

Book Review

Bauman and Contemporary Sociology: A Critical Analysis

By Ali Rattansi

Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press. 2017. 334 pages. \$25.50 paperback, \$115 hardcover. (<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/bauman-and-contemporary-sociology-9781526105875?lang=en&cc=us>)

Reviewer: Michael Strand, *Brandeis University*

Toward the end of his extensive and detailed critical analysis of the work of the late Zygmunt Bauman, Ali Rattansi provides a general point of focus that could serve as a general orientation for the entire book: “trends are more complex, ambivalent and contradictory, as well as subject to more oppositional currents, than Bauman acknowledges” (252). The figure of Zygmunt Bauman does not really loom over sociology or even haunt it. When he passed away in January 2017, the field did not register the event in the same way it did the passing of Peter Berger just a few months later. The global media, however, *did* register it. Obituaries of Bauman were published in countless news outlets around the world: from Fox News, to *Spiked*, to the *Times of India*. Although Rattansi does not try to connect this pattern of bereavement, unusual for a sociologist, to the problems he finds in Bauman’s work, I think that such a link does exist and it does not stretch *too* far to draw one. That Rattansi does not attempt a sociology of Bauman alongside his critical analysis of Bauman’s work (aside from exposing, for the most part convincingly, the “eurocentric, white, male gaze” threaded throughout Bauman’s prolific writing) is the primary fault of a book that should be read by Bauman supporters and skeptics alike.

Rattansi examines Bauman’s work since the 1980s, inclusive of his *anti-modern* phase, his *postmodern* phase, and his *liquid modern* phase. In major and minor works drawn from each period, the main fault that Rattansi finds in Bauman (lack of complexity; little acknowledgment of contradiction, ambivalence, and contestation) holds true. In *Modernity and the Holocaust*, for instance, Bauman gives “overwhelming emphasis to the role of bureaucracy” (76) in facilitating the Holocaust atrocities when, in fact, a “more complex, more apposite reflection on these topics” reveals how “even desk killers knew what they were doing and believed they had good reasons for doing it” (85–86). In *Postmodern Ethics*, Bauman highlights “compassion fatigue ... for misfortunes “we” in the West experience only through selective media images” (176). In fact, however, scholars have found “myriad strategies of denial and disavowal

that individuals use in order to cope with the emotional demands of knowledge of atrocities and natural disasters” (177). In *Liquid Modernity*, Bauman follows a transition from a period in which “both workers and capital were by and large tied to place and forced to confront each other without any route of escape,” a period when rules of behavior were clear and it was “difficult to break out of pre-determined patterns of boundaries,” to a period of constant movement, change, flux and temporary form (from a solid state to a liquid state). Yet, as Rattansi reveals, “what Bauman has to say about the heavy or solid phase of modernity ... applies largely to white males” (210). Other examples proliferate, and in every case Rattansi’s discussion is a model of clarity and erudition. In each phase of Bauman’s long writing career (spanning 57 books and hundreds of articles), Rattansi finds essentially the same thing: Bauman puts a “discussion of [certain issues] on the agenda of sociologists and others in an ethical frame, but his own analysis ... fails to do justice to the complexities involved” (177).

But why? If Rattansi is right, Bauman’s thinking is characterized less by Brownian motion than by habitus-like consistency. Bauman turns out to be a hedgehog rather than a fox. And like a hedgehog, he keeps burying himself in holes. Such a pattern does not suggest that we should look inside the mind and intention of Bauman to explain how so much writing over such a long period of time could be fairly summarized by such a consistent formula, nor that we should *only* look at Bauman’s intersectional profile for answers. Rather, what Rattansi’s analysis largely misses is how Bauman’s distinctive thought style reveals something about the field in which Bauman himself was situated: the field of British sociology for the nearly fifty years that he wrote and taught at the University of Leeds.

To call British sociology a “field” might be a misnomer, as it does not closely resemble the field of American sociology, surely the model system in this case. Yet, Rattansi provides some clues for how we might situate Bauman in this space. Bauman’s oeuvre (especially late in life) was characterized by “repetition and rapid publication.” Some critics noted that “the great degree of verbatim repetition in his works” and his exchanging “*postmodern* for *liquid modern*” suggests an “appearance of newness” that mimicked the consumer culture he loathed, particularly as Polity Press continued to print and sell each newly titled Bauman book (211). Bauman also preferred “newspaper and journalistic accounts and documentaries” to build many of his claims; he was not one to pick up the *BJS*, the *ASR*, or *Social Forces* to provide fuel for his critical diagnoses (229). Bauman also wrote in a literary and compulsively readable style, with a penchant and facility for vivid metaphor (198). Finally, and most notably, Bauman’s collected work reads something less like “an analytical exercise” and something more like a “series of ethical demands [made] on the reader” (15).

I would argue that these traits signal something important about Bauman’s position in the field of British sociology, a unique position that likely only British sociology could produce. It appeared in combination with Bauman’s own trajectory as an ex-Communist, both Polish and Jewish, whose life directly traversed Europe’s many horrors of the twentieth century, and the dispositions this left him with. Clearly Bauman’s work is not produced for only other sociologists to

read. If it were, he could not be so bold and metaphorical, nor his scope so wide and unwieldy. The lack of nuance and complexity (or original data) that, for Rattansi, characterizes Bauman's work means that Bauman would probably not be tenured by a sociology department anywhere today were he to be resurrected by some fountain of youth and do the same thing he did from 1987 to 2017. On the other hand, Bauman's position is also a big part of the story of why his death was something of an event around the world. His work *could* have the sort of large-scale readership that is the antithesis of the scholarly journal. The field of American sociology will likely never produce its own Bauman for this reason. Rattansi's book should make us consider (though he himself does not directly consider it) whether the case of Bauman could in fact be a black mirror for our endarkening times: must the public relevance (and reverence) for a sociologist come at an intellectual price?