

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Zygmunt Bauman and the theory of culture**, by Dariusz Brzeziński, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022, 192 pp., £30.51 (paperback), ISBN-13: 978-0228013976

Dariusz Brzeziński (2022) argues that from his early Polish language publications, rooted in an orthodox Marxist-Leninist vision of society, reflection on the role and purpose of culture was a constant theme in Zygmunt Bauman's sociology. In this book Brzeziński maps the changes and continuities in Bauman's understanding of culture, from the 1950s when Bauman viewed culture as something external to the individual that operated as a mechanism for the transmission of values, routines, and aspirations, providing people with a sense of community and a clearly defined identity.

In common with many other Bauman scholars, Brzeziński places a great deal of emphasis on the importance of Bauman's *Sketches in the Theory of Culture* (2018), a collection of essays originally due to be published in 1968 but confiscated by the Polish authorities as Bauman and his family left Poland for exile. The unpublished manuscript of *Sketches* was later found shortly before Bauman's death and published in 2018. Although several of the essays in *Sketches* were published separately before and after their due publication date, Brzeziński regards *Sketches* as a significant milestone in the development of Bauman's understanding of culture. The essays in the volume take their starting point from Simmel's understanding of the relationship between 'form' and 'content' that was to become central to Bauman's later understanding of culture. In addition, Bauman identified 'innate drives' underpinning the 'cultural mechanisms for organizing the world' into categories that commonly take the form of 'either/or' understandings that suppress ambiguity in the mind of the individual as providing clear meaning or 'semantic unequivocality' within any 'cultural field'.

Bauman gave the name *seme* to the minimum unit of significance that a person can draw upon in transmitting their intended sense of meaning to others and eliminating indeterminateness. The greater the group of people that the individual must engage with in everyday life, the more the *semes* a person needs to orient themselves meaningfully to the group.

Brzeziński is keen to argue that Bauman did not ignore the role of human agency in his understanding of culture: 'Bauman wanted to transcend the binary opposition of determinism and voluntarism' (p. 57), and draws parallels between the work of Bauman on culture in the 1960s with Bourdieu's understanding of 'structural constructivism' and Giddens account of 'structuration' (p. 18)

It is disappointing that Brzeziński did not explore more fully Bauman's attempt to construct a structuration theory as one of the critiques of

Bauman's postmodern and liquid modern turns in sociology was that he undervalued the role of human agency in social life (Best, 2013).

As Bauman came to distance himself from an orthodox Marxist-Leninist vision of society and embrace a more Humanistic Marxian view of the world, his conception of culture made greater reference to Gramsci and to a lesser extent the popular 1960s 'Soviet semiotics' of Popovich and the work of Abramian. Bauman still maintained that individuals think using categories of thought and the content of those categories of thought was derived from the culture of the society. Bauman came to be more aware of the ideological aspect of culture in modernity, identifying how the modern state attempted to replace 'folk' or 'wild' cultures that were assumed by the state to lack logic and coherence with more state-approved ways of behaving and thinking.

As we move into Bauman's Leeds period, following his appointment as professor of Sociology at the University of Leeds in 1970, Bauman lost faith in actually existing socialism in Eastern Europe and came to view socialism as an 'active utopia'. As part of this intellectual transition, praxis, and the ability to transform both the physical and social worlds became central to Bauman's understanding of a Humanistic Marxian conception of culture. The culture system remained a projection of the personality structure and the social structure, with culture understood as the sum-total of signs shared and commonly interpreted within a community (Bauman, 1973). Culture was understood as still having a control function that defines the person's cognitive abilities, goals, and patterns of behaviour. Culture for Bauman (1973) was seen as both a way of ordering and structuring the surroundings of the individual and a way of connecting peoples' behaviour through repetition.

In a very skilful manner Brzeziński draws upon Margaret Archer's understanding of 'conflation', the duality of structure, and analytical dualism to discuss Bauman's claim in the 1970s that culture was: 'simultaneously, the objective foundation of the subjectively meaningful experience and the subjective "appropriation" of the otherwise inhumanly alien world' (Bauman, 1973, p. 117 cited in Brzeziński, 2022, p. 61). By the mid-1970s, Bauman viewed culture as something that was both intersubjective and objective at the same time.

For Bauman (1973) praxis is the thing that makes social life meaningful and intelligible. Bauman's Humanistic Marxism drew upon Berger and Luckman's (1966) concept of habit leading to habituation and the social construction of reality. People are 'epistemological entities,' thinking beings with individual self-interests who form habits when they successfully repeat a social action that has a successful outcome for them. These repetitions become routinised social actions and people come to live with each other in a habituated way.

Bauman himself was very keen throughout the later different phases of his intellectual journey on identifying forces external to the individual such as bureaucratic rationalisation, individualisation, consumption and liquefaction, and the different forms of adiaphorisation (moral indifference and lack of moral responsibility for the Other generated by the neutralising of the individual's moral conscience) associated with solid modernity, postmodernity and

liquid modernity pressing individuals to conform, as little more than properties of modernity rather than attempting to construct a structuration theory. At this point, Brzeziński's argument lacks detail in terms of the finer points of Bauman's analysis and the underpinning rationale of this transition. On the one hand, Brzeziński would like to present Bauman's analysis as containing an active human agent but as Bauman's ideas developed social action became increasingly viewed as determined by forces external to the individual. Consequently, in the last analysis, Brzeziński (2022, p. 40) finds himself quoting Bauman as saying: 'Society is like a billiard table and humans are like billiard balls, they move where they are pushed' (Bauman in Tester & Jacobsen, 2005, p. 89).

As Brzeziński's argument moves towards exploring the more familiar analysis of the relationship between culture and society that Bauman developed in his critique of modernity found in his *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), postmodern and liquid modern turn writing. Brzeziński describes Bauman's account of modern culture as a garden culture. Underpinning modernity is a form of rational order, policed by the state based on a design for an ideal life and the perfect arrangement of people and social life. Bauman (1989) discards the monster hypothesis that identified the causes of the Holocaust as embedded in a form of wickedness generated by vile people fulfilling their evil intent. The Holocaust was not a product of modernity going wrong but rather was a product of state planning, the normal working of modernity underpinned by a form of bureaucratic rationality that encouraged people to view their actions not in terms of the possible moral consequences but in terms of achieving a bureaucratic objective, generating *adiaphora* a neutralisation of the moral constraints of action in the pursuit of a rationally designed order. The uninvited guest, the person who did not fit the garden design such as the conceptual Jew that Bauman had initially explored in *Culture as Praxis* (1973) was viewed as *vis-queux* (Sartre) and slimy (Douglas), construed as outside of the order of things, characterised by boundary transgression, non-conformity and inability to fit into the garden design.

The notion of *adiaphora* is still present in the culture of liquid modernity and Bauman's liquid turn writings but Brzeziński does not explain the transition from moral indifference directed to groups of people such as the conceptual Jew, rooted in the bureaucratic rationality of solid modernity to moral indifference directed to 'flawed consumers' or 'human waste' who are seen to be excluded by their failure to successfully participate in the consumer culture of liquid modernity.

Bauman stated clearly in an interview with Keith Tester and Michael Haviid Jacobsen published in 2005 that the arguments he presented in his Polish language publications from the 1960s derived their inspiration and whatever meaning and significance they had from the trials and tribulations that were internal and specific to Poland at the time they were written. One must wonder if Bauman would have approved of the central arguments that Brzeziński presents in this book. However, in the first part of the book Brzeziński skilfully guides the reader through much material not published in English, together with some unpublished and difficult-to-obtain material. This is the strength of the



book. In addition, the narrow focus on Bauman's intellectual development should be of great interest to Bauman scholars. As a theoretical text, the book is unlikely to appeal to a general audience, or contemporary scholars and theorists of culture given that the understanding of culture has moved on significantly since the time of Bauman's early work.

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**The Greek imaginary: From Homer to Heraclitus. Seminars 1982–1983**, by Cornelius Castoriadis, with supplementary essay by Pierre Vidal-Naquet, edited by Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas, and Pascal Vernay, translated by John V. Garner and Maria-Constanza Garrido Sierralta, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2023, 307 pp., £95 (hardback), ISBN: 9781474475327

With Castoriadis's 'roads beyond Marx', ancient Greek thought became increasingly important to his intellectual trajectory. It became a central source for his elaboration of the project of autonomy, and, from 1970 onwards, there were repeated waves of systematic immersion in central works of key thinkers that shaped his social theory and political philosophy. Castoriadis found sources of inspiration in Aristotle (and, more implicitly, in Protagoras) but he pursued a trenchant critical engagement with Plato, who figured as not only anti-democratic but whose thought was considered the antithesis of all that made Greece. We see this already in Castoriadis's best-known work, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (first published in 1975) in which he critiqued Plato's