

Marko Galic¹

*University of Banja Luka
Faculty of Political Science
Banja Luka*

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The social struggle against death: Human strategies for immortality

Abstract

Death is an infallible part of the human life, and what makes human different from all other beings is fact that he knows that he is going to die. Knowing this, human beings are spending their whole life knowing that the day of their end is going to come. It is clear that death has its biological part, also as a huge event in the existence of all life forms, including human, death has its philosophical point of view, and finally, unlike some may disagree, death itself is a huge social phenomena as well, and as such, the social influence of death deserves close attention and its own part in the social science studies. This paper analyzes the presence of the death in human culture, including institutions, rituals and beliefs following the discourse of late Zygmunt Bauman who left huge influence on this field of study. Since the earliest forms of communities, humans are trying to overcome the death, the state of “after-life” and some form of immortality of the being is something that is common to all religions and beliefs ever known to mankind, which stands as a evidence that the final void of non-existence know to us as death is something that always presented horror in the mind of the humans.

Keywords: *death, culture, institutions, beliefs, religion, immortality, fear, deconstruction, modernism.*

¹ Sociology student of the second year at Faculty of Political Science in Banja Luka; galicmarko61@yahoo.com

Introduction

It is very unlikely that there was ever human being on this planet that didn't have unwanted feeling that made him feel scared, unpleasant, anxious, depressive or even shocked, that feeling is fear. Such feeling is mostly connected with some particular event or expectation, but there are some particular forms of fear when the one who is feeling it doesn't know exactly what is there to be feared of², and the worst thing that comes with that kind of fear is its omniscience and possibility that it will come out from every corner.³ Many of such fears are going to prove sooner or later as groundless⁴ but there is always that one fear, deep inside every human that is unlike many others always going to become truth, that is, the fear of death. Human perception of death is based on deaths of the others, and as such death is not something that can be known from personal experience. An infinite nothingness is way to describe death, absolute contrast of existence, a form that cannot be perceived, visualized or represented⁵, an event that will come, and humans as animals who not only know, but they know that they know⁶ are spending their whole life just waiting for that moment. Aware of their temporary existence, humans have been always trying to overcome death at some particular way, even if until this day humans didn't manage to defeat death-a lifelong enemy of existence and being, they for sure had numerous tries to convince themselves that death is not the end, as the result of this huge on-going battle we have one creation that is common to human beings only, and that is culture with all its components such as institutions, rituals and beliefs are. Role of the culture in humans mortality overcoming is huge, Bauman mentioned that all human cultures could be described as creations whose major goal is making life with knowledge of death possible⁷. Basically culture is creation of the human kind

² As the most notorious form of fear Zygmunt Bauman mentioned the one which isn't clear, doesn't have proper source or reason, fear which is diffusive. Such fear is manifested as constant fear of something that one don't know what is, where it comes from or how long will that fear exist. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Fear*, Polity Press, 65 Bridge Street: 2006, page 10.

³ *Ibidem*, page 13.

⁴ Bauman mentioned that at the end we always suffer from less punches than we expected, huge threats that are making people having fear in everyday activities are most likely not going to affect those people at all. At the end how many damage in real life things like Millennium bug, mites, GMO, GSE and other media hyped – fears caused? *Ibidem*, page 15.

⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, Polity Press, 65 Bridge Street, Cambridge: 1992, foreword.

⁶ *Ibidem*

⁷ Bauman, *op cit.*, „*Liquid Fear*“, Polity Press, 65 Bridge Street, Cambridge: 2006, page 42.

that is giving meaning to the life, without it life wouldn't be anything but a "short loan from death"⁸. Taking a close look, we can see that ending of human life is unquestionable thing, and with knowledge of that we can without much thinking ask ourselves is there any purpose of life at all? On such question religion, as part of almost every culture since the beginning, was providing some kind of answer, it was trying to tell the human that there is some other form of life waiting for him after death and interesting thing is that all religions that ever existed had some kind of "after life state" in common. Augustin Comte in his law of three stages concept named animism as first and most primitive part of theological stage, animism as belief system that predates most of the religions that we know today, had strong teaching on after life and the main focus was on spirit world, place where immortal souls from dead bodies are going after death. This completely suits statement that even the most primitive human communities had some kind of treatment for dead people and this discovery led French sociologist Jean Baudrillard to describe cemeteries as first ghettos⁹. Events as cemeteries and rituals were providing hope and belief to people who are still alive that their successors are going to provide them immortality through the collective memory as they are correctly doing to their ancestors¹⁰.

1. Fear of dying

Unlike all other living beings on planet earth, human has consciousness, reason and imagination and those are major reasons why it is so hard for him to understand death as one of laws of the nature¹¹. As a being like that, human cannot deal that the day of his absence is just going to come and that he isn't able to do anything to stop that. Animals are able to feel the death when the moment of their own is close, but human is the only being that has the knowl-

⁸ Artur Schopenhauer

⁹ Jean Baudrillard, „L'Escapesymbolique et la mort (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), page 195.

¹⁰ Taking a look on immortality from the position of social-science, Bauman mentioned difference between „body death” and „social death“. Every death is without doubt a physical death but through institutionalization of collective memory the one who died is still left to be remembered by his successors and with that some kind of immortality is provided. To say that someone reached “social death” would mean that not only his physical body has died, but also remembrance on his life and deeds died as well. Bauman, op cit. *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, page 54.

¹¹ Nature is well established system that has its own laws that are constant and all living species are forced to live under those laws, so it is human. However human is thinking being living under the laws of unthinking nature and that is the reason why many times some of these laws are inconsistent to human logic. Ibidem, page 23.

edge of the death long before the arrival of death itself. Since the ancient times, philosophers and thinkers were discussing about the reason to be afraid of death, one of them was Epicurus¹². The rational beings as we are couldn't agree more with this philosopher. From the empirical point of view death is something that one can't face and tell if there is something to be afraid or not, as a matter of fact death can't even be imagined by human¹³. So with this fact human is faced with absurdity of death, something that cannot be imagined, and the only way to imagine death is to imagine absence of existence, so death is that "other" part of life-death duality which human as being born knowing only life simply isn't able to present in his mind. But with knowing of all this we can still ask one simple question, why are we afraid of it, why almost all cultures and religions are having problem with facing death as finality and even refusing to admit natural cause of death¹⁴ ¹⁵. So it is clear that humans since the formation of the most primitive cultures had problem with facing it, but why are we having problem with something which we can't even imagine? The answer which we are looking for might not be some deep metaphysical puzzle solved, on contrary, answer may be more simple than we think it is. Interruption of the deed, plan or ambition before it is finally released or finished might be highly connected with such fear. Each one of use, thanks to the culture mostly, and some other creations of the human beings have some kind of purpose, something that we are making but death could easily stop us from finishing it, or even when we do finish it, we would never be able to enjoy it because death will come and make interruption¹⁶. Baumants explanation of

¹² This philosopher argued about irrationality of death fear which is so present in the minds of humans, he said „*Why should I fear of Death? If I am, death is not. If death is, I am not. Why should I fear that, which can only exist when I Do not?*”

¹³ Imagining death is absolutely impossible, trying to imagine it human will have vision of world without him but he will be still there as spectator, it would be like imagining your dead body but you are still there even in your imagination watching yourself. Bauman, op cit., *Liquid Fear*, page 55.

¹⁴ Original immortality of the human being is common belief in Abrahamic religions, and mortality of human is connected with his first sin. Interestingly the characters of snake, human sinner (mainly female) and their connection with mortality of humans is also highly represented in native beliefs of tribes from Australia, Oceania and Siberia. Various tribes connected immortality with possibility of skin sewing, and that's a reason why serpents (as beings with possibility of sewing) were targeted as those who stole the immortality from human. Original immortality and totally unnatural origin of death is common to many tribes. Bendann, E., *Death customs: An Analytical Study of Burial Rites*, Routledge: 1930, page 22-34.

¹⁵ Beliefs of some particular cultures went that far to believe that human is in fact immortal being and that there is no such thing as "natural death", if some human dies and that didn't happen in the battle it is caused by either witchcraft of the foreign tribe or magic influence of demons or evil spirits, in the first case revenge is required. Ibidem, page 34-35.

¹⁶ Baumant gave explanation of this phenomena pointing that incompleteness and death as cause of it can give huge fear, we are making money and we can die long before we make much

death fear may not be the only reason why are humans so terrified of death but it makes one of the possible answers clear. However fact is that death is huge phantom fear which man is carrying with himself, Freud mentioned death as one of 3 threats that are attacking human¹⁷ Role of the culture and religion in overcoming this fear was huge, Christianity is great example for this since it helped in solving two major troubles that fact of human mortality was causing, meaning of this life and after life. As meaning of this life Christianity mentioned belief in God and service to him and as award for that God will give you infinite life in heavens, which is defeat of mortality. Managing to make huge number of people believe in such statements, religion and culture without debut made one enormous step in helping humans to overcome fear of death danger, one which Baumant called meta-danger¹⁸.

2. Battle against mortality

Trough the long history of battle against mortality humans developed a good number of ways to solve this problem. Many of so called traditional methods are still active today much as they were during the past, but since the arrival of modernism and especially postmodernism position of death in the society has changed drastically, and the strategy in overcoming it had to change as well. This caused whole new approach to life and nature in general, and death along-side them¹⁹. In this paper we are going to analyze some of the most well known and well used strategies and beliefs that humans used to prove themselves that death can be survived.

2.1. Belief in afterlife

Denying death as the ultimate end of the being is one of the most common fighting strategies known to mankind. As it is mentioned before in the text,

as we wanted, we believe in some institutions and ideals and we can die before they come to test and before we can see if they are true or not, we are collecting something, and death can easily interrupt completing of our beloved collections. Bauman op cit., *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, page 6.

¹⁷ Other two threats, beside body doomed to death are fear of destructivity of the world (some other people may harm you, or some natural disasters may do so) and our own relations toward the others. Freud S., *Civilization and its Discontents*, in: *Civilization, Society, Religion*, page 264.

¹⁸ Bauman described fear of death as a fear which is above all others, a natural resource of fear which cannot be exploited to the end. Bauman, op cit. *Liquid Fear*, page 55-56.

¹⁹ Bauman, op cit., *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, page 134.

most of the known cultures all around globe had some form of treatment for the dead, and interesting fact is indeed that some cultures that didn't have any connection at all had some similar or even same beliefs or customs connected with dead people²⁰, the whole cults based on death were present in many cultures²¹. Reason why some different cultures had similar or same belief ritual or custom connected with death, is topic discussed by the anthropologists for years. The original battle between evolutionism and diffusionism as two major theories had spread to various other field of this discipline²². Christianity as religion with currently the biggest population holds a strong belief that death is not absolute end, and that according to his deeds in this world everyone will deserve place in heaven or hell based on his own life in this world. Unlike Christianity, in Judaism we can find belief in collective immortality based on ethnical and racial background, Jewish people are believed to be chosen people and as such they are all saved. Through the reincarnation to the moksha in Hinduism also tends to deny death as the end, so are not only religions of today, but also from the entire human history through the evolution of religion^{23 24 25}. It is widely confirmed that ritual could be considered

²⁰ Cremation is perfect example of this, an event that can be even today found in many totally separated cultures. Anthropologists mentioned that in explanation of such things we must understand that totally different occasions could bring people from other parts of the world to do literally same thing, so in some cultures cremation was practiced to prevent wild beasts from eating the body of the dead, while in some others light of the fire was considered as other world department, benefit to the ghost or some form of cleaning of the soul. Bendann, op cit., page 3-6.

²¹ Example for this would be a whole cult based on the head of the dead human which was practiced by Kava-people and Betel-people. The skull was used mostly in the ritual and religious ceremonies but later it was also used as war trophy in so called head-hunting. W.H.R. Rivers., *The History of Melanesian society*, Cambridge university press: 1914, page 259-260.

²² Inspired by the evolutionary theory in natural sciences, some anthropologists used this paradigm to explain that each society has to evolve through same phases from savagery to civilization and that is normal that some similar or same thing would arise from that even if they don't have contact. On contrary diffusionists believed in transmission of things from culture to culture and from place to place, including huge interaction between cultures. Barnard, A., „*History and theory in Anthropology*. Cambridge University: 2004, page 27-28; 47.

²³ As famous anthropologist Tylor noted once, in virtually every society, there is common belief in a spiritual essence which survives death. Ibidem, page 36.

²⁴ Term *religion* was pretty hard to define in earlier anthropological literature. Term *religion* was distinguished from other similar terms such as *paganism* (it was associated with non-Christian religions and their public rituals) and *superstitions* (they were used as description of invisible relationships that religion, science or common sense couldn't explain). But in this paper term *religion* will be used in its new form, as particular form of belief in supernatural powers, which are give public expression through rituals. Eriksen, H. Thomas., *Small places, large issues*., Pluto press: 1995, page 209.

²⁵ According to Lubbock and Tylor, the evolution of religion went according following scheme: atheism>animism>fetishism>totemism>shamanism>idolatry>theism. Barnard. A., op cit, page 36.

as social aspect of religion²⁶, as a matter of fact it is mostly responsible for social expression of religion at all. Humans are trying to connect with spiritual world to get answers on some fundamental questions of the existence, death and mortality are one of those questions and to find answer they must find connection with the spiritual world and as connection for that various forms of rituals²⁷ are used. Connection with spiritual realm is not only thing that is useful when we speak about rituals other, more rational aspect is role of ritual in inner group cohesion. Rituals are symbolic activities which are always performed according to same regular way, same structure. It could be described as message well known by all people and well repeated by them²⁸. Once when the structure of ritual is made, it is always repeating on the same way, it is like that because that one particular way is regarded as the right way which is giving the wanted results, and as such rituals could be easily viewed as some particular techniques which are known to work²⁹. From all that is mentioned rituals could easily help humans defeating death in at least two ways, first it provides the possibility for communication with spiritual dimension for humans which are still alive, because of that humans are becoming aware that there is spiritual realm which is going to become their new home. Second way is more of a social character but has huge spiritual influence. Collective memory on dead members of the society is pretty common in rituals, it can be in form of pray for someone, dance or some particular choreography in honor of dead or even some kind of communication with spirits of ancestors. With help of this dead people are staying to live in the memory of living society members which are celebrating them often.

2.2. Living trough the influence

When we are talking about this kind of providing immortality which has been mentioned before, it is pretty important to make distinction between

²⁶ Eriksen, H. Thomas, op cit., page 215.

²⁷ Not all rituals are same, but in fact they are all connected with belief in supernatural powers. All rituals could be separated in three groups: 1) Taboo rituals 2) Magical rituals and 3) Religious rituals. Koković, Dragan, *Socijalna antropologija sa antropologijom obrazovanja.*, Banja Luka: 2008, page 68.

²⁸ In rituals we can find verbal, musical, choreography and various visually-esthetical dimensions which are common to all people performing it. As such it helps in providing solidarity, identity and communication between members of particular society. Kokovic, op cit., page 68.

²⁹ Ellul mentioned that humans developed two major types of techniques, one is connecting humans to material world and the other is helping them to have connection with spiritual world, ritual could easily be classified as the second one. They are always repeated by the same way because of their validity and any change could put their effectiveness in the question. Ellul, J., *TehnikailiUlogveka*, anarhija/blok 45, Porodicnabibliotekabr 10: 2010, page 42.

two different ways how can someone make huge influence on society to make it remember him. Leaving trace in this world isn't easy thing to be done and especially it isn't easy to make individual trace. When influential person dies, world that he is going to leave behind him is in fact going to exist without him in his physical form, but his influence will still be there and people who are alive will still be influence which one individual or group left. Not everyone is able to make his personal, individual influence so big to leave trace behind him, because of that another possibility for immortality through the memory is provided, that is, living in the memory as part of some group³⁰. Many great historical figures received immortality on this way, but there is always a huge number of those humans who are not so powerful to obtain something like that, their individual persona is not something which has quality to be remembered of this kind of people are receiving immortality with losing their individuality and becoming just a number in something bigger than themselves³¹. In many post-socialist cities statues of numerous unidentified fallen heroes are visible, each of those humans are immortal because of way on which they have died, they died in battle against fascism and as such they are remembered, same is with numerous people that have taken a part in huge revolutions that caused huge changes in some society or all those WWI soldiers who fought for one side, way on which they have died made them immortal, they changed their individual self for membership in some huge group which will be immortal unlike its members who weren't able to receive something like that by themselves. This kind of immortality is clearly sword with two sharp sides, if someone trades his individuality for membership in group one thing can always be left unanswered, was some able to find its own path toward individual immortality but because of some particular reason it didn't?

³⁰ There are two classes, one is constructed of people able of leaving huge trace by themselves and they are going to receive *personal* immortality, and the other is constructed of people who are together with other people similar to them going to receive immortality by creating together one collective, non-individual entity which will receive immortality. Bauman op cit., *Liquid Fear*, page 46.

³¹ Perfect example for this can be found in relationship between national state and patriots willing to put their lives under the danger for their ideal. To become strong country needed national patriots willing to fight for national community, even if they die for some particular ideology, names of each of them will most likely not be known, but they will all be remember as individual who sacrificed their lives for survival of nation, and as such they will receive immortality as being part in something much larger than their individual persona is. Bauman op cit., *Liquid Fear*, page 49.

3. Deconstruction of mortality in modernism

Emergence of modernism caused big change in everyday life of humans, modern society became much faster, as a matter of fact it is so full of changes that ordinary human being is constantly ending many things even before he managed to start them properly³², that is major characteristic of so called liquid life³³. Living in such society human can obtain so many daily-based fears that he almost forgets that one fear which is always real and always popular, that is fear of death. In the modern society, society which is characterized by human's belief in himself more than in some higher being, death became something unusual for the first time in the history of mankind³⁴, death became something that cannot be thought about by the busy people of modern liquid society. Since the old methods of overcoming the death are no longer so popular in this society, humans had to develop new one, and the most popular is marginalization of death through deconstruction³⁵. Humans of the modern era seem to have problem with facing their failure to master death as one of the natural laws, even beside their huge arrogance toward some earlier primitive societies, humans of modernism are having exact same attitude toward death as those „silly and primitive” cultures who were negating natural

³² In modern liquid society, human is always having huge on-going battle with the time, to obtain success everything he does must constantly have new endings and new beginnings, it is time in which almost anything can easily become old fashioned and useless, and to escape total failure humans progress and going from place to place, from job to job, from interest to interest must be constant. Bauman, Z., *Liquid Life*, Polity Press, Cambridge: 2005, page 10. Bauman described Liquid life as one which humans are living in so called liquid society, and as a major characteristic of such society he mentioned impossibility of establishing one common or certain way of life due to fast development of various situations in such society, everything can change very fast and become useless. Ibidem, page 9.

³³ Humans since the ancient time believed that death is not the ultimate end and that it is just an entry to another form of life, we exist this door and enter the another world through another one. But since the arrival of modernism it is no longer like that, death remained exist from this world, but it is no longer entry into another. Bauman, op cit., *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, Polity Press, Cambridge: 1992, page 130.

³⁴ Liquid modern life is in the meaning time consuming life as well, all objects that are around modern human are classified as ones that could be consumed and used and ones that cannot. When something is used and consumed it loses its original value and meaning, knowing that entire human life can be described as constant search for some identity or settlement which is going to be changed in short time. Bauman op cit., *Liquid Life*, page 18.

³⁵ Major strategy of deconstruction is reducing one big problem (death, which cannot be solved as itself that easily) to large number of small problems which human can solve one by one. Defeating each individual problem, humans will be able to solve the big one as well. Bauman, op cit., *Liquid fear*, page 54.

cause of death had. Human in modernism is constantly making negation of the natural death as well, and it seems that new battle strategy is nothing but a more sophisticated version of the old one^{36 37}.

Death is no longer natural fact, in modern society it became a form of myth, as the reason of death is always mentioned some form of mistake that could be fixed. Even when our beloved die we always tend to ask doctors why it happened? And those same doctors are always giving some particular explanation which is almost never natural arrival of death itself. Because of such reasons, death is in modernism viewed as some form of accident, it can be caused by almost everything except itself. While believing that mortality is something temporal and that death is going to be defeated by not smoking, not drinking, eating healthy food or similar things, human is concentrating more on his modern, liquid, consuming life³³ in which his own life as such becomes target of consummation, and death is viewed as nothing more than just a waste of product³⁸. Knowing this a question about entire human life could be reduced to temporary existence and satisfaction, human acts in modernism are mostly based on moment, future is no longer something that is going to get built by long and passionate development in one particular field, in modernism human is forced to develop huge number of skills, each one determinate for particular situation, and even than the survival isn't guaranteed. In such fast and liquid life human simply cannot afford a fact of death to himself, since the huge on-going race with his own creation culture is making human too busy for natural facts, and especially in the modernism death became one of those things which got ignored by busy, „glorious” mankind.

³⁶ With the deconstruction, biological death is being forgotten, and just as some sorcerers or spiritual leaders in primitive societies were finding a reason for death in sorcery or demonic influence, today doctors are doing similar thing, modern medicine began to explain death with numerous reasons and the least used is death as reason itself. Ibidem, page 52.

³⁷ This totally proves Bauman's description of death as denial of everything that modern world stood for the arrogant modern humans cannot admit to themselves, it is defeat which our reason isn't able to face with. Bauman, op cit., *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, Polity Press, Cambridge: 1992, page 134.

³⁸ Death is nothing more than just a waste of production in modern society. Through the evolution of the society, with the modernism for the first time humans began with their mastery over nature, something that was once holy now became mastered by its own creation. And now as so advanced being, human doesn't have any time to deal with something that should have been defeated long time ago, as an old enemy which isn't still defeated, death is as Bauman would say total stranger in this rich, busy and confident world. Bauman, op cit., *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, Polity Press, Cambridge: 1992, page 132.

Conclusion

Death appears as an important subject of discussion in the circles of science, philosophy and religion today much as it was in the past. With the arrival of the various scientific discoveries some beliefs which were connected with the hope of after-life have been denied, with such discoveries death once again became taboo. Zygmunt Bauman in his *Liquid Life* and *Liquid Fear* described high influence of death on human society and individual life. Fear caused by awareness of death and unknown future that is beyond death, forced humans to develop various tactics in battle against mortality. With those strategies (most notable were mentioned in text) humans through the history were trying to convince themselves that death is not the end, as well to make some sort of meaning to their life, because with knowledge of death and dying, why should we even live? Systematic anthropological and sociological view of social relations toward the problem of death shows us that numerous societies from the past and present had well developed strategies in fighting this kind of danger, much as religion used to overcome the fear of death and bring us belief that death is nothing more than entrance to another aspect of being, with arrival of modern science and whole new approach to this question, many answers provided by religion in the past with the arrival of modernism became questionable. Modernism provided whole new strategy in overcoming the death, which was precisely described by Bauman. He also described unique strategy which is used in post-modern era, postmodernism as whole is precisely described by Bauman in several books written by him, and along-side it post-modern strategies for battle against mortality, which are not included in this paper. From everything written in this paper it can be concluded that humans in their history had three different situations when it is word about their struggle against death:

(1) *Denial of death*, is the period in which human was surrounded by mystery of death, period in which death wasn't considered a natural fact and myths of human immortality and unnatural causes of death (because of first sin, witchcraft or some other cause) were practiced by humans.

(2) *Triumph over death*, during the evolution of religion human developed belief that death is just a phase in his life, very important phase which is leading to another, more abstract, and more real phase of life.

(3) *Ignoring death*, with the arrival of modernism and skepticism toward religion, human couldn't agree with *a priori* solutions given by religion about the death, and with emergence of liquid life human simply stop looking at

death as natural fact and problem, but instead of that started denying its natural character once again and hides this very fact at the bottom of his mind.

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