Review of Ali Rattansi, *Bauman and Contemporary Sociology* (Manchester University Press 2017), 344 pages, £16.99 pb

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Introduction; Part 1: The dark side of modernity; Part 2: Living with postmodernity; Part 3: Floating, slipping, sliding, drowning, boiling and freezing: the perils of liquid life; Conclusion: A sociologist of hope or a prophet of doom?

Introduction

Bauman has long been regarded as an unconventional sociologist, though his work has tended to garner more praise than criticism, both inside and outside of the academy. This new book from Ali Rattansi is presented as an alternative to existing commentaries on Bauman's work which the author suggests have been primarily exegetical and lacking in critical edge.

Despite the title of the book, its focus is squarely on Bauman's ideas, approach and contribution, and there is very little engagement with contemporary sociology except as a means to support Rattansi's critique and to highlight perceived gaps and oversights in Bauman's work. Organised chronologically, the first part of the book provides a detailed examination of Bauman's work on modernity, including the Enlightenment and his analysis of the Holocaust, in which Rattansi begins to establish his analysis of Bauman as a Eurocentric thinker and his lens as "*white male gaze*" (88). The second part of the book focuses on Bauman's engagement with postmodernism and key elements of his thought during this period including consumerism. The third and final section deals with Bauman's work on liquid modernity as a new phase in his thinking, and subsequently the conclusion considers whether Bauman was a pessimist or optimist, and assesses his legacy and contribution. Ultimately, Rattansi delivers a fairly damning verdict on Bauman's theoretical contributions and his sociological method, but also on his success in meeting his own ambition to help people understand their experiences and to identify where there is potential for change (Jacobsen 2016).

Elements of Rattansi's critique are timely, given that contemporary sociology in the UK is turning a critical lens back on itself, with scholars and students challenging a lack of diversity of academic voices and analyses. In this sense, this book offers a contribution to the broader critique of the sociological canon through identifying the gaps in, and limitations of, Bauman's ideas in terms of their capacity to help explain contemporary experiences of marginalisation. However, other elements of the critique are less convincing, and in part this is due to Rattansi's insistence on trying to empirically refute Bauman's ideas. Ironically, given the emphasis throughout the book on empirical evidence, much of the material dealing with Bauman's contribution is speculative in terms of asserting the impact of his work on people's sense of hope and possibility, and identifying who actually engaged with his ideas.

The content of Bauman's work

Bauman's lack of engagement with certain aspects of race and racism, and his tendency to overlook gender, are amongst the more interesting themes woven throughout the book. Others have previously highlighted the inadequacy of Bauman's definition of racism in

explaining the experience of Black populations, for example in the context of slavery, empire or colonialism (e.g. see Gilroy 1993), and Rattansi develops a detailed elaboration of these critiques. In particular, he explores the difficulties with generalising Bauman's (1989) definition of racism as a form of social engineering enabled by modernity from the example of Nazi anti-Semitism to the experiences of Black populations, and its limitations in explaining, for example, relationships between slaves and slave-owners. He traces this lack of specific engagement with the experiences of ethnic minority groups through his work, highlighting Bauman's analysis of the 2011 London riots, which he described as "*a mutiny of defective and disqualified consumers*" (Bauman 2011). Rattansi suggests this analysis completely overlooks the role of institutional racism and police violence, and that Bauman's analysis of the rioters as flawed consumers essentially supports an analysis of them being "*no more than criminals*" (232).

Whilst this seems a simplification of Bauman's analysis – after all 'flawed consumers' are marked by experiences of inequality, exclusion and stigma – Rattansi does raise interesting questions about why Bauman did not explicitly engage with racism in his analysis of the riots, and about the broader implications for his ideas. Elsewhere in the book, Rattansi takes issue with Bauman's lack of engagement with gender, in particular his failure to recognise the continuing salience of gender within liquid modernity (as does Branaman 2013). As Bauman's concept of liquid modernity emphasises the flexibility and contingency of identity, Rattansi suggests there is a sense in which he overlooks how certain kinds of inequality and division persist over time.

The question is therefore raised of what might be the implications of these absences within Bauman's work. Do they demonstrate a fundamental limitation or are his theories amenable to refinements, modifications and interventions which successfully incorporate the identified absences? In terms of race, whilst Gilroy (1993) is highly critical of Bauman's failure to consider the limitations of his analysis of racism, and for missed opportunities to develop critical dialogues in this area, he also finds "*something valuable and eminently translatable*" (1999: 192) in his ideas. Instead, for Rattansi, there are more serious consequences to these omissions. To some extent, Rattansi links the limitations of Bauman's theories to the "*shaky foundations*" (28) on which his analysis is built, specifically a highly selective (Eurocentric) and flawed analysis of both the Enlightenment and modernity. This includes a failure by Bauman to understand or account for the influence and role of non-European people and ideas ('connected sociologies') or the ways that modernity unfolds differently in different contexts ('multiple modernities'), as well as a lack of engagement with the role of women in the Enlightenment, or with gendered experience more generally.

Assessing Bauman's contribution

Commentators have suggested that Bauman's methodological approach can be understood as lying "*somewhere between social science and literature*" (Jacobsen & Marshman 2008: 798), and to blur disciplinary boundaries. For Rattansi, Bauman has been undeservedly treated as a special case and a key theme in the book is the inadequacy of Bauman's 'cavalier' approach, which is portrayed as unsystematic, unrigorous and lacking in empirical grounding. Rattansi

criticises Bauman's failure to produce or engage with appropriate sources of empirical data, condemning his reliance on "*no more than the accounts of journalists in broadsheet newspapers*", and *"unsystematic critiques of 'agony aunts'"* (229). Furthermore, he argues that Bauman's selective engagement with the work of his fellow social scientists showed that he was dismissive of their more careful work. Of course, Bauman's work is quite clearly not empirical sociology (Blackshaw 2016) and he himself suggested that his works *"justify my filing among the least systematic thinkers on record"* (cited in Tester & Jacobsen 2005: 19). His shift towards more eclectic sources and popular culture references has tended to be assumed to reflect his concern to speak to people beyond academia (Beilharz 2000; Davis 2016; Best 2016), though clearly Rattansi's view is that this is not an adequate defence. Rather, he suggests that empirically grounded sociology is ever more important in a post-truth age.

Despite his sustained critique of Bauman's approach, throughout this book Rattansi valorises the "*ethical charge"* of Bauman's work and his moral commitment as his greatest contributions (278). At the same time, however, he suggests that Bauman's ambition for his work to help people understand and make sense of their experiences was thwarted by the style and content of his work, in part because of his failure to engage directly with experiences of the marginalised. Furthermore, he argues that a "*persistent strain of pessimism"* in Bauman's work (7) means that he is unable to offer solutions or alternatives that might help people, and fails to see the positive dimensions of the phenomena he describes. He detects a preference in Bauman for "*heavily statist and top down"* solutions (286), and a tendency to dismiss the potential of activism or resistance, or new technologies like social media which he famously described as 'a trap' (Bauman 2016). Despite Bauman's extensive readership, Rattansi argues that his writing is too elaborate and complex to be of any use or interest to those for whom he claims to speak, and he makes frequent reference to the idea that Bauman 'lets down' his readers, for example by failing to refer to particular texts or cover particular topics. But several elements of this assessment are inaccurate: far from being a champion of statist solutions, Bauman was (unsurprisingly given his personal history) highly suspicious of state power, and his decision to move away from developing blueprints for a 'good society' was based on the fact he felt it was not desirable or appropriate for him to do so (Smith 2013). And though Rattansi questions the value of Bauman's work for those engaged in social and political struggle, of course he was well-known and respected amongst contemporary protest movements.

Rattansi ultimately questions whether in fact Bauman's contributions qualify as sociological insight, distinct for example from journalistic analysis. He suggests that Bauman's ideas "*do not always add enough of what might be said to constitute genuinely sociological understanding of the ills that plague 'liquid' modern life"* (231), and, like Best (2016), clearly feels that his work is superficial. Furthermore, whilst he finds certain aspects of Bauman's ideas about liquid modernity and consumerism useful, Rattansi suggests that many others have picked up similar themes – for example around insecurity – and developed them in ways which he finds more convincing. As an example of good practice in terms of bringing together methodological rigour with an explicit ethical commitment to challenging marginalisation, Rattansi cites social geographer Danny Dorling. But invoking this comparison between Dorling and Bauman is unintentionally revealing of a key weakness in Rattansi's analysis of Bauman's approach. In *Injustice: Why Social Inequality Still Persists* (2015), Dorling specifically directs his readers to

Bauman's work for an explanation of the mechanisms which lie behind his statistical data about socio-spatial segregation, and for a description of how such segregation occurs as a result of rising inequality. This neatly illustrates the interrelationship which exists between abstract theoretical and applied empirical work, and shows that there is room for different kinds of sociology to co-exist. Indeed, we might understand there to be a division of labour – albeit blurred, contested and shifting - between different forms of sociological endeavour. Not only Dorling but many other researchers interested in contemporary experiences of exclusion, marginalisation and stigma have also used Bauman's ideas as a way of analytically framing their work (e.g. see Hamilton 2011; Shildrick & Rucell 2015), suggesting that they continue to have both use and relevance within contemporary sociology.

Conclusion

So the success of the arguments developed in this book is somewhat mixed. Even those who Rattansi casts as Bauman's 'defenders' or his most ardent admirers are likely to find aspects of the critique that resonate with their own reservations about aspects of Bauman's work. Furthermore, despite its analytical uses noted above, the kind of 'grand theorising' and 'epochalist' thinking in which Bauman engaged has fallen out of sociological fashion (Savage 2009). Critiques like this raise important questions about what sociology is, and what our criteria for appraisal ought to be, although arguably part of its appeal has been that it often transcends clearly delineated disciplinary boundaries and approaches, and interdisciplinarity is increasingly valued. Further questions are perhaps raised about the desirability of there being 'celebrity sociologists' who are respected above others, given that scholarship is a collective endeavour. Rattansi's critique serves to remind us that no-one is – or should be – above criticism or reappraisal, and whilst this book is perhaps unlikely to change many minds, it undoubtedly offers a provocative contribution to ongoing debates.

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