

Learner, beware! Clutching tightly to the knowledge you've gained and habits you've acquired spells trouble to come. Irony, distance, non-commitment, and above all, an awareness of the 'until further noticeness' of truths is one of those few pieces of advice of the current version of reason that should – indeed – be taken seriously. (p. 108)

I am tempted to say that this is an inimitable way of expressing yourself. His readers should perhaps give more attention to the proposition that Bauman is as much a great writer of English prose as a great sociologist. His acute interest in being understood well is of course a crafty counterpoint to the trained incapacity that he regards to be an 'unwholesome', 'unwelcome' feature of too many degree programmes in Sociology today. Bauman resists the cliché and the formulaic. This is both why the best social scientists see him as 'required reading' and why he does not have a recognizable 'school' of followers. Bauman is in the line of Simmel and Goffman, in being a virtuoso sociologist.

This is a refreshing book which offers a different kind of 'sociological imagination' to that offered by Wright Mills and Intro writers. Unwaveringly, it defines sociology as a moral discipline and identifies moral force as its crowning objective. The questions from Michael-Hviid Jacobsen and Keith Tester are well selected and call upon Bauman to draw upon his erudition and humanity. We live in difficult times. But Bauman's answers reveal, not a mind at the end of its tether, but a formidable and admirable entity in full command of its material and responsibilities. There is only one Zygmunt Bauman.

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Zygmunt Bauman's conversations with Michael Hviid Jacobsen and Keith Tester in *What Use is Sociology?* explore a complex set of issues regarding contemporary sociology: the point of sociology in the new century; its contents and methods; the prospects of sociological practice. With the discipline facing a period of full-blown crisis, the book offers some non-conventional angles on sociology. At the same time it encapsulates the themes and methods that characterize Bauman's vast intellectual output – from his interest in human experience in its various manifestations, to his key ethical and political commitment; from his affinity with an approach based on sociological imagination, to his preference for what he terms 'sociological hermeneutics' (which in his vision coincides with sociology in general). The encounter between these two analytical levels proves to be a fertile one, offering vivid insights into the exploration of sociology that has characterized Bauman's lengthy – almost half a century – and rich intellectual career. Withstanding changes in time and place, this rapport highlights a vision of sociology as a form of knowledge that cannot be regimented; that is alien to the dynamics of power, and inherently critical. This is a vision that links Bauman to his Polish teachers, Ossowski and Hochfeld: he continues to share their belief that sociology is a form of knowledge capable of increasing individuals' range of action, and ultimately, their level of freedom. And he also shares their opposition to sociological practices with an explicit managerial or technocratic orientation, which fetishize 'data' as such.

It is this last type of sociology, in Bauman's view, that is now undergoing an irreversible crisis. While in solid modernity sociology identified with and serviced managerial

reason, becoming one of its tools of un-freedom, today things are different. Within the accelerated and fragmented processes of social change now under way, far removed from any kind of teleological framework, sociology can – in an apparently paradoxical way – adopt the semblance of a ‘technology of freedom’ and present itself as a source of ‘ethical activism’.

This situation can arise when social transformations (including the second managerial revolution) are pointing in the direction of increasing individualization. In this context, sociology’s agenda changes. According to Bauman, new imperatives for sociology include fostering individual self-fulfilment; contributing to producing knowledge capable of replacing the enforced responsabilization of neoliberalism – the need to offer individual solutions to systemic problems – with the exercise of moral responsibility, and supporting fundamental human values like autonomy, dignity, freedom and justice. By ‘defamiliarizing the familiar [. . .] and familiarizing [. . .] the unfamiliar’ (p. 98), sociology contributes to challenging what is habitually taken for granted in everyday life, and thus deemed set in stone. Sociological imagination supports this. The dialogue underpinning it between biography and history elicits creativity and curbs passive acceptance of the status quo. In this way politics and sociology, at least in principle, can resume some kind of dialogue.

It is no coincidence that dialogue is a central theme of the book. The dialogue between Bauman and his two interlocutors highlights a conception of sociology that is itself a form of dialogue with human experience. This dialogue makes it possible to initiate an analysis of the cultural, social and historic determinants of action, the ultimate aim of which is to combat the degeneration of the human condition. By entering into a critical, ongoing dialogue with the human condition, sociology enters into contact with its distinctive ‘objects’, namely men and women, and their life strategies. It thus in turn forges a close dialogue with these ‘objects’, which has the aim – here Bauman uses an allegory borrowed from Milan Kundera – of “tearing through the curtains” that hide the realities from view by covering them up with fraudulent representations’ (p. 29).

This literary reference is not a random inclusion. To repair the relationship between micro- and macro-social aspects, between *Lebenswelt* and social system, Bauman seeks to introduce literature and other ‘non scientific’ languages (including his well-known use of metaphor as a tool of theoretical analysis, which also crops up here). Inherently eclectic, like the analytical avenues it opens up, this approach breaks down the barriers between academic disciplines and mingles sociological reflection, existential analysis and moral considerations, favouring critical investigation.

To conclude: is the profile of sociology and sociological practice that the book sketches destined to retain the unique, unmistakable imprint of Zygmunt Bauman’s sociology, or can it also offer a possible model for those who, like Bauman, have faith in the critical, emancipating rationality of sociology? What theoretical and methodological indications can this text offer to younger generations of sociologists? The answer, as is often the case, is a multilayered one. In my view, there will be broad agreement with his criticism of the inability of a considerable portion of academic sociology to tackle the challenges generated by the processes of change in progress, and his emphasis on the need to rethink the programmes, language and methods of a sociology that wishes to restore a connection with the public arena (Buroway). On the other hand,

I find his dismissal of the importance of research funding for sociological practice (p. 112) unrealistic and ungrounded. To offer a concrete example: this very year, and on more than one occasion, the European sociological community has taken a stand against the substantial cuts in funding for social sciences in the new European Research Programme Horizon 2020. The cuts are a clear sign of how Europe's technocrats disregard the theoretical and empirical forms of investigation performed by sociology and the other social sciences.