

# Book Review: Strangers at our Door by Zygmunt Bauman

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In this new short book, **Strangers at our Door**, Zygmunt Bauman examines the origins, contours and impact of the present-day moral panic around the 'migration crisis' in Europe. He explores the fear generated by political campaigns, arguing that this 'crisis of humanity' instead requires a 'fusion of horizons' through dialogue. While **Nicolas Schneider** suggests that a more systematic and detailed analysis of how to oppose this emergent dynamic of dehumanisation within contemporary politics might be required, he finds that this text nonetheless offers a valuable introductory glimpse into the complexities of the issue.

**Strangers at our Door. Zygmunt Bauman. Polity. 2016.**

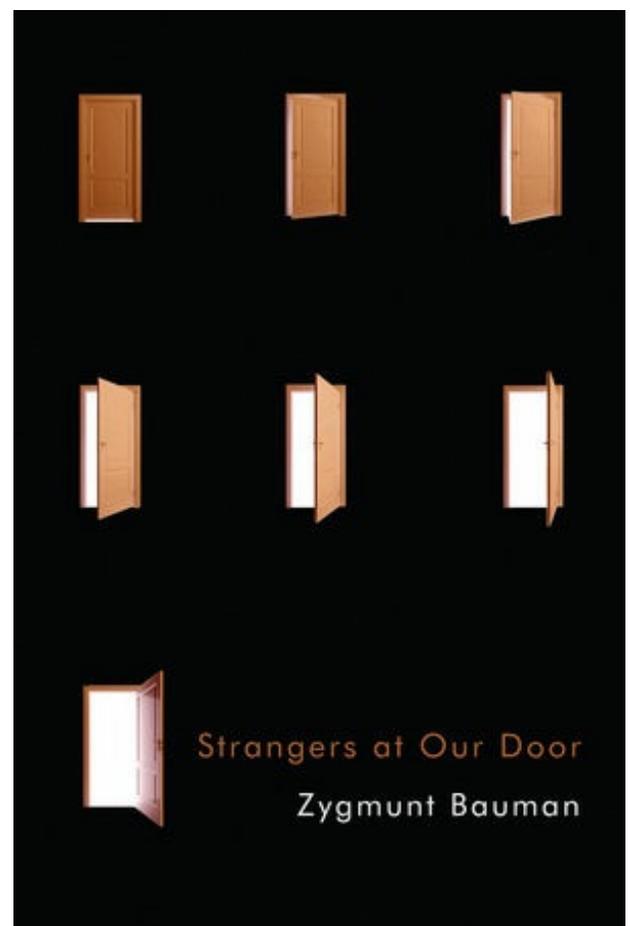
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In his most recent intervention into the public debate, Zygmunt Bauman sets out to dismantle the 'migration panic' that has been shaking Europe since 2015. *Strangers at our Door* understands this panic as reflecting a sweeping social and political trend that involves the erosion of the moral compass guiding politics in Europe and the West in general. Bauman deploys a range of conceptual apparatuses to unmask the hypocritical and politically motivated fear-mongering campaigns which, in a desperate attempt to emulate the success of right-wing populist parties, have been embarked on by European policymakers of all persuasions. This climaxes in Bauman's evaluation of the current condition as a 'crisis of humanity', the only way out of which, he claims, is a 'fusion of horizons' through dialogue. But it is a long way there.

At six chapters, the 117 pages of the book at times resemble more a collection of essays – an impression caused by the odd repetition and few cross-references between the sections. Thus, the respective chapters present themselves through quite different tones and pertain to different dimensions of the issue. At its worst, Bauman cites at length from newspaper articles and poll results, thus risking an involvement with an all too ephemeral 'politics of the day' discourse. At its best, however, the text exposes the political mechanisms that are shaping present conditions in the West, accompanied by a scathing criticism of this mode of politics.

Bauman's starting point is his perplexity vis-à-vis a Europe that, for all its Enlightenment traditions and Kantian cosmopolitanism, has come to a point where we act openly hostile towards strangers and displaced persons from other corners of the world, jettisoning our own moral values in a move that openly deprives other human beings of their humanity. All this happens, Bauman recalls, despite nomadism and migration having figured as quasi-anthropological constants throughout the history of humankind.

In light of this, Bauman expresses his disbelief at the blatant historical forgetfulness with which we encounter refugees from war and people seeking a better life – advancement and progress being, after all, *the* legitimising promises of capitalism's very existence. This perplexity and disbelief provide the backdrop against which Bauman



develops numerous conceptual threads aiming at explaining our contemporary predicament, enlisting insights from philosophy, sociology and social psychology.



**Image Credit: Made in Crisis, Hungary (Tord Remme CCo)**

An instructive example of this – if reduplicating, Bauman admits, an argument he has made elsewhere before – is his invocation of Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of ‘cosmic fear’ (Chapter Three). Cosmic fear describes precisely the diffuse anxiety we experience in the face of an uncertainty that presents itself as a constitutive feature of life, a powerful answer to which has always been the construction of an almighty God. According to Bauman, however, this fear is turned into ‘official fear’ by God’s ‘plenipotentiaries’ on earth, that is, professional politicians vying for votes. By virtue of this, cosmic fear is rendered ‘mundane, human, all-too-human’. This finds its expression in racist prejudices and hostility towards everything unknown – xenophobia, shamelessly exploited by politicians.

Bauman adapts this concept by placing it within a twofold development that, in his analysis, haunts the Western world: individualisation and the disappearance of territorial sovereignty. On the one hand, the ‘society of performance’ (here, Bauman cites Byung-Chul Han) causes an increasing vulnerability among individuals who are not capable of responding appropriately to the ‘imperative of performance’ spelt out by their societies, thus generating an ever increasing share of people who feel (and are) ideologically and materially excluded from social welfare. On the other, the loss of meaning of stable territorial points of reference – above all, the nation-state – aggravates disorientation and disenfranchisement, with democratic (i.e. nation-state-centred) politics being a prominent victim of this development.

This creates fertile soil for all kinds of scapegoating or ‘victimizing’, fuelled by hysteria-oriented media outlets, which brings Bauman to a figure devised by Giorgio Agamben: the *homo sacer* (Chapter Four). This mirror image to Bauman’s own concept of ‘adiaphorization’ describes the process by which a group of people is excluded from basic human rights and dignity – in Bauman’s words, ‘the area of human inter-relationships and interaction exempted from moral evaluation [...] subject solely to assessment by its efficiency in “bringing results”.’ Captivated by discretionary performance, we lose our moral bearings. And the only way to go against this, in Bauman’s reading, lies in establishing an open dialogue that aims at a fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*), a term borrowed from German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer.

This remedy also emanates from Bauman's reading of Hannah Arendt in Chapter Six: overcoming the gap between thinking and acting requires 'the art of dialogue', that is, willingness to engage with the uncertainty embodied by the stranger. However, this stands in stark contrast to the competitiveness imposed by the society of performers, which, Bauman prefigures, risks tipping into a 'resurrected Hobbesian world of war of all against all'. Against this, Bauman insists on the centrality of the 'phenomenon of encounter', on which 'the royal road to agreement [...] and solidary coexistence' must be built.

As is evident from the many borrowed concepts, Bauman's way of posing the problem in this book is not entirely new, and neither are his answers: who would challenge the notion that international solidarity and dialogue seems the best way to articulate discontent? But what does it mean to enter into a dialogue under the present conditions? That is, how is the phenomenon of encounter to be realised? In this regard, it is difficult to derive any genuinely new interpretation from the texts collected together in this book.

In the wake of the British referendum vote to leave the European Union, Bauman's analysis takes on yet another dimension. With a core pillar of the campaign for a 'Brexit' being provided by more or less outright racism unleashed by the 'Leave' campaigners, this adiaphorisation strategy is eventually self-defeating: it operates on the invocation of fear of strangers as a response to life's uncertainty, glossing over the fact that the uncertainty running rampant in contemporary society is propelled rather more by an increasingly unyielding imposition of the 'imperative of performance' and ensuing social exclusion.

Hence, *Strangers at our Door* might serve as a prism for what is yet to come, but the cures that Bauman proposes appear too vague. In that respect, the acknowledgement of refugees as the 'harbingers of bad news' (citing Bertolt Brecht) and of the accordant reflex – as preposterous as it is plausible – to 'punish the messengers', might require a more systematic approach to establish how, on the grounds of our shared humanity, an opposition to the seemingly irresistible dynamic of dehumanisation can be forged. As an introductory text, however, *Strangers at our Door* offers a valuable glimpse into the complexity of the issues at stake.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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