

# Strangeness and Recognition: The Realistic Representation and Deciphering Exploration of Fluidity in Modern Society

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**Abstract:** To achieve a deeper understanding of modernity and postmodernity from the perspective of public administration, this paper comparatively examines *Modernity and the Holocaust* and *The Language of Public Administration: Bureaucracy, Modernity, and Postmodernity*. Modernity emphasizes science and rationality, utilizing Weberian bureaucracy to achieve organizational rationality. In contrast, postmodernity values deconstruction and alterity, envisioning bureaucratic transformations to respect diversity. Within modernity, "fluidity" accelerated the Holocaust; in postmodernity, "fluidity" represents diversity and inclusivity yet also brings about moral anomie. Fluidity and the resulting uncertainty permeate developments across all disciplinary paradigms. Amid the rise of Generation Z, this phenomenon manifests particularly as "strangeness." Such strangeness can be actively chosen because interactions with strangers significantly reduce the opportunity cost of deeper personal engagement. However, an unavoidable "society of strangers" also introduces new ethical risks. By constructing institutions and value systems founded on trust and responsibility, society can cultivate long-term, genuine recognition of strangers, enabling strangeness to serve rather than constrain human development.

**Keywords:** Fluidity; Society of Strangers; Ethical Risk; Recognition.

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## 1. Introduction

Drawing on Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust*, we can examine numerous modern factors and their combinations that facilitated the horrific Holocaust during the modernization process. It is essential to identify the potential possibilities of modernity explored through the Holocaust within modern society's context. These include confrontations with capitalism driven by freedom and wealth accumulation, bureaucratic (technical rationality) harm to moral self-restraint, legitimizing rational self-preservation over public morality, political rationality's monopoly on violence, and intensified authority coupled with singular authoritative control. Farmer's *The Language of Public Administration: Bureaucracy, Modernity, and Postmodernity* contrasts modern and postmodern perspectives on public administration as a social construct, examining both its factual existence and theoretical foundations. Modernism constructs public administration through science, technology, enterprise, and interpretation, safeguarding bureaucracy with organizational rationality and subject-centered Cartesian mind models. Postmodernism emphasizes imagination, deconstruction, deterritorialization, and alterity to transform bureaucracy, manifesting decentralization of the subject and pictorial representation of the world based on Foucault's ethical revolution of the self. Rationalization dominates modernity, while "the intertwining of external diverse environmental factors results in the pluralism and fluidity of the public administration paradigm"[1]. Both scholars agree that any attempt at seeking certainty is futile. As modern society gradually transitions to postmodernity, the accelerated changes in the information society highlight that everything subject to deconstruction and reconstruction in postmodernity is highly fluid. Thus, reclaiming "fluidity" as a core issue in postmodern public administration, characterized by diversification and flexibility, is crucial in addressing cutting-

edge societal changes.

In the late Middle Ages, people gradually developed a vague sense of management, and the term "public administration" began to be used in openly public management activities, such as religious and school administration. During the early modern period, "public administration" became associated with governmental activities following bourgeois revolutions, distinguishing them from monarchies. With the gradual differentiation between public and private spheres, "public administration" came to distinctly represent government management activities as separate from enterprises and social organizations. However, for a long time, the management within political activities and administrative management were not clearly differentiated. It was not until the end of the 19th century, with Wilson and Goodnow's political-administrative dichotomy, Taylor and Fayol's scientific management theories, and Weber's rational bureaucracy theory, that the foundations for the development of public administration as a discipline were established. Subsequently, public administration evolved through phases of application, criticism, and transformation. From prioritizing efficiency to emphasizing social fairness, marketization, and corporatization to "customer-first," the debate between democracy and efficiency continues today. The values of public administration profoundly influence its objectives and behavioral patterns, delineating historical phases such as traditional public administration, new public administration, new public management, and new public service theories. According to Waldo's definition, explicitly public-interest-oriented public administration emerged in the mid-20th century. Public administration is a type of administration playing a transitional role from early ruling administration towards future service administration.[2] Public administration, shaped within the managerial-administrative framework, exhibits a profound contradiction between

substantive rationality and formal rationality. As Farmer noted, "public administration theory based on modern technical rationality is a dialect," and modern public administration theory paradigms, equated with rationality signifying social progress, have faced Kuhnian paradigm crises since their inception. Bauman's lifelong exploration of "uncertainty" suggests that "in the highly complex and uncertain contemporary and future governance landscape, this ideological crisis will only intensify"[3]. Consequently, postmodern public administration has begun a new cycle of deconstruction and reconstruction, emphasizing service-oriented perspectives and heightened fluidity in atomized societies.

For individuals, fluidity implies uncertainty, risk, threats from unfamiliar interpersonal relationships, and lost opportunities for deeper human interaction. For Generation Z, the extensive interactions with strangers are closely linked to the internet, with future society expected to become increasingly interconnected digitally. As societies strive toward a communist free association of individuals, resolving the dual risks of "stranger hostility and stranger dependency" becomes a critical transitional challenge for harnessing stranger societies for human advancement. As early as the beginning of this century, scholars addressed contractual trust in industrial and stranger societies from a legal perspective, noting that frequent mobility leads to mutual distrust among strangers, making contracts a preferred communication strategy for risk avoidance[4]. Entering post-industrial society, cooperation without genuine trust has become perilous[5]. Zhang Kangzhi argues that instrumental rationality characterizes contract-based social governance systems, where the formalized and generalized pursuit of efficiency leads to a moral value decline. Critiques of industrial governance systems point towards cooperative social governance. Cooperation supersedes contractual societies by establishing cooperative ideals that acknowledge the necessity of formalization while seeking social homogenization, moving beyond formalized uniformity by highlighting value-driven homogenization[6]. However, how this cooperation is realized in practice remains an open question. Market economy growth and the development of virtual online societies continue to expand stranger populations, prompting varied scholarly proposals on enhancing and innovating stranger society management[7]. The stranger society faces a triple challenge of moral vacuum filling, social trust reconstruction, and grassroots governance reform, with contracts, rules, and legal systems as key solutions. Modern trust culture and responsibility awareness continue to be revisited in research to integrate stranger societal relations and awaken moral consciousness.[8][9][10][11] Regarding trust, institutional trust-building is vital, and reshaping grassroots social mentality imbalances within the framework of social governance communities involves refining mental health guidance mechanisms, leveraging digital tools to build social trust, promoting multi-party involvement in mental health governance, and integrating resources to dissolve mental health circles[12][13]. On the moral level, the internet-plus era has spawned a "virtual acquaintance society," intensifying online moral opinion resources and strengthening netizens' moral supervisory roles, thereby promoting positive moral developments[14][15]. Moving from fluidity to strangeness, this paper will continue to explore solutions to the new-century challenges of stranger societies from the perspective

of "stranger recognition."

## 2. Fluidity: A Key Feature of Modern Society

Bauman argues that the pursuit of perfect order constitutes the essence of modernity, necessitating attempts to eliminate the contradictions of uncertainty and fragmentation. Farmer's comparative analysis highlights that rationality, scientism, and bureaucracy have become the most potent and staunchly admired means employed by modernity in the quest for rational planning, yet disorder among "others" emerges in this process. The "Panopticon" described by Foucault and the "gardening technique" by Bauman epitomize modernity's pursuit of perfect order, where humanity is suppressed, and free thought is restricted in the quest for universal behavioral standards. "The standardization and predictability of behaviors restrict the freedom and creativity of modern individuals, turning people into machine-like producers rather than independent entities." [16] Bauman firmly believes that attempts to achieve perfection invariably lead to tragedy, as reality and imagination cannot equate; indeed, it is the contingent nature of human choices that shapes the realities and changes of the world. The contradictions, differences, and contingencies negated by modernity represent its true essence, with "liquid modernity" being perceived as a prominent feature of contemporary society.

The latent potentials of modernity, revealed in complex environments, highlight fluidity as a significant characteristic of modern society. What is fluidity? Fundamentally, fluidity refers to the characteristic of movement or adaptability, implying variability and adjustability over time and space. It captures the adaptability and changeability of phenomena. In social life, this fluidity usually manifests as vertical social mobility and horizontal geographical movements. Bauman extends fluidity to encompass the uncertainty of physical and power migrations combined with adaptability in intellectual and spiritual transformations. As global social mobility accelerates, societal uncertainty becomes increasingly pronounced. The continuous flow and reorganization of people, resources, goods, events, and information amplify uncertainty, positioning "fluidity among coveted values: the freedom of mobility (always a scarce and unevenly distributed commodity) quickly becomes a primary factor for social stratification in this late modern or postmodern era" [17].

In the 21st century, the establishment of the "information superhighway" has interconnected the global village, ushering humanity into a media-driven society. Deregulated global media redefine time and space, eroding boundaries between nations and between private and public domains. In this mediated society, media often shape people's perceptions of reality and society, yet media resources themselves are market-driven, embedding a media culture that caters to audiences into everyday life. The uncertainties of physical and power migrations and the adaptability of intellectual and spiritual transformations are continuously magnified in a borderless environment full of infinite possibilities. Joint temporal and spatial transformations shift modernity from solid and enclosed states to liquid and fluid forms, placing fluidity at the center of contemporary social processes. In other words, uncertainty is the most definitive feature we face today, and humans continually adapt to this uncertainty.

### 3. Strangeness: The Manifestation of Fluidity

Marx pointed out in *The Communist Manifesto*: "Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air... Men are at last compelled to face with sober senses their real conditions of life, and their relations with their kind." Strangeness is the most quintessential manifestation of liquid modernity enveloping us.

(1) The Strangeness that Awakened the Modern "Rationality" of the Holocaust

In the traditional context, the stranger is simultaneously physically near and socially distant—these two spatial relationships coexist. Simmel was the first to conceptualize the "stranger," stating: "If wandering is the liberation from every given point in space, and thus the conceptual opposite to fixation at such a point, the sociological form of the 'stranger' presents the synthesis, as it were, of both of these determinations." [18] Bauman similarly argued that "the stranger is the other like the neighbour" [19]—distant in social space yet proximate in physical space. "Not knowing" signifies profound social distance, which also implies distance in cultural and relational terms. Strangers exist tangibly in life, concretely or abstractly affecting every individual—this constitutes the intrinsic meaning of physical proximity [20].

Engelhardt focused on analyzing strangers from a moral perspective, proposing the concept of "moral strangers": people belonging to different moral communities with divergent moral commitments. Within the Chinese cultural context, Fei Xiaotong first analyzed strangers at the level of overall social structure transformation. Traditional China was an "acquaintance society," while "modern society is composed of strangers," and "cannot be managed using the customs of the rural society." [21] Other scholars define strangers based on "in-group/out-group" dynamics: strangers belong to the out-group, existing outside kinship, geographic, or occupational ties, adhering to different value systems. Due to globalization, information networks, and the rapid, frequent movement and interaction of global citizens transcending time and space, strangers are ubiquitous. In Giddens' view, when faced with unavoidable strangers, people mostly choose deliberate, polite distance, engaging at most in ritualistic politeness and small talk. This "fleeting form of interaction" [22] exhibits the characteristic features of stranger relations: transience, fragility, "non-personalness," and even exclusivity. Consequently, fear and wariness towards the strange, a lack of tolerance, respect, and genuine trust, make it easy for people to deliberately or inadvertently ignore strangers, or to remain indifferent when their rights are violated, even coldly excluding them.

Bauman acutely captured: "Before the advent of modernity, the otherness of Jews did not prevent their integration into the prevailing social order," because ritualized institutionalization transformed conflict into a tool for group differentiation and social cohesion. However, with the advent of modernity, Jews pursuing "freedom," "equality," and "wealth" shattered the old group differentiation and its social

cohesion function. This "strangeness of the marginal group" created immense panic within the "host group"—a sense of profound uncertainty regarding their own and the other's identity and security. Within this panic, the appeal to the political rationality of a larger collective (the state apparatus) unleashed violent impulses facilitated by technical rationality, impulses contrary to morality and ethics. Why did the strangeness resulting from the breakdown of institutional group differentiation cause such panic among the European "host groups," epitomized by Nazi Germany? For many Europeans, this strangeness meant Jews were "not of my tribe," posing an alien threat. From the perspective of political rationality, such aliens were perceived as needing to be—and capable of being—excluded or even eliminated as "humans" distinct from the host group. In other words, as strangers, Jews were "othered" and "objectified."

(2) The Strangeness Fueling "Light Socializing" in the Network Era

From the Holocaust era to the network age, do these signals of strangeness remain consistent? Massive information floods the three-dimensional human living space constituted by the online and offline worlds. "In the traditional Chinese moral value system, the 'stranger' finds no proper place; 'stranger' means 'outsider,' 'unknown person,' 'passerby,' 'someone irrelevant to oneself.'" [23] Strangeness sometimes becomes an opportunity, even a choice for many young people, but it can also be a risk. Thus, we ponder: How exactly does strangeness manifest itself in us within modern society? What do these manifestations signify?

Under the uncertain migration of bodies and power, both actual and imagined strangeness occur simultaneously. The constant flux of interpersonal relationships, human thought, labor forms, and environments constitutes perceptible actual strangeness. Due to unfamiliarity, inability, unwillingness, or lack of habit for deep understanding, people may also generate an imagined strangeness of the "alien." According to Husserl, the universality and absoluteness of entities do not depend on a priori knowledge but on pure experience. The experienced and the intuited exist only within the experiencing and intuiting acts themselves. The essence of things resides within the human act of experiencing them and manifests only within this immersive experiential interaction—this can also be understood as the "presence of the person." Conversely, the "absence of the person" drives strangeness. Socializing in the network era is predominantly "light socializing" characterized by "absence." Strangeness signifies the space for potential "presence" to be explored, the possibility of choosing "light socializing," while simultaneously carrying the risk of excluding the "other."

In modern society, reformers and traditionalists viewed strangeness as abnormal, because "the higher order of the future has no place for the stranger." However, in postmodernity, understood as a new stage of modernity's development, plurality, difference, contingency, and fluidity are respected and even celebrated. These are unavoidable, and their inherent uncertainty can shake "stubborn traditions." The qualities emphasized and sought by postmodernity can make the world novel, refined, and progressive through fluidity; they are worthy of being cherished, protected, and explored [24]. During the Holocaust, the "strange group" signified opposition and threat to the "host group" because, under modern rationality, "strangers" were "othered" and "objectified"—"not of my kind" represented the ultimate risk. So why is socializing now turning towards the strange? This

is because fluidity implies faster rhythms and heightened uncertainty. Work occupies a large part of people's lives in modern society; the cost and risk of cultivating serious relationships and emotions are exceedingly high. Furthermore, the fluidity of real-world class distances makes the cost of serious relationships seem even higher. The phenomenon of "social anxiety" perfectly illustrates people's satisfactory choice to evade responsibility, social judgment, and potential harm when faced with the "strange" risks contained within the myriad possibilities of a mediated society. This lifestyle compels us to seek seemingly unbreakable, convenient connections online. And online, most are strangers—hence the prevalence of light socializing. Yet, the modern mindset underlying the internet still encompasses othering thinking, as seen in the increasing polarization and singular voices within online discussion groups.

Does othering/objectification thinking make strangeness a threat? But does strangeness necessarily mean "othering" and "objectification"? Not. When we examine strangeness from the perspective of the communist vision of an ultimate association of free individuals, whether facing actual strangeness arising from changes in interpersonal relations, human thought, labor forms, or environments, or imagined strangeness, it can be harnessed to serve humanity itself through mutual tolerance and common development. Admittedly, the stranger society carries inherent ethical risks—potential dangers or harms stemming from the uncertainty of others' value cognitions and behavioral choices. These manifest as crises of trust, identity crises, and irreconcilable value conflicts. However, it is possible to break the closure of moral spaces, eliminate othering thinking to unleash the fluidity, freedom, opportunity, and potential for united development underlying the representation of the strange. This requires building upon the self-identity and responsibility of strangers.

#### **4. Recognition: An Adaptive Strategy in Risk Society**

The inescapable stranger society is the "Gesellschaft" (society) described by Tönnies, the "organic solidarity" society (evolved from mechanical solidarity) conceptualized by Durkheim, the "rational society" defined by Max Weber, and the "risk society" diagnosed by Ulrich Beck. The inherent fluidity and uncertainty of "strangeness" resonate profoundly with Ulrich Beck's interpretation of the "risk society." While democratic politics characterized by plurality and the mutual counterbalancing of powers within postmodern society mitigate the immoral exploitation of risk by political capital obsessed with security, they do not eliminate it. For individuals at the micro level, recognizing the stranger is essential for effectively transforming risk, adapting to the risk society, and constructing and sustaining a sound order within the stranger society.

##### **(1) Ethical Risks of the Stranger Society**

In his research on the sources of profit, Frank H. Knight made a conceptual and typological distinction between risk and uncertainty from the dual perspectives of human cognition and probability theory, thereby advancing the economic theory of uncertainty. The distinction between risk and uncertainty lies in this: "Risk" is a measurable uncertainty, representing an objective probability, whereas "Uncertainty" is an unmeasurable risk, representing a subjective probability. "The practical difference between the categories of risk and

uncertainty is that in the former the distribution of the outcome in a group of instances is known (either through calculation a priori or from statistics of past experience), while in the case of uncertainty this is not true, the reason being in general that it is impossible to form a group of instances, because the situation dealt with is in a high degree unique." He further noted: "Uncertainty which is effective in a behavior situation is the degree of subjective confidence felt in the correctness of the foresight embodied in a present prospective adaptation to future conditions." [25] Consequently, the stranger society inherently possesses uncertainty, leading to varying degrees of ethical risk due to a deficit of trust.

The ethical risks within the stranger society stem from a tripartite mechanism:

1) Absence of a Shared Moral Background: The lack of a common moral foundation among strangers renders each other's actions unpredictable and unforeseeable. Unlike the traditional acquaintance society, where kinship, blood ties, and geographic proximity established shared values, secure existential spaces, and deepened trust, strangers in modern society are disembedded from traditional morality through processes of time-space distanciation. They converge bearing diverse moral resources and cultural traditions shaped by distinct historical contexts. Consequently, their values, value orientations, and resultant practices exhibit significant divergence, making trust fundamentally elusive.

2) Lack of a Shared Moral Authority: The absence of a common moral authority impedes the establishment of a collectively adhered-to moral order. Upholding social moral order necessitates the indispensable force of moral authority. Moral authority legitimizes standards of "good and evil," effectively rewards compliance and sanctions deviation, and fosters contractual or even cooperative trust. However, the fluidity and strangeness characterizing modern information flows and spatio-temporal dynamics pose novel challenges to moral authority. Moral disputes among "moral strangers" further obstruct solidarity.

3) Erosion of Moral Responsibility: Among modern strangers, rational calculation often occupies the apex of value. To avoid the substantial opportunity costs associated with deeper engagement and to live with perceived "high cost-effectiveness" and minimal burden, interactions are saturated with instrumental calculations. Absent direct benefit linkages, even a "nodding acquaintance" becomes exceptional. The moral relationship between strangers is fragmented—devoid of trust, lacking genuine concern for a shared fate, leading to a progressive attenuation of moral responsibility.

Confronted with these three risks points unequivocally to the imperative for order integration at the value level, necessitating both institutionalized trust and the reconstruction of responsibility. This summons recognition grounded in love.

(2) The Mechanism of Recognition in Mitigating the Risks of Strangeness

What constitutes recognizing the stranger? Let us conceptualize it in degrees. Due to the lack of "presence" and deep engagement, we readily project our imagination onto the stranger during interactions. Frequently, we engage with an imagined version of them. When the actual person manifests traits incongruent with our expectations, we tend towards negation and abandonment of the relationship. This pattern of rapid acceptance followed by swift rejection

epitomizes "high cost-effectiveness" behavior within the risk society. It constitutes incomplete recognition of the stranger, detrimental to cultivating robust interpersonal networks in modernity. As society progresses, the metaverse develops with increasing momentum. Reverting to constructing the authentic "proximity" of past eras to eliminate strangeness is neither feasible nor possible. Therefore, we must establish complete recognition of the stranger based on their self-identity, enabling online relationships to offer substance beyond fleeting, unstable, and convenient emotional connections fraught with insecurity.

This entails:

1)Self-Identity of the Stranger: Every "I" is a stranger to others in the digital realm. Finding myself amidst strangers, I inherently desire kind treatment—encompassing respect, tolerance, etc. In essence, as a stranger myself, I can and must cultivate self-identity regarding my "stranger" status.

2)Building Complete Recognition upon Self-Identity: Complete recognition demands enduring patience, understanding, and tolerance towards the stranger. Firstly, interacting with diverse individuals online necessitates learning to comprehend those different from ourselves—embracing difference. Secondly, our tolerance must extend beyond those encountered fleetingly with whom we briefly imagine potential; it must encompass enduring strangeness.

3)Axial Virtuous Responsibility: Complete recognition must revolve around virtuous responsibility. Zygmunt Bauman, in *44 Letters from the Liquid Modern World*, identifies a common modern trait: selfishness and timidity, desiring bonds and emotional support yet shunning commitment, for commitment implies inescapable responsibility. However, within a postmodern ethos grounded in love, responsibility transcends mere obligation borne without affection. Virtuous responsibility is necessarily predicated on one's own sense of happiness. This does not imply initiating relationships based solely on happiness suffices; it intrinsically involves, during sustained interaction, navigating dissonance or friction with understanding and tolerance rooted in love. Love and responsibility are not antithetical; responsibility must incorporate love. Virtuous responsibility inherently embodies value rationality. Constructing complete recognition of the stranger must be anchored in one's own affirmation and sense of happiness to sustain an axial virtuous responsibility, transcending mere legal or contractual obligation.

## 5. Conclusion

Through a comparative reading and analysis of Zygmunt Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust*, David John Farmer's *The Language of Public Administration: Bureaucracy, Modernity, and Postmodernity*, and related materials, the author discerns a common thread underlying societal development from the "rationality"-supreme modernity to the deconstructive postmodernity: the rapid fluidity of society and frequent interactions among humans. This dynamic has led to the emergence of strangers cohabiting en masse in daily life, "acquainted strangers" in everyday encounters, "familiar strangers" in the online world, and "distant strangers" in the mediated world, collectively constituting the contemporary stranger society. Strangeness is the manifestation of fluidity. When "uncertainty" becomes the only certainty within society, it signifies that strangeness can be both an opportunity and, more likely, a risk. Only by undertaking a contemporary decomposition of the ethical

risks inherent in the stranger society, and by constructing enduring value-based and institutional support through recognition grounded in "trust and responsibility," can strangeness be harnessed to serve human flourishing. Otherwise, the distance between people will only widen amidst the deceptive lightness of instrumental calculation.

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