauman's modernised world, while individuals face freedom of unprecedented proportions, they are simultaneously constrained by greater forces such as globalisation and consumerism that can turn them into waste at a moments notice. However, Bauman's watered down version of freedom as freedom to consume, has particular relevance for those that are human product and therefore able to consume copious amounts of material goods. Conversely, human waste are 'flawed consumers' (2004, 39) and do not have the means to exercise this consumer freedom. In Bauman's world, humans are both consumers and consumables and we are powerless to choose to which group we belong. In this sense, Bauman's assertion that 'freedom has come to mean above all freedom of choice' (1998, 121) becomes insignificant as mass society makes the ability to make decisions pertaining to individual life almost impossible. While individually we do not want to be waste, nor do we want to become powerless, identityless singular entities certain only of the uncertainty that surrounds us, the rise of the social and more specifically the stranglehold of mass society has meant that we face no other alternative. As we move from the political to the social, not only are we privatised and individualised, but we become increasingly isolated and insecure. For Arendt, the individual deprived of political rights 'to whom public and official life manifests itself in the guise of necessity, acquires a new and increased interest in his private life and his personal fate...[and] loses his rightful place in society and his natural connection with his fellow-men' (1951, 141).

On the other hand, a political understanding of the nature of the human condition offers us a chance to expand the bounds of our humanity. The political allows us to create a common world and facilitates the construction of reality by our appearance in the public realm where our individual ideas can compete to be seen and heard through speech and persuasion. While the social advocates sameness and conformity, the political embraces difference and assures us freedom and equality and a chance to demonstrate who we are and what we believe. In this way, the political allows us to 'go naked' and 'in this nakedness, stripped of all masks' assigned by society, people can find freedom and 'create that public space between themselves where freedom [can] appear' (Arendt 1961, 4). Rather than Bauman's version of nakedness that strips us of dignity (2004, 77), Arendt's understanding allows us to become fully human and provides 'a space against the fleetingness of human life that [can] be protected and reserved for a permanence for mortal men' (Walsh 2002a, 8).

While there still exists much internal disagreement over exactly what political theory is and should be (White & Moon 2004), generally it offers us an understanding of human dignity, the public/private realms and a chance to create beauty, become immortal and live lives that 'transcend the life-span of mortal men' (Arendt 1958, 55). For Germino, political theory "affirms the possibility of transcending the sphere of immediate practical concerns and 'viewing' man's societal existence from a critical perspective" (1967, 7). Further to this, political theory has an important role in creating and maintaining identity, both on a collective and individual level, as it provides a means of orienting and reconciling us to our way of life (Moon 2004, 22). However, the concurrent theorising of the complexity of human life by other disciplines such as social theory, economics and psychology, combine to challenge political theory to extend beyond traditional barriers and forge new ways of conceptualising human existence. In view of this, Bauman's work has important implications for both political and social theory as it challenges the foundations of both disciplines, blurring their distinction and neglecting their specificities. What we see then is the emergence of a new hybrid 'socio-political theory' which is neither social nor political. Not only are the political elements of

freedom through speech and action denied in Bauman's work, but the creation of his agora is in contradiction to the construction of the social as elucidated by Arendt. In political terms, the social exists as neither the public nor the private, but for Bauman it is both. Political theory (distinct from the blanket term politics) is uniquely positioned to examine and explain the human condition through its understanding of the divide between public and private. However, for Bauman, the public is ignored at the expense of the private and necessity through work and consumption reign supreme. What Bauman does not say is that his understanding reduces the sphere of human potential to a two-dimensional existence of consumption and waste. In contrast to the political understanding of the human capacity for politics and the ultimate goal of immortality, the lives in Bauman's work are indeed very much wasted because they are politically empty.

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