**What is it to ‘Think Sociologically’?**

REVIEW- Zigmunt Bauman’s ‘**Thinking sociologically**’


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Reading Zigmunt Bauman’s *Thinking Sociologically*, to do a book review for an assignment at La Trobe University (Australia) as requested by Prof. Peter Beilharz, (lecturer of the unit *Current Issues in Sociology*), helped answer a question that had bothered me for quite some time. Since I became a student of sociology, whenever I meet a person from a different field of study to that of the Social Sciences, he/she would ask me, ‘what are you studying?’ When I say ‘sociology’, the dreaded question immediately follows, ‘Oh really, what do you study in sociology?’ Then I mumble, ‘well, you know, sociology is the study of society, cultures, various institutions like politics, religion etc. etc.’, wondering to myself whether this is all sociology really means to me! Reading the introduction was such a relief because it made me realize that it was alright to be confused about the subject matter of sociology. Because it is hard to draw the boundaries of relevance in this discipline as its scope is quite wide; so wide that it includes almost everything that concerns humans. Also it made me realize that it is hard to explain to an ordinary person what sociology studies, since it is the same matters that he/she thinks and talks about, only difference being it’s looked at in a different light. After all sociology all about us, the ordinary people!

Bauman states that ‘sociology’ is “first and foremost, a *way of thinking* about the human world” (Bauman 1990, p. 8). And all the raw material for sociological findings is derived from ordinary human experiences. “Anything sociology talks about was already there in our lives” (Bauman 1990, p.10). Thus Bauman proves the impossibility to study sociological phenomena with complete objectivity, as a sociologist too is at first, part of this ordinary human world. And he also emphasises the fact that “sociological discourse” is “wide open”. Bauman believes that thinking sociologically would make us more “sensitive” to our lives and the lives of other people and help us understand the universality of human experiences of happiness, sorrow, desire, disappointments, misery etc.
This essay is an attempt to understand what thinking sociologically really is by reviewing Zigmunt Bauman’s book “Thinking sociologically” which was first published in 1990. This review will take the reader through a summery and review of the significant points of each chapter of the book on everyday aspects of human life. I trust that this would create an interest to read this book, as I feel that this simple, easy to understand book carries a lot of depth to help a student of sociology to understand what thinking sociologically is all about!

First let me briefly summarize one main point Bauman talks of which I found particularly interesting, in order to give you a head start of what is to come. While reading the book, one of the key points which seemed to be screaming out to me was his concept of ambiguity; the uncertainty of the grey area between the black and the white in human interaction; the space-in-between which makes it ever so difficult to draw the line between two extremes. Bauman in almost every chapter explains how much of human interaction occurs within this space and how hard we try to classify them into a controllable and predictable category; either ‘us or them’, ‘together or apart’, ‘friend or foe’, ‘order or chaos’. Anything in between is hard to explain, difficult to define, and is frustratingly unpredictable! Therefore, we don’t want anything in between the seemingly opposing, distinct categories, and try as much as we could to eliminate any. Bauman explains how all such attempts are in vain because there is no escape from this ambiguity. An attempt to dissolve one would inevitably lead to another.

**Chapter One- Freedom and Dependence**

Bauman enters his discussion on the first topic observing that “being free” and “unfree” at the same time is maybe the “most common” and “most confusing” of our experiences. Bauman states that “freedom means the ability to decide and choose” (Bauman 1990, p. 20). Our sense of freedom is conditioned by many aspects. Generally others’ right to freedom put constraints on ours’. My choice to read a book may not be successful due to the contradiction of my nephew’s freedom to scream at the top of his lungs. Bauman says in order to experience my freedom I need resources to fulfil my choice over others’. “I may find out that freedom to act on my wishes depends not on what I do, or not even on what I have, but on what I am” (Bauman 1990, p. 22). Bauman says that the process of socialization in order to belong to a particular group would make me dependent on it to experience my freedom. Our sense of dependency puts constraints on our freedom. For an example, the values and norms (for instance; gender roles, ways of addressing people etc.) we learn with time, through the socialization process, would be different to those of another country. When left alone in a different setting, we may feel rather uncomfortable and be unable to grasp these value systems quickly, which those within that particular society so easily take for granted. In such a situation such external factors may put constraints on us from being ourselves. We could say that we are dependent on our own culture and society to feel free and be who we are. This explains why we sometimes go about doing things we may not like to do, because we are dependent on them to obtain something else.

**Chapter two- Us and Them**

Bauman explains the concept of ‘us’ and ‘them’ as not just two separate groups of people, but as “the distinction between two totally different attitudes- between emotional attachment and antipathy, trust and suspicion, security and fear, cooperativeness and pugnacity” (Bauman 1990, p. 40). Bauman compares this
distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ to that between ‘in-group’ and ‘out-group’ in sociology. Bauman says that these two groups are inseparable and that this “mutual conflict” conditions their existence. Bauman talks of the importance of the idea of an ‘out-group’ for the “cohesiveness”, “integration”, “solidarity”, “self identity” and “emotional security” of the in-group. “There must be an ‘out’ for the ‘in’ to be truly appreciated” (Bauman 1990, p. 42). Our feelings towards the ‘out group’ are generally edged with prejudice and antagonism.

Chapter Three- Strangers

Bauman’s definition of a stranger is quite interesting. In general terms we would think a stranger is a person we no nothing of. But Bauman states that a stranger is person we know a little of, a person who is “bound to come time and again, uninvited, into my field of vision” (Bauman 1990, p.54). Bauman says if we didn’t know anything about them, they wouldn’t be ‘strangers’, but “nobodies” (Bauman 1990, p.55). Bauman states that because we “note their presence”, and since we know so little about them it is hard “to make sense of them”. “They are, as it were, neither close nor distant. Neither a part of ‘us’ nor a part of ‘them.’ For this reason, they cause confusion and anxiety” (Bauman 1990, p.55). “With enemies we fight, friends we like and help; but what about people who are neither? Or who can be both?” (Bauman 1990, p. 56). Bauman talks about the discomfort people feel when things or people are not in the spaces originally allocated to them, and even more upsetting when ambiguity makes placing them in the social and physical world difficult.

Chapter Four- Together and Apart

Bauman discusses the concepts of “together” and “apart” with relation to the “community” and the “organization”. Bauman defines community as a “group in which factors which unite people are stronger and more important than anything which may divide it. Bauman contrasts the organization which “absorbs only part of the persons involved”, to the community, where the members are expected to belong
to “body and soul” (Bauman 1990, p. 78-79). In an organization what is important is not the person but the “skill” they have to “perform” the assigned role. This creates the limits to their attachment to the organization. However, Bauman concludes that the two models, of the community and the organization, are not adequate to explain the practise of human interaction. “The two models sketch artificially separated, polar models of action, with separate and often opposite motives and expectations. “Real human action, under real circumstances, resent such a radical division” (Bauman 1990, p. 84). Here again it is repeated how hard it is to separate and classify human interaction and behaviour by drawing distinct boundaries.

Chapter Five- Gift and Exchange

In this chapter Bauman talks about how human interactions are predominantly depended on the principles of “gift” and “equivalent exchange”. He explains the two types in its “pure form, as models.” He says that exchange interactions occur in informal relationships, while gift transactions occur in more personal ones. Bauman states that in contemporary society where people need to engage in numerous exchange interactions, in which they play specific and different roles according to the different situations, the need for personal relationships is more “poignant and acute”. Connecting Georg Simmel’s idea on the need of personal relationships for the realization of “self identity”, Bauman stresses the importance of personal relationships for the human’s perception of the “I”, among the various “Me’s” they play in all their impersonal relationships. In the latter part of the chapter Bauman talks about the issues and pressures on and in love relationships in this complex society, when elements of exchange, which is the need for “reciprocity”, creeps into relationships, as opposed to unconditional gift transactions. Thus he explains that most relationships are “impure, and mix the two models in varying proportion,” and that “love and exchange are two extremes of a continuous line along which all human relations may be plotted” (Bauman 1990, p.106).
Chapter Six- *Power and Choice*

Bauman starts this chapter with the discussion of the alternative choice we have to all the things we do. We generally perceive a person as the decision-maker of his own acts. But this may not always be the case. Bauman explains that certain acts we perform are not “outcomes of a decision-making process” (Bauman 1990, p.109). Actions that do not involve calculated decision making, such as “habitual behaviour” or “affective behaviour” are described as “irrational”. According to Bauman, in conscious decision making, we consider our “resources” and “values” and probable outcomes before we choose our actions. Our degree of freedom depends on these “resources and values” (Bauman 1990, p.113). Bauman says that the difference of the “degree of freedom” among people is the basis of social inequality in the world. This is also often referred to as “difference in power” (Bauman 1990, p.113). The range of choice available to a person widens if he/she has more power. Bauman also talks about the effect of “influence” and “authority” over one’s freedom of choice. He says that “influence” directly affects our “values” and we come into contact with it through social interaction. He also talks about the impact of “traditional”, “charismatic” and “legal rational” “authority”, in the spheres of religion, politics, mass media etc. on our choice in decision making. An important point Bauman brings up in this chapter is that when the “morality” of certain decisions becomes an issue the justifications of action through “authority” make individuals free from the burden of moral judgement based on their choice of action (Bauman 1990, p.124).

Chapter Seven- *Self-preservation and Moral Duty*

In this chapter it is quite interesting how Bauman explains “self-preservation”, which is a seemingly self-centred concept, actually has a social aspect to it. He says that our need to self-preservation through the acquisition or “ownership” of certain “goods” we are “deprived” of brings other people to the picture. Bauman says that self-preservation actually strengthens our ties with other people, as we are generally dependent on them for the fulfilment of these needs. He says “ownership” is also a “social affair”, because it involves the “exclusion” of other people from accessing that
particular good. “This is mine” means “it is not yours” (Bauman 1990, p.126). Bauman says that self-preservation of “scarce” “goods”, through self-interest and competition, points to the opposite direction to “moral duty”, because “morally motivated action” puts the needs of others before one’s needs. Bauman further states that in a rational organization, the tasks of every member is reduced to a simple choice of obeying or refusing to obey a command, which relieve people from “moral doubts” (Bauman 1990, p.132). Bauman concludes the chapter saying that “self-preservation” and “moral duty” stands in opposition to each other.

Chapter Eight- Nature and Culture

Bauman defines “culture” as a change initiated by humans and “nature” as something that “stays beyond human power” (Bauman 1990, p. 143). Bauman states that culture is a “preference” and that it regards other alternatives as “inferior, or altogether disorderly”. Taking an example of how a gardener weeds the garden to maintain order, to explain how cultures are initially formed, Bauman says that the skills and the tools the gardener already has draws limits to his scope of imagination. What he is suggesting here maybe that culture is an artificial social structure, which gives no room for change. Considering the skills and tools Bauman refers to as technology and scientific advancements, one could argue that a culture could be open for these changes, yet the morals and value systems brought forward since the past maybe the ones that are most suitable for the members who belong to that particular culture and therefore may not necessarily need to be changed. Even though “tools and skills” may be in need of advancement, the human interactions, perceptions, relationships would be predominantly the same throughout time as these are uniquely ‘humane’. In today’s world to follow ones’ culture is seen as going back in time, but this should not necessarily be the case. It is possible for world cultures to ‘move forward’ along innovation and technological advancements, and yet preserve their own ways of life that are the most suited in almost everyway for those members of that particular culture. Bauman says that culture is most affective when it is disguised as nature, and when it is not questioned as to whether it is the right possible “order.” But the fact is
that people are exposed to various cultures and ultimately, conforming to one particular culture seems to rely on personal choice.

Chapter Nine- State and Nation

Bauman says that being subject to the power of the state gives a “combination of rights and duties” to a person, which simultaneously makes he/she feel “protected and oppressed” (Bauman 1990, p. 163). The asymmetrical relationship between the state and the subject, where the state maintains more power is bound to create tension and feelings of distrust among the subjects. This makes the need for legitimation of the state pivotal, to develop “unconditional allegiance to the state” (Bauman 1990, p. 169). This naturally promotes strong feelings of “patriotism” to one’s state. Thinking along these conceptions one could question the situation of migrants in a particular state. In a state (in which “order” and “obedience” are vital for its smooth running) would migrants, who wouldn’t develop a ‘sense of belonging’ to the state, find the urge to make sacrifices and abide by rules and policies they do not “approve” of, simply to contribute to the betterment and smooth flow of the state? For an example, would they want to cut down on consumption of a scarce resource of the state out of moral obligation and sense of sacrifice, and not over-consume simply because they can ‘afford’ it? One could assume this kind of patriotism may be evoked in a “national-state”, which Bauman defines as a “state which can fully identify with one nation” (Bauman 1990, p. 170). But yet again, individual differences may foster and adversely affect the unity and order, as even within a nation there bound to be differences based on various aspects, for example; regional dialects, or caste. However Bauman concludes the chapter saying the merging of nation and state in many countries of the world has proven its convenience in maintaining order and unity.

Chapter Ten- Order and Chaos

In this chapter Bauman discusses how “social order” is actually a “human product”. He describes “human order” as “a subject of art, knowledge and technology”
Therefore “order” is, as opposed to the “natural”, something which is created and controlled by humans, and it refers to a situation where things occur in an orderly fashion, as expected. Absence of such familiar order is considered “chaos” by people, and not as an “alternative order”. Bauman says that only the “vigilant management of human affairs” seems to stand between order and chaos. He says that this “dichotomy” of trying to classify the complexity of human situations into two distinct parts is “ill suited” (Bauman 1990, p.184). And that this attempt itself creates much “ambivalence”. People create artificial boundaries to distinguish what is right and wrong; orderly and chaotic; trying as much as possible not to leave room for ambiguity—“one either does or does not belong to this body; there is no third possibility, no intermediate status, no ambiguity” (Bauman 1990, p.186). The uncertainty of this ‘grey’ area between ‘black and white’ upsets people. Therefore in society to build order means to “wage war against ambiguity”. But, Bauman says that each of these attempts to create order and avoid ambiguity in society would bring forth “new types of ambiguity” and that “the victory of order over chaos is never total or final” (Bauman 1990, p. 183, 193). Along these thought one could wonder the validity of the modern legal system. If there could be a right in every wrong and a wrong in every right, how can we point at one and say its right or wrong and decide on punishment?

Chapter Eleven- Going about the Business of Life

At the beginning of this chapter Bauman talks about how dependent we have become on technology as we have become so accustomed to using them. Since we can not seem to be able to do without these modern technologies, we have developed a “need” for it. Increasing complexity of these technologies alienates ordinary man from them. This “need” Bauman says was not natural; it was a “new type of need”. “These new technological objects (for example, television) did not replace old ways of doing things; they induced us to do things we never did before, and made us fell unhappy if we did not do them” (Bauman 1990, p.199). This was why Bauman explains why the “demand” for new products comes only “after” their introduction. Bauman also explains how this never-satisfying “consumer attitude” is further reinforced through
the advertising agencies, and how this in the modern world has given new meanings to ‘poverty’, ‘social position’, ‘identity’, ‘inequality’, ‘happiness’ and ‘power’, based on individuals’ ability to possess these commodities. His theorising in this chapter conveys to the reader the irrationality of most of our purchasing decisions and how we, humans, have trapped ourselves in this world of technology and consumerism, we ourselves have created.

Chapter Twelve- The Ways and Means of Sociology

In this final chapter Bauman talks about sociology as a science and its service to the social sciences. Reminding us once again his words at the beginning of the book he says that sociology simply provides us with a “commentary” to our daily experiences; a “refinement of that knowledge we possess and employ in our daily life” (Bauman 1990, p.214). Bauman says that it has been said that “the best service sociology may offer is to ‘prod sluggish imagination’- by showing apparently familiar things from unexpected angles” (Bauman 1990, p. 215). Bauman says that sociology can evoke a scientific investigation of social aspects, leading to descriptions, explanations and even predictions, as is expected of “scientific knowledge”. He also stresses on the changeability of the subject matter under study in sociology, and says that “sociology goes further than science”, as it recovers the meaning of the reality it studies” (Bauman 1990, p. 224). Concluding his final chapter Bauman emphasises the greatest service of sociology to human life, which is “the promotion of mutual understanding and tolerance as a paramount condition of shared freedom” (Bauman 1990, p.232). Bauman believes that “sociological thinking helps the cause of freedom” (Bauman 1990, p.232).

Final thoughts...

Thus we see how Sociological Thinking is useful to describe and explain aspects of human world, and to make us appreciate things we take for granted and make bearable the things we take far too seriously in everyday life. This introductory
textbook is indeed a must read for all who are interested in sociology, and also everyone else as it makes us understand clearly the ambiguities in classifications and generalizations of social aspects. It reminds us again and again the changeability of the subject matter under study, and how that very fact makes it so interesting to try and understand. But just as Bauman states in the introduction, sociology identifies and explains problems to broaden our understanding of it, rather than give a solution for it. Final question one could dwell on would be *are we supposed to find the solution and fix it, or just understand it and accept things as they are...*