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Peter the Great

By Mark Davis, University of Leeds, UK.

Suddenly, there he was. Peter the Great. Hidden away behind some trees on an outdoor bar table at Weetwood Hall, one of Leeds University's hospitality venues and a stone's throw from Janina and Zygmunt Bauman's home. I was with Keith Tester, another giant in my eyes, heading to meet, well, who?

I knew Peter on the page. Engaging, accessible, insightful. Peter once said Zygmunt was 'good to think with'. Well, back at ya, mate. He didn't know it yet, but Peter was my preferred 'way in' to the room marked *Bauman's Colossal Sociological Output*. In foregrounding the themes of socialism, Marxism and modernity, Peter had provided the spark I needed to organise my own thoughts on Bauman's writing on freedom during my PhD. And then, like a gift from the Gods, I discovered Peter's majestic *Zygmunt Bauman* (Sage Master's Series) (Beilharz (ed) 2002) in the library (in a time before Google Scholar, kids). Bauman in four volumes. Bauman 'in a box'. A vast solid island offering safety to someone trying to stay afloat in the turbulent waters of Ziggy's incorrigibly playful liquidity. I stopped treading water and swam for shore.

But now I'm meeting Peter with a pint. Who would he be, the man behind the page? At the risk of slipping registers and flirting with tabloid romances, the first thing I noticed was his smile. Uneasy as I was in daring to propose that I could build and lead an institute in Bauman's name, I was instantly at ease in his company. Most academics I'd met proved rather curious in person, especially as I wrestled with my own "first gen" imposter anxieties. Some wore their status heavily. Something to be performed. The real person somehow buried away underneath, hiding from the light they otherwise appeared to crave. For reference, I've met Žižek. Instead, Peter was more like the blokes I loved to hang out with at gigs. Sure, they'd seen better bands than I had, and they 'were there' when festivals – y'know, the *real*

festivals – were still life-altering experiences. But they didn't care about any of that. They wore it lightly. They wanted to know what I was listening to, whether or not I played, and what I was trying to figure out. I could not have liked Peter more.

'You should come to Melbourne', he said. Sure. And we did. Me and some PhDs landed in Bundoora, slept through a *Thesis Eleven* management meeting (still sorry!), and woke up startled to find ourselves at lecterns presenting papers at the State Library of Victoria. Wow. The generosity of opportunity, and the kindness with which this was all framed as 'no big deal' despite our scholarly rawness, was simply staggering. 'You should come back to Leeds', I said. Sure. And they did. Peter and some PhDs, plus a glorious cast from the wider *Thesis Eleven* network, all for a conference on Sustainability that we hijacked and had fun with. Both occasions enjoyed great food and saw us all in rooftop bars overlooking our respective cities. The Malbec was great. My pronunciation of Auchentoshan somewhat less so.

I'm using my 'little postcard' to share these memories to make a point. Peter recently published a remarkable book that I had the pleasure of reviewing and discussing with him for Manchester University Press: *Intimacy in Postmodern Times: A Friendship with Zygmunt Bauman* (Beilharz 2020). It provides a rich account of how academic relationships are made and sustained, even at opposite sides of the world. And thus, how ideas truly form, how real change happens. And that matters. Perhaps now more than ever. Look around you.

Peter on the page puts it better than anyone else I have read:

Friendship may be one of the most important parts of our lives, but in the classical terms of sociology it is a 'taken for granted'. Either that, or else sociologists give scrutiny to friendship among others, but not between themselves. The intellectual culture we inhabit is collective, collegial and cooperative, yet we still behave like possessive individualists, as

though some own or hold the exclusive patents to ideas. Most of what we know comes from somewhere else. (Beilharz 2020: 1) On ya! Whilst universities worldwide feed themselves smiles about the need for greater international collaboration to solve grand global challenges (they're right), they've become too detached from those academic lives they imagine exist solely to be administered to see and so value the need to sustain those vital friendships that lead to all 'the good stuff'. What makes these strange lives of ours worth the trouble of living them. Without friendship, what can we ever truly learn about ourselves and each other? Most of what we know comes from somewhere else.

And so, Peter on the page became Peter with a pint became Peter my friend. A smile right around the world. So, raise your glasses... to Peter the Great.

References

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Biographical Statement: