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In Pursuit of the Sociological Imagination: Zygmunt Bauman as Reader

Critical Sociology

1–4

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journals.sagepub.com/home/crs**David Beer** 

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Theory and Society: Selected Writings, Volume 3, by Zygmunt Bauman, edited and introduced by Campbell T, Brzeziński D, Davis M and Palmer J, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2024; 280 pp., \$22.10 (paper). ISBN: 9781509550784

‘I, only I am the observer of the ground floor’. That was Franz Kafka’s (2022) verdict in a diary-entry dated 23 September 1912, just 2 days after the overnight writing session that produced the famous short story ‘The Judgment’ (p. 242). This, it would seem, despite it being only a single-line entry in a personal diary full of eccentricities, could be a self-assessment of Kafka’s own perspective on the world, a perspective that undoubtedly found its way into his stories. This line hints at Kafka’s almost sociological, maybe even ethnographic, take on modernity. In those stories, a stifling closeness competes with the disconcertingly distant. Frustration and awkwardness arise from the uncertainty. Zygmunt Bauman’s brief reference to Kafka in a 1971 essay on the ‘Uses of Information’ – which is one of the pieces gathered in an illuminating new collection of Bauman’s (2023) selected writings on theory and society – would suggest that he recognized some synergy in their perspectives. He noted how Kafka focused on the ‘total lack of knowledge of the intentions of the other side’ (Bauman, 2024: 51). With this as inspiration, Bauman reflected on how power can operate through ‘lofty’ distance, the unintelligibility of rules and a lack of information.

It should be made clear from the outset that this new book is no greatest hits compilation. Often when works are assembled in collections they have an air of familiarity. They are usually oriented toward well-known ideas or the biggest hits. This third and final volume of selected writings is more like having a new album to listen to. That freshness is a consequence of the chapters being mostly either unreleased or hard-to-find tracks. Of the 12 pieces gathered together, 4 were found among the papers in Bauman’s archive, 1 of those was on a floppy disk and 1 on a USB drive (giving a little hint as to the materiality of Bauman’s everyday writing practices), 4 have been translated from the original Polish by Katarzyna Bartoszyńska, 3 were in edited collections, and the remaining piece was a journal article. The editors have genuinely edited.

For those not familiar with Bauman’s work, the well-appointed editorial introduction to the collection is a good place to start for intellectual context and biography (for more on this see also Best, 2024). As the editors explain in the opening chapter, Bauman was forced to leave Poland in

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1968 and ended up settling in Leeds, which is where the archive behind this volume and the previous two collections, on the topics of ‘culture and art’ (Bauman, 2021) and ‘history and politics’ (Bauman, 2023), is located. I suspect *Liquid Modernity* (2000), a wide-ranging take on the move from fixed and heavy forms of modernity to something less solid and more mobile, is probably the best known and most influential of his many books. As Bauman summarized in a 2004 interview with Nick Gane (2004), ‘an attribute that makes liquids an apt metaphor for our times, is the intrinsic inability of fluids to hold their shape for long on their own’ (p. 19). The vision of the fluids and flows of consumer capitalism chimed and the book was highly influential. At the point of its publication, Bauman was already well into his 70s and had built a following for his works on questions of modernity and postmodernity throughout the previous two decades. This collection shows the evolution of his thought over time.

The pieces gathered start in 1961, with a detailed review of Mills’ *The Sociological Imagination*, and end in 2012 with a reflective piece on the contribution of Cultural Studies at Birmingham. These chapters populate the gaps between the books and address the blindspots in how Bauman’s work is seen and understood. They demonstrate his unfading enthusiasm for ideas. The short takes on display here differ in focus to the longer and more sprawling books. Although, in terms of approach, it often seemed like Bauman’s continuous writings were periodically interrupted by the insertion of book covers, containing them within a single text when they were actually part of an ongoing series. Stylistically, on the surface, these selected pieces may be shorter contributions, but they are actually also part of that ongoing flow of thought. Bauman was a writer of streams rather than of contained and discrete items. To use his terminology, his writing followed a similar liquid logic to the conditions of modernity he attempted to make his object of study.

This new collection shows what he was reading and engaging with as he negotiated the intellectual terrain and forged his own ideas. In these pieces we find *Bauman the reader* as well as Bauman the thinker. He is engaging with various texts and authors, exploring the ramifications and possibilities of the ideas. In this regard, one standout feature is that the depth of the influence of C. Wright Mills becomes more visible. As mentioned, the first piece featured in the collection is a 1961 review of Mills’ 1959 classic *The Sociological Imagination*. This is no coincidence. Bauman reacted fairly rapidly, in academic publishing terms at least, to the release of the book. He must have read Mills’ text fairly soon after its publication and drafted a detailed review article quite quickly after that. It seems to have sparked something that continued to fire Bauman’s imagination.

The interest and appeal of Mills’ core ideas on sociology and imagination from that book permeates through the pieces in this collection, showing the ongoing influence of both the mode of working and the sensibility that Mills communicated. That early review, which is one of the pieces translated from Polish, might also shed light on how Bauman formulated his own major contributions over the years. These selected writings, as well as Bauman’s wider works, could all be regarded as an attempt to engage with Mills’ ‘promise’ of sociology. Reading Mills early in his career seems to have set Bauman off on a lifelong pursuit of the sociological imagination. In that book Bauman seemed to find, as Back and Gane (2013) have identified as its enduring legacy, a ‘way of practicing intellectual life as an attentive and sensuous craft but also as a moral and political project’ (p. 404).

This new career spanning selection of writings show Bauman in an unending pursuit of the sociological imagination and the promise it holds. In one case this leads him to questions of probability and future likelihoods. In another, it pushes him to consider how and why a sociologist might conceptualize change. There is the problem of narrative explored too. The question of how to develop a ‘humanist sociology’ is another option explored in one of these pieces, which is an approach that is actually implicit throughout too. The result is a lively collage of insights into sociological thought, many of which still seem highly relevant to the discipline today.

Alongside this there is a sensitivity to the changing craft of the sociologist. Bauman saw wider social and cultural developments as posing a challenge to sociological thought itself. From this perspective, sociologists, it would seem, would have to adjust their thinking to respond to the social forces and events taking place around them. Take this conclusion from a 1999 essay on theories of change:

Claims such as ‘social change is the root of sociology’ or ‘every sociological theory must consider change sooner or later’ do not grasp, therefore, the enormity and radicalism of the ‘changes in the status of change’ taking place today, and especially the changes in the system of thinking in which the concept of change is located and from which it derives meaning. (Bauman, 2024: 134)

For Bauman, the sociologist not only needs to engage with change but also needs to rethink what change itself is and how it is conceptualized. The very frameworks in which conceptions of change are produced needs itself to be open to change. As he puts it, the status of change has changed, along with its meaning. Bauman’s suggestion is that those changed meanings need to be factored into theories and analyses of change itself. Admittedly, that sounds quite a challenge. It would require the immersed sociologist, pushed-and-pulled themselves by these changing forces and meanings, to obtain some analytical distance and perspective.

Retaining this theme of situating the thinker in the same conditions as their objects of study, elsewhere Bauman pictures the sociologist as being swept along in liquid modernity. They are exposed to the same wider currents. He explains that ‘living in a liquid-modern setting calls for, and ultimately consists of, an incessant flow of reflexivity’ (Bauman, 2024: 154). And so for the sociologist’s craft:

to be effectively and consequentially present and in such a habitat, sociology must conceive of itself as a participant (perhaps better informed, more systematic, more rule-conscious, yet nevertheless a participant) of never-ending self-reflexive process of interpretation, and devise its strategy accordingly. (Bauman, 2024: 154)

What might such a strategy look like? It remains hard to fully picture. Bauman is quite gently presenting the reader with a question that could unsettle a whole discipline. Mills’ (2000) challenge to explore the relations between biography and history, between the larger scene and the inner life, between the personal and structural, seems to still be working on Bauman here, especially as he also wants to place the sociologist themselves within that same dilemma (pp. 5–8). The circumstances inevitably impact the imagination. The imagination itself is exposed to and shaped by those same public troubles. It is one step to think of the sociologist as participant rather than outside observer, it is another to then think of the craft of sociology responding to this perceived liquid modern context of incessant self-reflexivity. Though, with the presence of data and analytic processes being embedded so far into individual and social life (Beer, 2019), it may be that Bauman actually saw something on the horizon that has indeed come to pass, even if not quite in the way imagined.

All of this may represent something of a challenge of the imagination. Bauman (2024) impresses it with some urgency too, claiming that ‘much of the success or failure of the interpretation-targeted public dialogue hangs on sociology acquitting itself of the task of stretching the cognitive horizons of interpretive effort’ (p. 167). The next layer he adds to this line of argument is that sociology is not only exposed to change it is also part of how it happens, and so the discipline is wrapped up in the forces of change that it seeks to analyze. Bauman (2024) argues, for example, that ‘inserted . . . in the competitive struggle over the substance and shape of world visions, sociology cannot but carve itself upon the reality which it investigates; it transforms the human world as it goes on examining its credentials’ (p. 164). Sociology, as has been commented by others (see, for

example, Savage, 2010), is part of social change, it is part of the knowledge that frames the social world it studies and therefore potentially influences the changes that occur. For this reason, Bauman (2024) concludes, ‘the logic of sociology leads inescapably to transgression’ (p. 163). In its very practice and objectives, he contends, ‘Sociology cannot but trespass, continuously and resolutely’ (Bauman, 2024: 163) on the line drawn between academic study and, on the other side, experiences of those being studied. Bauman’s sociological imagination might appear to be overarching and even comforting in its stylistically conversational tone, yet it is also fraught in its tangles with the craft and the possibilities of releasing its promise in shifting conditions.

When it comes to sociologists telling themselves stories about sociology, there is a note of warning raised by Bauman. In a 1994 piece, he points out that we should:

approach the self-definitions of social scientists as one does all other self-definitions: with caution. This is how they narrate their purposes and practices; this does not, however, make their version more reliable than the narratives of others. (Bauman, 2024: 108)

The stories we tell ourselves about our sociological craft are imbued with attempts to give ourselves purpose. Which leads to a further question: If Kafka was observing the ground floor, as he claimed, then what floor was Bauman the observer of? Certainly not the ground floor. The perspective seems much higher and encompassing. Yet, Bauman remained very much closer to the ground than to the lofty and unintelligible distance found in Kafka’s notorious depiction of the castle. Perhaps, Bauman was to be found in the elevator, moving scales and panoramas. It would seem that for Bauman the sociological imagination is something to be pursued rather than reached. This, in part at least, is because the social world in which it is entangled is also changing. Bauman was seeking a contextually enlivened sociological imagination. The implicit contingency of such a task means that it can never be reached, it can only ever be sought. As fitting with Bauman’s observation on the continual and lifelong seeking of identity in liquid modernity, with the sociological imagination too we are prevented ‘from ever finishing the search’ (Bauman in Gane, 2004: 33).

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