

BOOK REVIEWS

Tony Blackshaw: *Zygmunt Bauman*. London: Routledge (2005), 170 pages.

A review of Tony Blackshaw's *Zygmunt Bauman* could start just like most articles on books summarizing the work of the retired professor of the University of Leeds do: here is the next position bringing readers closer to Zygmunt Bauman's life, output and contribution to modern humanistic sociology. The book has been published in a book series of *Key Sociologists* edited by Peter Hamilton. As the initiator of the series emphasizes, it is addressed above all to sociology students and is supposed to present figures of founders of sociology and significant thinkers of the discipline. Zygmunt Bauman is thus put into the company of Émile Durkheim, Georg Simmel, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Max Weber, representatives of the Frankfurt School, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu.

In *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, in the issue dedicated to Zygmunt Bauman on the occasion of his 80th birthday, Elżbieta Neyman describes her relationship (and that of one of her colleagues) with this great thinker—their teacher and leader in the world of science in the 1950s and 1960s; a relationship admirable and enviable to anyone dedicated to science—a master-disciple relationship.¹ Probably a spirit of this relationship can also be found in Tony Blackshaw's book—he treats Bauman as his master. Such an approach affects the narration process and description of the personality and work of the outstanding sociologist. In the course of his book, Blackshaw uses the following expressions to describe him: 'superstar,' 'good story teller,' and says: "Bauman awakes the sleeping sociologists in all of us" (p. 2).

The potential recipient of the book is very important here. As I have mentioned before, the editors address the book to social sciences students or anyone who might be interested in the profile of the described thinker. The book, according to these intentions, tries to present the immensity of Zygmunt Bauman's work, his perception and assessment of the contemporary world, in an easily approachable way. It can be said straight away that this aim has been reached. Let's then have a closer look now at which parts of Bauman's work have been presented and in which way. Marian Kempny, a recently deceased eminent cultural theorist, pointed out that choosing a selection of writings of such a prolific author, "whose thoughts materialize so often in new publications, that it is almost impossible to keep up with them," might prove

¹ Neyman, Elżbieta (2005): "Uczta skończona? O mistrzu i uczniu" [Is the Feast Over? On Master and Disciple], *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, 3: 5–25.

a risky strategy.² Blackshaw himself stresses the arbitrariness of his decisions as far as selection of topics and trains of the enormous output of the Polish sociologist is concerned.

In the first chapter ('An Interim Career Report') the author presents Bauman's personal biography—the starting point and sources of the discipline he has been practicing. Furthermore, Blackshaw presents and criticizes two main, in his opinion, misconceptions about Bauman: the first—that he is postmodernist—and the second—that in his analyses he puts too much emphasis on the individualization of everyday life. As far as answering the question of the theoretical and ideological sources of Bauman's sociology and its constant redefinition is concerned, the second chapter of the book ('Bauman's Sociology: His Theory of Modernity') is worth reading. One can find here both references to Karl Marx and the breaking away from a Marxist tradition in Bauman's thinking.³ Moreover, Bauman's attitude towards the concept of modernity and the analysis of transition from solid modernity to liquid modernity is presented in this chapter. The next chapter, number three ('The Ways and Means of the Dragoman') discusses the condition of contemporary sociology, and tries to specify the presented thinker's role and place in it. An especially interesting point is the presentation of Bauman's ambivalent relationship to sociology, showing that on the one hand Bauman points out restrictions of traditional sociology, and on the other indicates new possibilities of developing it (in hermeneutical spirit). According to Blackshaw, Bauman is the Dragoman (an interpreter or, to use Bourdieu's expression—a 'cultural intermediary'), an author able to combine, not excluding, various ways of practicing humanistic sociology, and assembling points of view of different disciplines: sociology, psychology, anthropology, political sciences, etc. The fourth chapter ('Freedom and Security in the Liquid Modern Sociality') proposes a presentation of how to apply the category of liquid modernity to the analysis of human condition torn between necessity and choice, between freedom and security, treated not as individual issues, but collective ones, revealing mechanisms of control and exclusion. Finally, the fifth chapter ('Consumerism as the Liquid Modern Way of Life') shows the ways in which the previously presented categories are used to describe and criticize contemporary consumerism. Suggestions for 'Further Reading' enclosed at the end of the book are extremely useful, since they include references to interviews, anthologies and studies concerning Bauman's work. According to Blackshaw these selected writings are valuable for helping the reader become acquainted with Bauman's attitude towards important social issues (such as social exclusion, globalization, consumerism, work migrations, security etc.).

It is crucial to the book that Blackshaw, apart from presenting the conceptual framework and its redefinitions suggested by Bauman, also presents the attitude of

² Kempny, Marian (2005): "O ciągłości w Zygmunta Baumana refleksji nad kulturą" [On the Continuity in Zygmunt Bauman's Reflection on Culture], *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, 3: 27–43.

³ The first two chapters concern a so-called 'Polish period' of Bauman's sociological activity; therefore they are of special interest to Polish readers. A detailed description and comparison of this period to the later, English one, has been presented by Nina Kraško (2005): "Socjologia Zygmunta Baumana: Społeczeństwo i wartości" [Zygmunt Bauman's Sociology. Society and Values], *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, 3: 67–83.

the great thinker to sociology. He emphasizes that Bauman represents an *involved* sociology; he is not a pure theorist watching the world from the perspective of his own office. He does not limit himself to diagnosing the situation, but also intends to participate (by his academic and journalistic activity) in the process of transforming the social world. Blackshaw goes as far as to say that “Bauman became a sociologist because he wanted to change the world and in this regard his sociology is first and foremost an extended critique of modernity” (p. ix). This issue is tightly connected with the question of morality. The involvement mentioned above means taking sides in important conflicts (e.g. assessment of the war in Iraq). Bauman has been deeply inspired by Immanuel Kant. In his lecture delivered in Colegium Civitas in Warsaw in April 2005, Bauman stressed that for the first time in human history the instinct for self-preservation of the human kind (threatened by constant wars and terrorism) and moral law (Kant’s categorical imperative) necessitate taking the same path—seeking a peaceful solution. The strategy of treating the world as a hunting area by important actors of international community such as the USA, and not as the area of common responsibility, was dangerous and could only lead to the escalation of violence.⁴

Blackshaw, while describing the importance of Bauman’s perspective and attitude towards humanistic sociology, proves to be an advocate of such a stance. He also emphasizes Bauman’s lack of interest in methodology (practicing sociology by conducting research) and stresses advantages of this sociological orientation, as offering a broader, not methodologically restricted possibility of gathering data and providing a chance of capturing various phenomena from different perspectives (in this attitude Bauman resembles Anthony Giddens, as opposed to Pierre Bourdieu conducting social field researches). Of course, some might treat such a way of practicing sociology as very valuable (Bauman himself being a good example) or might even glorify it, but depreciating research activity as such as a way of investigating social reality seems to be too big a simplification. I believe that as much as the possibility of developing and sensitizing one’s so-called sociological imagination due to intellectual inspiration provided by Bauman’s work can help anyone (not only a sociology novice) explain and, what is more important, understand the contemporary world and its complexity, conducting social research can only intensify this process (which Bauman himself would never negate). Talking about sociological research on everyday life and its actors, Blackshaw’s attempt at explaining Bauman’s popularity (whose lectures are attended by crowds, and whose books are read and commented by a far broader public than those of other academics) proves to be very interesting. The author suggests the following explanations of Bauman’s popularity. First, Bauman touches upon issues which concern (or might concern) everyone—therefore they are real problems for people living in the times of liquid modernity. Second, he does it in an extraordinarily eloquent and straightforward way. Here we come to the issue (analyzed in many passages of the reviewed book) of Bauman’s special style of writing. Blackshaw shows how the literary inspirations of the author of *Globalization* come from works of such authors as Borges, Kundera, Kafka, Marquez, Calvino, etc.

⁴ Zygmunt Bauman develops this topic in the book *Europa: Niedokończona Przygoda* [*Europe. An Unfinished Adventure*], Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2005.

As Nina Kraško emphasizes, Bauman is interested both in knowledge of society, and in the way of presenting it.⁵ Not only are the references to literature important for Bauman (although they helped him achieve a style which attracts readers). Blackshaw enumerates a long list of academics and thinkers important for Zygmunt Bauman's sociology, with whom Bauman argues in his books. The list includes: Marx, Freud, Foucault, Habermas, Giddens, Barthes, Bourdieu, and Beck. Personally I would like to complete this list with the names of Geertz, Sennett, Lévi-Strauss and Mary Douglas. Bearing in mind the limited length of the book and the arbitrariness of the author's selection of topics, it would still have made the part describing Bauman's metaphors more complete, had the author presented the significant and expressive metaphors of a tourist and a vagabond.

In the beginning of this review, I mentioned a 'master-disciple relationship.' If this relationship might describe Tony Blackshaw's attitude to Zygmunt Bauman, it would mean that the disciple has gained a thorough knowledge of the master's work and has become his most ardent adherent.

Tomasz Kasprzak
Institute of Applied Social Sciences,
Warsaw University
e-mail: kasprzakt@yahoo.com

⁵ Kraško, Nina (2005): "Socjologia Zygmunta Baumana: Społeczeństwo i wartości" [Zygmunt Bauman's Sociolog. Society and Values], *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, 3: 67–83.