

Article

# Individual and Society: The Crisis of Modernity in Paul Auster's *Leviathan*

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**Abstract:** American writer Paul Auster's novel *Leviathan* revolves around the life trajectory of the protagonist Benjamin Sachs. It tells the story of a promising novelist who gradually transforms into the "Phantom of Liberty" under the combined impacts of political oppression, the trauma of the Vietnam War, and pervasive social hypocrisy. By destroying replicas of the Statue of Liberty, Sachs attempts to express his questioning of the U.S. government and his discontent with the contradictions of modern society. Drawing on Zygmunt Bauman's theory of liquid modernity, this article analyzes the alienation of individuals, the fragmentation of social bonds, and the crisis of cultural identity reflected in the novel. It further explores how fluid, unstable social structures intensify insecurity, moral ambiguity, and the erosion of stable identities. Through an in-depth reading of *Leviathan*, the paper reveals the tensions between personal freedom and social control, as well as between ethical responsibility and political violence. By examining the crisis of modernity embodied in Sachs's choices and ultimate fate, the study urges contemporary society to re-examine the relationship between the individual and the collective, and to seek a more humanistic, inclusive, and dialogic social model capable of responding to the multiple challenges of modern life.

**Keywords:** paul auster; leviathan; modernity; alienation; cultural identity

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research Background

A pivotal figure in contemporary literature is celebrated for a distinctive narrative style and profound philosophical depth. Emerging in the 1980s with a groundbreaking trilogy, a unique literary voice was established through novels characterized by suspense and deconstruction. These works consistently explore themes of identity, destiny, and memory, revealing the inner struggles of individuals navigating complex social environments through nuanced character portrayals. One representative work continues this tradition by conducting an in-depth exploration of the complicated relationship between the individual and society. It further examines the challenges and limitations faced by individuals when confronting powerful social systems in modern contexts, as well as the broader crisis of cultural identity [1].

### 1.2. Literature Review

At present, academic research perspectives on Paul Auster's novel *Leviathan* remain relatively limited. Existing studies mostly analyze the novel by drawing on concepts of freedom, trauma theory, and other theoretical frameworks. Works approaching the novel from the perspective of freedom generally focus on the protagonist Sachs' pursuit of freedom and his predicament, exploring the essence, boundaries, and realizable paths of freedom. They reveal the novel's reflection and critique of the individualistic conception of freedom, as well as its profound reflections on the relationship between social roles, moral responsibility, and freedom. Studies have examined the dilemmas encountered by the novel's characters in their pursuit of freedom at literary, social, and national levels. These analyses further explore the diverse paths through which these characters seek

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freedom, emphasizing that the realization of freedom requires a balance between social roles and moral responsibility. Other studies adopt trauma theory as the theoretical perspective, combining close reading of the text and historical materials to explore the protagonist's sources and manifestations of trauma [2]. They reveal the connection between trauma and the historical context, discussing implicit methods of trauma redemption in the novel.

Although scholars have conducted studies from the perspectives of freedom theory or trauma theory, there remain limitations in exploring the crisis of modernity and its impact on the relationship between the individual and society. Events in the novel, such as Sachs' bombing of a replica of the Statue of Liberty that triggers complex social reactions, his wife Fanny beginning a new life with another man after his fall from a building, and the shooting incident involving the Vietnam veteran Dimaggio, all reflect the crisis-ridden state of American society at that time [3]. This paper will utilize theoretical perspectives on modernity to conduct an in-depth analysis of the crisis of modernity embodied in *Leviathan*.

### *1.3. Significance and Structure of This Article*

The field of Western sociology has produced a wealth of theoretical interpretations of modernity, with particular emphasis on the concept of fluidity and uncertainty within modern society. By situating individual experiences within broader social structures, it is argued that these characteristics are crucial to understanding modernity. Solid modernity is described as an era of mutual engagement, while fluid modernity is characterized by disengagement, elusiveness, and the ease of escape. In fluid modernity, those who are most elusive and free to move without notice often hold significant influence. This perspective highlights the alienation of individuals and the disconnection from society, offering valuable insights into contemporary social dynamics [4].

Modernity has not only driven advancements in knowledge and societal progress but has also given rise to new social challenges and ethical dilemmas. The framework of modernity provides a distinctive lens for analyzing contemporary society, particularly in examining the dynamics between individuals and society, as well as the crises inherent to modernity [5, 6]. This paper will explore these themes through three key dimensions: individual alienation, social disconnection, the commodification of culture, and the challenges related to collective identity, all grounded in theoretical analysis.

## **2. The Alienation of Individual and the Difficulty of Resistance**

### *2.1. The Root of Individual Alienation*

Modern societal transformations have disrupted the relationships between individuals and their environment, their inner selves, and their connections with others. This disconnection, shaped by evolving social conditions, has led to a pervasive sense of uncertainty and insecurity. As a result, individuals often find themselves in a state of rootlessness, unable to establish a stable self-identity or a sense of belonging. This condition fosters a heightened vulnerability to alienation, as the lack of anchoring in personal and social contexts undermines the ability to navigate contemporary challenges effectively [7].

### *2.2. Benjamin Sachs' Evolution from Alienation to Radical Resistance*

*Leviathan* follows the narrator Peter Aaron as he uncovers the truth behind the death of his close friend [8]. Through flashbacks, the novel recounts the extreme acts of alienation committed by the protagonist under the alias "The Phantom of Liberty." Once a brilliant writer, he vanished from public view after surviving a fall from a building. During his disappearance, he killed an equally alienated Vietnam War veteran in an accidental confrontation. He later read an article written by the veteran before his death, which inspired him to resist societal structures in a more radical manner and to draw public attention to social issues through extreme actions.

"I couldn't help myself after that. I started to think about him all the time, to compare myself to him, to question how we'd come to be together on that road in Vermont. I sensed a kind of cosmic attraction, the pull of some inexorable force. She wouldn't tell me much about him, but I knew he'd been a soldier in Vietnam and that the war had turned him inside-out, that he'd left the army with a new understanding of society, politics, and his own life. It fascinated me to think that I'd gone to prison because of that war—and that fighting in it had brought him around to more or less the same position as mine. We'd both become writers, we both knew that fundamental changes were needed—but whereas I started to lose my way, to dither around with ineffective articles and literary pretensions, he kept developing, kept moving forward, and in the end, he was brave enough to put his ideas to the test. It's not that I think destroying property is a good idea, but I envied him for having the courage to act."

This incident not only deepened his sense of alienation but also further propelled him toward extreme resistance [9]. This included acts such as destroying a replica of the Statue of Liberty and other radical behaviors, which ultimately led to his tragic demise.

### *2.3. Individual Powerlessness in Resistance Against Modern Social System*

The concept of alienation has long been a subject of discussion. It has been suggested that identities often appear fragile, temporary, and subject to change. This leads to a critical choice: to master the challenging art of coexisting with differences or to create conditions that render such coexistence unnecessary.

During the 1980s in the United States, significant shifts occurred in social values and the political landscape. Certain perspectives and behaviors were fundamentally at odds with this emerging new order. These views were perceived as overly rigid and traditional, misaligned with the prevailing spirit of the time, which led to a gradual decline in their acceptance. Over time, these ideas came to be seen as outdated and disconnected from contemporary societal trends. This sense of alienation deepened as these voices faded from public discourse, their ideas marginalized, and their identities increasingly challenged. Theories suggest that such challenges are intrinsic to the fluid nature of modernity, where individuals must adapt to constantly shifting social environments, coexist with differences, or redefine their identities to avoid exclusion. In this context, failure to adapt or embrace a new identity can lead to a loss of confidence and a sense of disconnection, driving individuals toward extreme actions and further alienation.

A pivotal moment in this narrative involved a seemingly accidental fall from a building. At a social gathering, an individual, slightly inebriated, found themselves in a conflicted state, suppressing desires while grappling with moral boundaries. In an attempt to navigate this internal struggle, they devised a risky plan involving a fire escape, hoping to elicit a reaction that would allow them to fulfill their desires without compromising their dignity. This act, however, resulted in a fall that was both accidental and deliberate [10]. The aftermath of this event marked a turning point, as the individual withdrew from professional engagements, abandoned their previous ambitions, and became consumed by inner turmoil. Their identity, once defined by clear goals and convictions, began to disintegrate, leaving them trapped in a cycle of contradiction and instability. This marked the onset of profound psychological alienation.

The experiences described are not merely personal tragedies but reflect a broader challenge faced by modern individuals confronting uncertainty and social mobility. These narratives illustrate how marginalization and crises of self-identity can lead to alienation and extreme actions in an attempt to reclaim a sense of self and belonging. However, such behaviors often exacerbate the sense of alienation, deepening the distress and further complicating the path to resolution [11].

## **3. Social Alienation and Institutional Oppression**

### *3.1. Alienated Interpersonal Relations in Liquid Modernity*

The concept of the "cloakroom community" describes a phenomenon where individuals, despite their diverse and often conflicting interests, temporarily come

together under a shared spectacle or purpose [12]. This temporary unity is achieved by setting aside personal differences, creating a space marked by fleeting connections and performative interactions. Such communities are characterized by their transience and superficiality, reflecting the alienated and interchangeable nature of relationships in contemporary society. These dynamics highlight the broader implications of modern social structures, where genuine interpersonal bonds are often replaced by ephemeral and utilitarian interactions.

### *3.2. The "Cloakroom Community": A Symbol of Estranged Society*

Six days ago, a man detonated an explosive device by the side of a road in northern Wisconsin. There were no witnesses to the event. As of today, no one has been able to identify the deceased individual. No one contacted the authorities, nor did anyone search for his whereabouts. It appears that his existence was never truly acknowledged by society. The only reason his death attracted the attention of law enforcement was the extraordinary nature of the explosion. Had he passed away due to illness, it is highly likely that his death would have gone unnoticed. Such a neglected passing serves as a profound illustration of social alienation. His death is not merely an individual tragedy but also a representation of the lack of connection and care among people in contemporary society.

In later recollections, the first encounter between the two individuals also reflects social estrangement. They met at a joint reading event, which can be likened to a "cloakroom community"—a gathering where individuals, despite their differing interests and activities during the day, were brought together by an evening performance. However, the event was canceled due to heavy snowfall. The lack of communication regarding the cancellation highlights the pervasive social disconnection and absence of interaction [13].

During the period when one individual disappeared after falling from a building, his spouse, though yearning for his return, did not allow his absence to immobilize her life. She began a new chapter with another individual, demonstrating that even though the missing person had once held a significant place in her life, his absence did not prevent her from moving forward. This evident substitutability in their relationship underscores the fragile and transient nature of connections between individuals in modern society [14].

### *3.3. Individual Isolation Under the Institutional Oppression*

Under the pseudonym the Phantom of Liberty, an individual carried out a series of bombings targeting replicas of the Statue of Liberty. These acts represented an extreme rebellion against society and highlighted a profound disconnection between the individual and the social order. While these actions attracted widespread public attention, they failed to bring understanding or acceptance, leaving the individual even more isolated. The attempt to express discontent and defiance through such actions elicited no significant societal response. Major global events unfolded during this period, yet the individual remained a solitary figure, moving toward destruction in a stolen car.

Through the individual's death, initial encounters with others, personal relationships, and extreme actions, the narrative profoundly explores the alienation between individuals and the fragility of human connections in modern society. The concept of a "cloakroom community" is reflected in the temporariness and interchangeability of personal connections, as well as the superficiality and lack of depth in social relationships. The individual's extreme behavior, eventual isolation, and sense of powerlessness are not only indicative of personal tragedy but also represent a constrained choice under the pressures of systemic forces in modern society.

## **4. Commodification of Culture and Crisis of National Identity**

### *4.1. The Statue of Liberty: A Dual Symbol of Freedom and Commodification*

In *Leviathan*, American attitudes toward the Statue of Liberty and the American flag are divided. Unlike the flag, which tends to divide people as much as it brings them together, the statue is a symbol that causes no controversy. If many Americans are proud

of their flag, there are many others who feel ashamed of it, and for every person who regards it as a sacred object, there is another who would like to desecrate it. Thus, Americans champion not the nation itself, but all that the Statue of Liberty represents: democracy, freedom, and equality. As an idealist, Sachs embraces these beliefs, and his act of destroying this cherished symbol may represent a fundamental questioning of whether these beliefs still function in American life. Little can be gained by the nation from its close links with the state. The state may not expect much from the mobilizing potential of the nation, which it needs less and less as mass conscript armies held together by patriotic fervor are replaced by elitist and highly professional high-tech units. These shifts have diminished the role of national identity in state objectives, exacerbating the crisis of national identity.

When Benjamin Sachs assumed the identity of the Phantom of Liberty and carried out a series of bombings targeting replicas of the Statue of Liberty, the public response further highlighted the commodification of culture and the crisis of national identity. On the one hand, many people were outraged by the actions of the Phantom of Liberty. One prominent conservative senator issued a statement condemning these acts and urged the culprits to stop immediately. On the other hand, numerous individuals expressed sympathy for the cause of the Phantom of Liberty. They were in the minority, but America is a large place, and their numbers were by no means insignificant. In their hearts, the Phantom of Liberty eventually became a kind of underground folk hero—a reflection of the skepticism and resistance toward mainstream values within society.

#### 4.2. *Resistance Spectacle and the Erosion of Critical Power*

The fame of the Phantom of Liberty grew with each of his actions. He became not only the subject of widespread discussions and public commentary but also a frequent topic on radio call-in shows and a recurring figure in political cartoons. While some criticized him as a societal threat, others celebrated him as a representative of the people. This mixed societal response exposed not only a crisis of collective identity but also the commercialization of cultural symbols [15]. The bombings of the Statue of Liberty replicas attracted significant public attention and were extensively leveraged in commercial products and entertainment programs. As the image of the Phantom of Liberty spread, his name was even used for commercial merchandise, transforming his radical act of resistance into a marketable commodity. Items such as Phantom of Liberty T-shirts and buttons became available in novelty shops, jokes began to circulate, and performances emerged, including one in which entertainers dramatized the disrobing and seduction of the Statue of Liberty by the Phantom. Such commercial exploitation and trivialization of the image of the Phantom of Liberty underscore the pervasive phenomenon of cultural commodification.

Through the bombing spree targeting replicas of the Statue of Liberty carried out by the Phantom of Liberty and the subsequent societal reactions, the narrative profoundly illustrates the commercialization of cultural symbols and the crisis of collective identity within American society. The sanctity of the Statue of Liberty as a national emblem has been eroded, while the rebellious image of the Phantom of Liberty has been transformed amid the forces of commercialization and entertainment. Its original political significance and critical social value have been progressively diluted during its dissemination, ultimately becoming a component of the broader spectacle-driven society [11].

### 5. Conclusion

In summary, this paper examines the crisis of modernity in Paul Auster's *Leviathan* through three dimensions: individual alienation, social estrangement, and cultural commodification. On the individual level, the experiences of key characters highlight the alienation and challenges faced by individuals navigating social uncertainty. On the social level, the interactions between characters emphasize the transient and superficial nature of certain communities, illustrating social estrangement. On the cultural level, symbolic acts and imagery underscore the effects of cultural commodification on collective identity.

These analyses reveal that while modernity has driven progress, it has also created a significant disconnection between individuals and society.

An exploration of the crisis of modernity in *Leviathan* prompts reflection on the individual's role in contemporary society, the fragmentation of social relationships, and the evolution of culture under the influence of commodification. This study not only enhances the understanding of modernity's challenges but also offers insights for fostering a more compassionate and inclusive social framework, guiding society toward healthier and more sustainable development.

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