

book review

Bauman Pours Out Culture

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Zygmunt Bauman
Culture in a Liquid Modern World
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One of the most interesting aspects of Zygmunt Bauman's prolific writing is that he always has fresh things to say. Even the central premise of 'liquid modernity' in his recent works continues to be approached in new ways. For those committed and energetic enough to keep up with Bauman's writing, *Culture in a Liquid Modern World* is consistent with much of his contemporary work and again an innovation. This book has been commissioned by the National Audiovisual Institute in Poland for the 2011 European Culture Congress. Originally written in Polish, this English language edition has been translated by one of the author's daughters, Lydia Bauman. The fact that Lydia is an artist dovetails with some of the argument within the book, as does the European focus which resonates with it being penned in the author's mother tongue.

The remarkable thing about this text is that despite being a little over one hundred pages, Bauman tackles some of the most pressing and complex issues regarding culture today. Not content to simply toy with definitions, he expands to look at the politics of difference, the role of globalisation in multiculturalism and the precarious position of art in the market place. The six chapters of the book deal with three key themes on the issue of culture. These can be best summed up as a philosophical exploration of the idea of culture, the sociological realities of living among others of different cultures, and the challenges posed in the pursuit and promotion of culture amid economic globalisation.

The first two chapters engage with the emergence of the idea of culture and its philosophical and political manipulation. We are shown how culture emerged as a way to guide and cultivate citizens and then became a tool in social maintenance. While once cultural pursuits were clearly associated with different classes, culture in a liquid modern world is free of such shackles. Connoisseurs of culture are now typified by their eclecticism and fluidity. This is a reality that Bauman ties in with the caprices of fashion and global markets. He argues that culture has morphed from something that taught and nurtured, to a seductive pursuit that has led us into a cul-de-sac of vapid consumerism. In this account one cannot help but consider the Bauman oeuvre itself, a rapid fire of new titles making previous volumes obsolete and followers eager to get the next slice of cultural critique. Bauman's complicity in this schema is clear and so too is the reader's.

By the close of the second chapter the topics of fashion, identity and culture have been brought together. We are shown that the mechanisms of fashion, to constantly create demand and obsolescence, have been riddled into every aspect of life. The preoccupations of keeping up, Bauman argues, have become a chief distraction from the questions of life. The goal has moved, or more correctly refuses to stop moving. The reward of culture is now not so much in its engagement but in its pursuit.

The central chapters of the book move to a more sociological enquiry of culture and our engagement with difference. It is from this point on the book has a very discernible European character and is a departure from much of Bauman's recent work in English that draws on social commentary in the United Kingdom. This European approach is welcome and provides a contrast to the opening

discussions on culture. Here we find Bauman critiquing the essentialist notions of multiculturalism but still espousing a hopeful account of the ability individuals have to accommodate each other. This optimism only fully makes sense in the final aspects of the text where he advocates high culture, as art, as a way of bringing people together and uniting their common experiences.

The spectre of globalisation is articulated as a contributor to social unrest and the divisions of society. A recurring theme is that of modernity without modernism, the notion that while we have moved to a point in history of continued technological progress we have similarly arrived at a place of spiralling social instability and surmounting inequality.

In Chapter Four, Bauman engages with some thought provoking material on the question of multiculturalism and individual rights. He identifies the inherent value of universalism in the origins of the idea of culture. He then criticises the workings of multiculturalism in that people are divided by their differences rather than brought together by what they have in common. The motif of this attack on multiculturalism moves beyond a call for tolerance and urges an engagement with shared humanity. It is here he discusses the need for confidence in one's own nation and culture in order to be comfortable with that of others. It is only with that ease that cultures can engage and work with one another. Not in the protectionism generated by policies of multiculturalism and the insecurity that they generate. This chapter contrasts with much of the recent work on multiculturalism that has sought to engage and represent the experiences of those (often the working class, the poor, young people, and migrants themselves) who do many of the intercultural transactions in daily life. The street-level reality of multiculturalism is something that Bauman touches on lightly and could do well to ponder more.

The final chapters of the book were to me less fulfilling. They do serve a purpose, though, addressing some very important concerns about culture as it exists in Europe and also the question of stewardship for the arts as the state falls away in significance and the market dominates, yet trivialises the value of art. The artist must walk a precarious tightrope to appease the machine that breathes life to their art (the market) and at the same time be authentic in gravitating beyond such limiting confines. The final two chapters are as well written as any others and they

bravely address issues that would not be included in many books that deal with the scope of ideas contained in this brief volume.

The triumph of this book is that it pulls the reader, who may have a particular idea or interest in culture, towards imaginings and conceptions of culture they may quite commonly avoid or dismiss. Talking about globalisation and multiculturalism side-by-side with the development of state-sanctioned high culture in sixteenth-century France is no mean feat. A valuable book and an embodied self-aware slice of liquid modern culture too.

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Paul O'Connor is an independent researcher interested in everyday life social theory, and religious and ethnic minorities. His book *Islam in Hong Kong: Muslims and Everyday Life in China's World City* will be published in 2012.