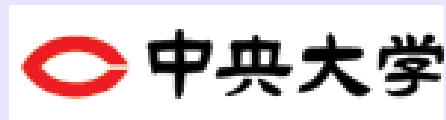


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Ethics and globalisation
in the work of Zygmunt Bauman

Overview

1. Who is Zygmunt Bauman?
2. Bauman's sociological vocation
3. Ethics: modern problem and contemporary potential
4. Consumption, consumerism and globalisation
5. The collateral damage of consumerist culture
6. The ethical damage of consumerist culture
7. Rival ethical archetypes and Bauman's advice
8. Two critical questions *and* the hope of possibility

Who is Zygmunt Bauman? 1

■ Born in Poland (1925 -)

- Nazi invasion → USSR
- Served in USSR based Polish Army against Hitler
- Post WWII (Jewish) captain in Polish Army
- Idealist about communism
 - ◆ Hope for “equality of dignified life”



■ University of Warsaw (1954-1968)

- Ph.D., London School of Economics (1959)
- Lecturer in Sociology (1954-1964)
- Chair of General Sociology (1964-1968)

Who is Zygmunt Bauman? 2

- **Anti-Semitic purges by the Polish Communist Party**
 - Polish government reinforces nationalism through anti-Semitic purges (“stain on my country” – Krzysztof Kieslowski)
 - Bauman forced to renounce Polish citizenship
 - Tel Aviv and Haifa Universities → brief spell in Australia
- **University of Leeds (1971 – 1990)**
 - Emeritus Professor of Sociology
- **University of Warsaw (1990 -)**
 - Emeritus Professor of Sociology
- **Bauman Institute**
 - <http://www.sociology.leeds.ac.uk/bauman/>



Bauman's sociological vocation 1

■ Sociological mission

- Focus of sociology
 - ◆ World as it is experienced (versus in abstraction)
- Task of sociology
 - ◆ See through our everyday familiarities of life → novel alternatives
- Goal of sociology
 - ◆ See possibility in the shape of existential alternatives
 - ◆ Counter necessity of so-called natural, immutable TINA conditions

■ Analytical problem

- Personal is political, or at least it's always implicated in it
 - ◆ Individual life-stories are shaped by structural societal forces
 - ◆ People confronted with contradictions beyond individual resolution

Bauman's sociological vocation 2

■ Political action

- Radical sceptic of modern will to make the world transparent
- Human condition is characterised by ambivalence and ambiguity
 - ◆ Bauman's life → the ambivalence of exile
- Endless possibilities must be rescued from power and powerful
 - ◆ Bauman's exile is not chosen → possibilities nonetheless arise
- Transform fate into destiny
 - ◆ Possibilities may not be easy or comfortable, but they're chosen
 - ◆ Being human → being the subject, not (power's) object, of relations

■ Ethical commitment

- Represent and give voice to those who suffer from domination
- Power pretends ambivalence is temporary → imposition of order

Bauman's sociological vocation 3

■ Sociologico-literary study of the human condition

- Sociology studies limits created by social structures & institutions
- Sociology's vocation → refusal to accept the inevitability of limits
- “Forgetting of being” ← duty to reveal hidden human possibilities

■ Living forwards

“It is perfectly true, as philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that is must be lived forwards.”

Soren Kierkegaard, *The Journals of Soren Kierkegaard 1853-1854* (quoted in Keith Tester, [2004], *The Social Thought of Zygmunt Bauman*. Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 9.)

■ Bauman on how to “live forwards”

- Morality and culture cancel necessity → opportunity to be human
- Intellectuals an avant-garde → interpretive charting of territory
- Ethically responsible humans → ahead or forwards of the world

Ethics: modern problem/contemporary potential 1

■ Ethics before ontology

- Prioritises being-for-the-other over being-in-the-world
 - ♦ I.e., how the world *ought* to be over how the world *is*

■ Why prioritise ethics over ontology?

- Cannot derive ought from is → true facts are neutral
- Prioritising morality → reject the world as it has been made
 - ♦ Reduces risk of the conditions necessary for moral indifference

■ Context of Bauman's engagement with morality

- The Holocaust and its intimate relation to modernity
- Bauman's main influence → Emmanuel Levinas
 - ♦ *Postmodern Ethics*, 1993
 - ♦ *Globalization: The Human Consequences*, 1998

Ethics: modern problem/contemporary potential 2

- **Problem → the moral worth of ethical rules**
 - Emphasise being moral in terms of following rules and orders
 - Encourages indifference to the impact of actions
 - ◆ Explains how sane, rational people sent others to the gas chamber
 - Moralities that turn on universal rules foster ethical blindness
 - ◆ Facilitated by abstract bureaucracy, instrumental rationality, technologies and classification systems that function according to the norm → promote similarity over difference → other as abnormal
 - Also, the universal nature of the rule is bound to encounter exceptional contexts in relation to which it is morally impotent
- **Solution → unconditional but natural care for the other**
 - Levinas → primacy of the face in micro-interaction of individuals
 - I can't be emotionally detached from consequences of my actions

Ethics: modern problem/contemporary potential 3

■ Bauman's ethics for the contemporary world

- Quandary of ethics → scepticism about the universality of truth and the possibility of any universal moral laws
- Quandary of consumer society
 - ♦ Aesthetic, not moral, interaction in an individualised mode

■ Bauman's postmodern ethics

- Ethics is contextual or case-by-case *and* self-sacrificial
 - ♦ Contingent and subjective → preoccupied with the other before me
- Being-for-the-other → unconditional concern & caring for others
 - ♦ Springs from a pre-societal (rather than pre-social) moral impulse
 - ♦ Cf. ethical rules that are social constructions given an objective status
 - ♦ Substitute rule prescribed actions with a concern for just behaviour

Consumption, consumerism and globalisation 1

■ Methodology

- Bauman adopts Max Weber's procedure of ideal types
- Ideal type \neq snapshot or description of reality
 - ◆ Model constructed from elements of, and configuration in, reality
 - ◆ Tool to help in the analysis of reality
- Render haphazard, subjective evidence of experience intelligible

■ Consumption (attribute of individuals)

- Basic metabolic form \rightarrow ingestion, digestion, excretion
 - ◆ Permanent part of the human condition and all living organisms
- Basic activities \rightarrow production, storage, distribution, disposal
 - ◆ Provide the raw material, together with cultural inventiveness driven by imagination, for social life and intersubjective relations

Consumption, consumerism and globalisation 2

■ Revolution in consumption

- Separation of the act of production and the act of consumption
 - ◆ Key is the way this new space is administered → political economy
 - ◆ Public and territorial → private (deregulation) and global
- Passage from consumption to consumerism is a revolution
 - ◆ Consumption becomes more than a means of a survival
 - ◆ End in itself, central to everyday life, if not the purpose of existence
- Wanting, desiring, longing for → underpin human togetherness

■ Consumerism (attribute of society)

“[A] type of social arrangement that results from recycling mundane, permanent and so to speak ‘regime-neutral’ human wants, desires and longings into the principal propelling and operating force of society, a force that coordinates systemic reproduction, social integration, social stratification and the formation of human individuals.”

Zygmunt Bauman (2007), *Consuming Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 28.

Consumption, consumerism and globalisation 3

- **Society of consumers → set of existential conditions**
 - Chances very high that people embrace a consumerist culture
 - Interpellated in capacity as consumers (cf. producers or services)
 - Focus → manage members' spirits (vs. administer their bodies)
- **Three examples**
 - Social networking ← confessional society, little privacy/intimacy
 - Software technology ← firms practise negative surveillance
 - Immigration ← criteria of points systems, ages and skills
- **Distinguishing feature of all three examples**
 - Humans are treated as commodities
 - To be treated – recognised – we must become commodities, too

Consumption, consumerism and globalisation 4

- **Neo-liberal story of freedom and increasing happiness**
 - Separation of subject/individual from object/goods and services
 - Capacity to exercise choice distinct from the commodities chosen
- **Bauman on being in the society of consumers**
 - Engage in the universal activity of marketing
 - ◆ We promote ourselves as commodities...
 - ◆ ... and we are the commodities we promote
 - Adrift in the sea of commodities → no subject/object distinction
- **Origins**
 - Wanting, desiring and longing are detached from individuals
 - Recycled or reified into an extraneous force
 - ◆ Constitutes human interaction and self-formation and ossifies it

Consumption, consumerism and globalisation 5

■ End of political economy

- Exterritorial economy outpaces territorial state-based politics
- ICT space-time compression negates policy initiatives and regulation constraints in economic, military and cultural domains
- Transnational global markets → withering away of nation-states
- State does a strip-tease down to bare necessity of repression
 - ◆ Govern the society of consumers on behalf of economic imperatives

■ Cf. universalisation

- Process in which we acted and did things to the world
 - ◆ Global *initiatives* and *undertakings*
- Modern state sponsored desire for order making on a universal, truly global scale → everything the same everywhere, or equal

Consumption, consumerism and globalisation 6

■ Globalisation

- Process that is happening to us
 - ◆ Unintended and unanticipated global *effects*
- Indeterminate, unruly and self-propelled character of world affairs
 - ◆ Sense of disorder and loss of control → nobody any longer in control

■ Consequences

- Domination of states by free market capital
 - ◆ Leeway and freedom versus strictest decisional constraint
 - ◆ Freedom of movement = f (weak states, or states remaining weak)
- Redistribution of social power from state to market
 - ◆ Impossible to reforge social issues into effective collective action

The collateral damage of consumerist culture 1

■ Concept of collateral damage

- No moral or legal responsibility (of the community for damage)

■ Underclass (cf. working- and lower-classes)

- Excluded in murky netherworld → classified as failed consumers
- Hotchpotch of people who *choose* to refuse consumerist culture

■ Vagabonds

- Live in space but need passports and permits
- Migrants → forced to move but no place to call or make home

■ Tourists

- Live in time without entry visas and rights of passage
- Wanderers → homeless by choice but at home everywhere

The collateral damage of consumerist culture 2

- Society of consumers is sovereign over the underclass
 - Exempt from its laws and excluded from its concern
- Vagabond is the tourist's alter ego

“The vagabond is the tourist's nightmare; the tourist's 'inner demon' which needs to be exorcized, and daily. The sight of the vagabond makes the tourists tremble – not because of what the vagabond is but because of what the tourists may become.... A world without vagabonds is the utopia of the society of tourists. Much of the politics in the society of tourists ... can be explained as an ongoing, stubborn effort to lift social reality, against all the odds, to the level of that utopia.”

Zygmunt Bauman (1998), *Globalization: The Human Consequences*.
Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 97.

- Underclass – like the Jews – is subject to ethical blindness
 - Problem to be dealt with and cleansed
 - Facilitated by a lack of empathy and compassion
 - Tackled through highly rational technologies

The ethical damage of consumerist culture 1

■ No victors of collateral damage

Even if many “human beings [in the underclass] may perish in the explosion, yet the most salient among the victims is the humanity of those who escape the perdition.”

Zygmunt Bauman (2007), *Consuming Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 128.

■ Existential

- Always on the move and never satisfied
 - ♦ Staying ahead of reference groups → high market value
 - ♦ Goods have a use-by date → constant renewal to regain security
 - ♦ Choose your style and look from an array of circumscribed choices
 - ♦ Content of choice is free, making a choice – context – is obligatory
- Privatised, individualised, fenced off or “home-alone” selves
 - ♦ Preordained identity into which one is socialised via constant cultivation exchanged for identities to be discovered alone

The ethical damage of consumerist culture 2

■ Philosophical, or the time of being

- Life is pointillist
 - ♦ Punctuated with a profusion of ruptures and discontinuities
- Past and future are conflated in the here and now
 - ♦ Present → incoherent, a succession of points, a collection of instants
- Each new moment promises possibility of an existential anchoring
 - ♦ Yet an unfounded promise of a possibility with a high improbability

■ Happiness

- Perceived as a hope rather than a state → liquid instead of a solid
- Happiness sought through commodified goods has no destination
- After purchase bliss (the end) replaced by shopping (the means)
 - ♦ Replace objective end-state of happiness with subjective pursuit of it

The ethical damage of consumerist culture 3

- The morality of life as a work of art
 - Individual identity inescapably a dialogical process
 - ◆ Modern art of life → making myself into something of lasting value, imperishable, resistant to the flow of time and the caprices of fate
 - Individual identity an individualised commodified process
 - ◆ Postmodern art of life → constantly remaking myself into something flexible via “creative destruction” (cf. happenings and installations)

- Archetypical subjectivity of liquid modern selves
 - Problem
 - ◆ Centripetal self → an *outside-in* self-other relation
 - Solution
 - ◆ Centrifugal self → an *inside-out* self-other relation

Rival ethical archetypes and Bauman's advice 1

- The problem → centripetal (outside-in) self
 - Responsibility is uncompromisingly to and for myself
 - ♦ Only my interests, needs, desires and longings for things matter
 - Consequence → no gesture of self-sacrifice towards the other
 - ♦ Effect → the other is a victim at the other end of the adiaphorized relations that link subjects in the commodified network of the social

For the Nietzschean centripetal self, ethics is tantamount to a “programme of ego care, ego enhancement and altogether self-referential concerns.”

Zygmunt Bauman (2008), *The Art of Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 122.

Rival ethical archetypes and Bauman's advice 2

■ The solution → centrifugal (inside-out) self

In contrast, the ethics of the Levinassian centrifugal self offers the “prospect of care and concern for the Other – and the happiness of being for.”

Zygmunt Bauman (2008), *The Art of Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 122.

- Ethically better → includes centripetal desire for self-fulfilment
 - ♦ Concern for the well-being of others has a centripetal effect
 - ♦ Care for an other can only enhance my well-being as well
- Morally better → bridges freedom and moral action
 - ♦ Only free will allows us to care for the other
 - ♦ Free will is a spontaneous expression devoid of any ulterior motive
 - ♦ It makes true moral acts into intrinsically free choices

Rival ethical archetypes and Bauman's advice 3

■ Bauman's counsel

• Two choices

- ◆ Succumb to the force of social structures imbued with consumerist opulence and carve out an existence unconcerned with the other
- ◆ Choose to act as an ethical self who, confronted by the other, has an unconditional impulse towards her not determined by a reciprocity of care but a will to take responsibility because she is weaker

• True and ultimate free choice

- ◆ The other opens me up to, and cajoles me into, ethical responsibility
 - ◆ Being responsible for that responsibility is a matter of choice
 - ◆ Whether I accept it depends on an inner moral voice that tells me choosing not take responsibility for the weaker other is not an option

• Being ethical is not for the strongest, privileged or enlightened

- ◆ Moral responsibility is human and a mystery contrary to reason

Two critical questions *and* the hope of possibility 1

- Process of creative destruction leaves nothing in its wake
 - Reinstating the centrifugal self is a pipe-dream
 - ♦ She's been destroyed, albeit creatively, by capitalism
 - ♦ Deleuze → immanent system always overcoming its own limits
 - Derrida → harrowing tremor in the experience of belonging
 - ♦ Yet less willing than ever to take moral counsel
 - Hugely optimistic to expect centripetal selves to take heed
 - ♦ Characterised by their shallowness and transience (Bauman)
 - ♦ No depth to care for, or permanence for confronting, the other
 - Centripetal selves who could change show no inclination to
 - ♦ Benefit most from consumerist culture *qua* privileged
 - ♦ Little evidence of growing moral guilt complex, only of the spread of the conspicuousness of the global society of consumers

Two critical questions *and* the hope of possibility 2

■ Ethics before ontology or ethico-politics?

- Bauman implies a moral realm of autonomous centrifugal selves
 - ♦ Able to choose with both the other in mind (being-for) and an understanding of the social conditions (being-with) that uphold authentic moral choices and push us beyond our subjective, self-centred concerns of individual fulfilment (being-aside)
- Ethics precedes ontology because the latter closes off difference
 - ♦ But can subject formation take place outwith norms of similarity?
- Is the subject able to abstract herself from power relations?
 - ♦ If not, then Bauman is offering a hypothetical situation
 - ♦ Tradition of social contract theory → cf. Rawls' veil of ignorance
- Critical ontology of ethico-political subjects
 - ♦ Subjectivation situated in discursive practices of power/knowledge

Two critical questions *and* the hope of possibility 3

- Question → what now, or perhaps, where to now?
 - Avoid a conservative solution of retrieval and yearning
 - Avoid celebrating new modes of ethical self-formation – simply because new – in the immature present that is not yet painted grey
- Bauman's message
 - Ethical consequences for subjects who fashion themselves against the backdrop of global consumerist culture
 - ◆ Portrays the radical liquidity of today's moral currency
 - ◆ Purpose → consciously face our choices and see their moral content

Two critical questions *and* the hope of possibility 4

■ Drops us off at moral crossroads of consumerist culture

Like all crossroads, they “call for decisions about which way to go, but the first crucial, and not at all obvious decision to be taken is to recognize the crossroads as a crossroads – to accept that more than one way leads from here into the future, and that sometimes pursuing the future – any future – may require sharp turns.”

Zygmunt Bauman (2005b) *Work, consumerism and the new poor*.
Maidenhead: Open University Press, p. 120.

■ Bauman reveals the possibilities before us to be chosen

- Charts an ethical course to navigate today for tomorrow
- Critique's task of channelling humans in the right direction