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Consumerist Culture in Zygmunt Bauman's Critical Sociology: A Comparative Analysis of his Polish and English Writings

Abstract: In this article I analyze Zygmunt Bauman's oeuvre on consumerist culture, from the Polish (1953–1968) and English (1968–2017) stages of his scholarly career. I demonstrate that despite the passage of many years and the numerous changes in the way Bauman approached sociology, it is possible to see considerable overlap between the interpretations that he advanced in the two periods of his career. In the first part of the article I focus on how Bauman's observations—dating back to the sixties and relating to the theory of culture, Marxist theory, and the method of ideal types—found their reflection in what he called the “consumerist syndrome” (seen as a set of properties permeating all planes of social life). In the second part of the article I highlight the fact that his observations were inspired by a model of critical sociology that evolved from Antonio Gramsci's “philosophy of praxis” and utopian thinking of an iconoclastic nature. And even though my analysis focuses on the denotative and conative dimensions of Bauman's vision of consumerist culture, I also present more general conclusions regarding the continuity and variability of his entire sixty-plus years of scholarly activity. The article offers an opportunity for English-speaking readers to become familiar with Bauman's Polish writings and should encourage further research in this area.

Keywords: consumerist culture, Zygmunt Bauman, critical and engaged sociology, theory of culture, Marxist theory, method of ideal types

Introduction

Zygmunt Bauman pursued his scholarly interests over a period of more than sixty years: first in Poland (1953–1968), then in Israel (1968–1971), and finally in the UK (1971–2017). Throughout his career, he repeatedly switched between research trends and paradigms, while his worldview underwent a far-reaching evolution. The range of his analyses, too, was exceptionally diversified due to his adoption of a very broad definition of sociology as a dialogue with human experience (Bauman, Jacobsen, and Tester 2014: 7–34). Finally, it is noteworthy that Bauman's studies were essentially of a transdisciplinary nature and that he himself often stressed the groundlessness of establishing strict boundaries between individual disciplines (see: Bauman 1966a: 29–30; Bauman and Tester 2001: 39–40). However, despite the fact that the presence of many paradigms, threads, and disciplines was constitutive of Bauman's scholarly endeavor, it is possible to specify the threads and subjects that constantly recurred in his writings. Bauman himself at one point indicated two such issues, namely, culture and suffering (Bauman 1992: 206–207). Looking back at the whole of his now complete oeuvre, these words still hold true. Bauman began his regular studies of culture in the sixties. While in Poland, he devoted many articles and two books to this

theme: *Culture and Society* [*Kultura i społeczeństwo*] (1966a) and *Sketches in the Theory of Culture* [*Szkice z teorii kultury*]; however, the latter of the two, which for many years was considered to have been lost, was published as late as in 2017.¹ The theory, sociology, and anthropology of culture figured prominently in the papers Bauman published while in exile. He presented his reflections on the above issues within the frameworks of structuralism, ethnomethodology, hermeneutics, and the theory of modernity, post-modernity and liquid modernity (see, e.g., Bauman 1973; 1978; 1987; 1997; 2011b). The problem of suffering appeared in his analyses of groups that were subject to exclusion. Initially, he focused on the situation of the working class, and only later substantially extended the scope of his research (see: Bauman 1982). In the eighties, he started to investigate the consequences of the development of disciplinary practices (Bauman 1987; 1989). At a later stage, he mainly stressed the difficulties arising from deepening social divisions in the era of a globalizing society (Bauman 1998; 2004; 2011a). Both in the writings he produced in Poland from the moment he started to identify himself with revisionist thought, and in the whole of his later scholarly output, the engaged nature of his sociology was based mainly on a demonstration of the need for critical and alternativist thinking (Dawson 2017: 224–242). As Dennis Smith (1998: 40) rightly observes, “(...) the driving force behind Zygmunt Bauman’s work as a sociologist has been two things: first, a sense of intellectual and moral outrage about the extent to which societies are run on the basis of untruth and self-deception; and, second, a deep dissatisfaction with the evil and suffering this makes possible. His own unerring instinct has been to move against these tendencies.”

Consumerist culture is a research area which brings into focus the two aforementioned issues. Bauman addressed this phenomenon throughout the whole of his academic activity and his interpretations were invariably critical (Davis 2008; Blackshaw 2008: 117–135). In his Polish works, he initially focused on what he saw as the ever-increasing role of the consumerist aspirations of socialist societies (Bauman 1962: 77–90; 1965a: 124–134). In his later, more general reflections regarding the socio-cultural transformation, he underlined the relation between the process of heterogenization and the central position which market mechanisms and consumerist culture held in the social reality. Against this background, he wrote about the progressing commodification of human life and the related reification of individuals (Bauman 1966a: 374–450; 1966d: 58–74). During his exile, Bauman continued his critical studies into consumerist culture, which, with time, became one of the most important aspects of his work (Bauman 2005; 2007, 2008a). In the beginning, he situated his analyses within the transformation of modernity and the abandonment of the disciplinary order in favor of a strategy of “seduction” (Bauman 1983: 32–43). With time, however, he

¹ The printing of the book was withheld in 1968 as a direct consequence of the March events and Bauman’s political engagement on the part of the revisionists (see: Tester 2004: 58–81; Brzeziński 2017: 61–80). Together with several other senior academic staff members at Warsaw University, Bauman was expelled from the university and forced to leave the country. The authorities demanded that all the copies of the said publication be destroyed and the author’s manuscript was confiscated by the customs officials when he was leaving the country. A major part of the proof of *Sketches in the Theory of Culture* was found after many years in the collections of the merged libraries of the Faculty of Philosophy and Sociology at Warsaw University, the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Polish Philosophical Association. This text, with the editorial materials collected in the archive of Ossolineum Publishing House, became the basis for the reconstruction of Bauman’s work. The book was published in Polish in 2017 together with the author’s afterword, written in 2016. It will be published in English translation by Polity Press in 2018.

devoted more and more attention to the commodification of all planes of human life, pointing to the formation of a “consumerist syndrome” (Bauman 2007; Bauman, Rojek 2004: 291–312). It is also worth stressing that, as was the case with his Polish writings and also the papers he wrote in exile, Bauman not only adopted a critical stance toward the development of consumerist culture, but he also discerned the need to shape alternative ways for social life to function.

In this article I compare the ways in which Bauman analyzed consumerist culture in his critical sociology in Poland and in exile. In the first part of the article I demonstrate the great effect his conceptualizations of social reality had on the whole of his later scholarly work (they were developed when he was Chair of the Department of General Sociology at Warsaw University²). My comparison opens up a perspective both for analyses of Bauman's interpretations from the last decades of his life—which were devoted to consumerist culture—and of the more general assumptions which underlay his work at that time. In the second part of the article I focus on the engaged nature of Bauman's sociology, as well as on how it was reflected in his way of describing reality. Indeed, regardless of the time at which Bauman's works were created, their conative function (Jakobson 1960: 350–377) significantly affected the way in which their referential dimension was realized. Finally, it should not go amiss either that the analysis presented here provides English-speaking readers with an opportunity to become acquainted with Bauman's analyses as written in his mother tongue.

Consumerist Culture in Zygmunt Bauman's Social Theory

The fundamental change in the condition of Western societies was a subject to which Bauman paid considerable attention before his forced emigration (Bauman 2017b: 177–192; 1966a: 374–450; 1966d: 58–74; 1966c: 76–89; 1965b: 211–221; 1964: 51–91). As he saw it, the processes connected with the pluralization of social reality, the increased appreciation of individualism, and the creation of a global network of dependencies constituted at that time completely new circumstances for the development of the human condition. He addressed this issue in *Sketches in the Theory of Culture*, saying,

Well, we live in an era which seems, for the first time in history, to recognize the ambivalence of culture as an innate and invariable condition of the world, to favor the type of personality that in this atmosphere of ambivalence is doing well and even feels like the proverbial kid in a candy store; and it even boasts about the fact that it has not only detected the ambiguity of the human condition, but also accepted it as a truly human condition and as a condition that is humanly noble and high-minded—as a calling of humankind (Bauman 2017b: 191).

The above observations found their reflection in Bauman's creation of a model of society that is “socially and culturally heterogeneous” (Bauman 1966a). It stood in stark contrast to communities based on permanent, stable, and uniform structures. Such a society was a loose network of manifold structural dependencies and normative systems, dynamically changing shape and constantly expanding. In analyzing such a society, Bauman applied the

² In this way I demonstrate the faultiness of the belief espoused by some interpreters of Bauman's work that his analyses of the transformation of modernity mark a completely new stage in his research and have little to do with his earlier studies (see, e.g., Blackshaw 2005: 11).

categories of “liquidity,” “non-systemicity,” and “amorphism” (Bauman 2017b: 234, 235, 254, 255; Bauman 1966a: 433). In this way, he emphasized the inadequacy of the existing sociological analytical apparatus and stressed the need to develop new ways of describing reality.

It would be difficult not to notice in these fifty-year-old observations the origin of Bauman’s later analyses of the role of ambivalence in contemporary culture (Bauman 1991), the decomposition of social and cultural structures (Bauman 2000), or the fragmentation of identity (Bauman 2005). In the sixties, he identified these processes at their then initial stage, but he supposed that they might affect the direction of future social and cultural transformations. From the eighties onwards, up until his death, Bauman scrutinized the processes from the perspective of the transformation of modernity. By introducing, in the year 2000, the category of “liquid modernity” to the social science discourse, he wished to stress the fact that continuous and never-ending changeability is the constitutive feature of today’s world. While in the earlier—“stable”—phase of modernity the destruction of traditional models was the beginning of the formation of the new ones, more functional and permanent, or even perfect, shape, currently the very conviction that there is a need to create any stable forms has “melted.” Moreover, whereas modernization formerly referred largely to the transformation of social structures and institutions, today it has come also—or perhaps above all—to include human life, something which has taken the form of a permanent revolution. Today, individuals may choose between an unlimited number of constantly bifurcating paths and may blaze, and subsequently promote, their own trails. Bauman underscored the importance of this fact by interchangeably using the terms “liquid,” “individualized,” and “privatized” modernity.

From the perspective offered in this article, it is especially important that both in the model of a socially and culturally heterogeneous society and in analyses of the liquid modern formation Bauman attributed much worth to market mechanisms and consumerist culture. At this point, two quotations should be juxtaposed. In *Culture and Society* Bauman wrote that

The role of the market (...) is based upon this that in the absence of other dependencies, typical of traditional societies—such as blood ties, personal relationships or ties created by non-economic violence—the market becomes in fact the only intermediary between the diversified and mutually independent fragments of society, the only ‘keystone’ of the broken social structure (Bauman 1966a: 420).

On the other hand, in the book *Consuming Life*, which was published four decades later, Bauman (2007: 28) stated that

We may say that ‘consumerism’ is a type of social arrangement that results from recycling mundane, permanent and so to speak ‘regime-neutral’ human wants and longings into the principal propelling and operating force of society, a force that coordinates systemic reproduction, social integration, social stratification and the formation of human individuals, as well as playing a major role in the process of individual and group self-identification and in the selection and pursuit of individual life policies.

This juxtaposition mirrors the continuity of Bauman’s views on the central role of consumerism for the operation of social life in the Western world of the past few decades. Both during the Polish and English stages of his scholarly career, Bauman argued that this foundation was a factor that integrated a pluralized society and, further, that at the same time

it lessened the extent to which other institutions and axiological models exerted influence. Furthermore, Bauman argued that consumerism was changing the way in which these were being realized, which he referred to as the commodification of all planes of human activity. Before I move on to present examples of this type of analysis, I will demonstrate that its formation was largely inspired by the tenets of the “systemic theory”³ of culture, Marxist theory, and ideal-typical methodology.

In Zygmunt Bauman's theory of culture, conceived prior to his emigration, two trends may be distinguished (Brzeziński 2017: 29–57). In the first—which converges with the concept of social facts proposed by Émile Durkheim (Durkheim 1982)—culture is “(...) a sphere of goals, values, meanings and models—of all that which regardless of its supraindividual origin has been internalized or may be internalized (...)” (Bauman 1996: 10). *Ergo*, it endows communities with a coherent identity and allows them to undertake organized activities, as well as contributing to the maintenance of the social order.⁴ In the latter trend, which is related to the transformation taking place in Western society in the second half of the nineteenth century, culture is in no way a system but rather “a loose collection of not necessarily coherent sets and meanings” (ibid. p. 433; see: Bauman 1966d: 58–74). Not only does culture not restrict an individual's choices in any way, but it is—thanks to the increased appreciation of human creativity—conducive to social pluralization. Both these trends fit in the evolution—as sketched out by Bauman in *Culture and Society*—from communities which were socially and culturally homogenous to socially and culturally heterogeneous ones (Bauman 1966a: 233–450). However, the trends were also present in his synchronic analyses, as is clearly visible in his above-mentioned interpretations concerning the manner in which contemporary society integrates. He regarded market mechanisms as the foundation for social reality, and the related consumerist culture as a set of internally coherent convictions and meanings which affect the way individuals think and act; this all results, in my view, from Bauman being under the influence of the systemic definition of culture. It is from this perspective, I believe, that Bauman's vision of the “consumerist syndrome,” conceived several decades later, may be interpreted. According to Bauman, the syndrome represents a complete, coherent vision of the world, affecting all planes of human activity (Bauman, Rojek 2004: 291–312; 2007). The convergence of this construct with the systemic theory of culture is, of course, of limited scope, since it is characterized by processuality and, further, it is reflected in the greatly diversified choices

³ Following some other scholars (see: Patterson 2014: 1–30; Vaisey 2010: 1–16; Sewell 1999: 35–61; Swidler 1986: 273–286) I contrast two opposing ways of defining culture: “systemic” and “repertoire.” Ann Swidler wrote on the first one as follows: “It assumes that culture shapes action by supplying ultimate ends or values toward which action is directed, thus making values the central causal element of culture” (Swidler 1986: 273).

⁴ One of the most significant aspects of the evolution of the theory of culture advanced by Bauman was a change in the extent of examining how the aforementioned tasks were conducted. In a text written in 2016, which served as an afterword to his book *Sketches in the Theory of Culture*, Bauman wrote that “The greatest shock for me was probably, if I can rely on my memory, the discovery of culture as a process rather than a solid body or a body oriented towards stabilization and solidification, a body which is ponderous and inert, surrounded by distinct, and strictly guarded borders, that is effectively separated from ‘alien’ influence (...)” (Bauman 2017: 374). The change referred to in this statement, inspired by the thought of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963), entailed *de facto* a transition from the focus on “structure” to the focus on “structuration.” In the period under scrutiny—as well as in subsequent years (Bauman 1973)—Bauman indeed paid attention with increasing frequency to the fact that a reduction of ambivalence is a continuous and everlasting process thanks to which cultural reality is subject to constant change.

one makes in life. This, however, does not change the fact that the syndrome is a rudiment of how one thinks about culture, and is quite typical of the early stage of Bauman's research activity. Both during the early stage of his work and in his writings in exile, he fused the systemic vision of culture with a theory describing the progression of heterogenization. On the one hand, he viewed heterogenization as a mechanism reducing ambivalence, but on the other hand, as a factor responsible for its proliferation.⁵

In the 1960s, in his analysis of the commodification of Western society, Bauman referred to Marxist theory. He argued that an increase in the role of consumer goods was closely related to the dominance of paid employment devoid of the elements of creative work. The inability to realize on this plane the properties which, according to Marx, are innate to human beings as a species, began to be sublimated in the sphere of free time, which was predominantly shaped by consumerism. "Human beings are (...) themselves and feel at home when they are consumers," Bauman argued. "Their 'freedom' is a freedom of consumerism. (...) The world of consumerism and of goods thus acquires an unprecedented value and attractiveness. This world is the last and only bastion of freedom. Human beings become persons by consuming mass-produced goods" (Bauman 1966a: 439). Marx described the space remaining in people's lives outside of their occupational activities as the possibility for people to realize their typically animal properties (Marx 1977). Bauman, on the other hand, held that consumerism is a surrogate of freedom, since the latter is limited to the choice between goods—a choice which is determined by the trends which prevail at a given time. The self-definition of an individual, mediated through the goods purchased, strips it of the rudiments of empowerment and positions the individual as an object. Bauman noted that "A human being must thus become an object to gain access to objects. A human being does not simply define himself through objects. A human being defines himself as an object through other people's decisions" (Bauman 1966a: 442). In recent decades, Bauman likewise referred to the situation of an individual in consumer society. He argued that the freedom offered by the consumer market is delusive, since the harder individuals strive for empowerment, the more they are subjected to market mechanisms; that is, they become objectified. *Eo ipso*, consumer society positions them both as purchasers of goods and as commodities. Bauman wrote that "It is by their potency to increase the consumer's market price that the attractiveness of consumer foods—the current or potential objects of consumers' desire triggering consumer action—tends to be evaluated. 'Making oneself a sellable commodity' is a DIY job, and an individual duty" (Bauman 2007: 57). At the same time, it should be noted that this consumer duty is usually entirely acceptable, since it appeals to an individual's desires and its realization consists of the fulfillment of these desires. One might also venture the more general comment that Bauman's observations in regard to the processes of commodification and reification are a meaningful exemplification of the continuity of his inspiration by Marxist theory, as well as of the way in which, over time, he reinterpreted this thought. Mediated through Marxist theory, the cognitive and evaluative framework of Bauman's work—despite the numerous switches between re-

⁵ Another example of such bipolarity in Bauman's thematization of culture is found in his interpretations in the book *Culture as Praxis*. On the one hand, he outlined in it his vision inspired by structuralism, and on the other hand, he attributed more importance to human *praxis* (Bauman 1973).

search trends and analytical paradigms—was something he never abandoned (see: [Bauman and Tester 2001: 25–26](#)).

Bauman's papers relating to the role of the "consumerist syndrome" in an era of liquid modernity shared their methodology with that of his analyses of commodification dating back to the 1960s. Both in *Culture and Society* ([Bauman 1966a: 235–247](#)) and in the paper *Opposing Models of Cultural Analysis [Bieguny analizy kulturowej]* ([Bauman 1964: 59–60](#)), which predated the book, he clearly stressed that his goal was by no means to depict the full complexity of the contemporary condition or the mechanisms of the evolution of its structures and institutions, but rather to highlight the most significant issues related to the two planes using the method of ideal types. With regard to the socially and culturally heterogeneous community, Bauman wrote: "Our construction will be of an approximate nature. We will be talking here about trends rather than facts, about probability rather than absolute rules. It should be stressed more than ever before that we are dealing here with models and not with statistical data showing frequencies of phenomena" ([Bauman 1966a: 434](#)). Bauman's reflections relating to the central role of consumerism in the functioning of contemporary society should then be viewed as unique abstractions which are based on empirical material, but which at the same time are not totally compatible with it. This assertion is equally relevant to the interpretations Bauman offered during his exile. In the methodology section of his book *Consuming Life*, he clearly stated that the models he presents of culture and consumer society are not descriptions of reality, but tools with which to analyze reality and, therefore, they should be regarded as "(...) the tools fit for the job of understanding a crucially important aspect of the society we currently inhabit, and therefore also for the job of constructing a coherent narrative of our shared experience of that habitation" ([Bauman 2007: 28](#)). In the next part of the article I will point to the fact that the adoption of such an approach to the methodology significantly affects the realization of the conative function of Bauman's work. At this point I would also like to note that not only the vision of the consumerist syndrome but also many other aspects of Bauman's interpretations relating to the liquid modern condition are all realizations of the method of ideal types. Any critique of Bauman's observations relating to this condition should, I believe, take into account the fact that he foregrounds certain aspects of the events described, while backgrounding others. However, not all Bauman scholars consider this fact (see: [Elliott 2007a](#)).

The fact that Bauman was inspired by the systemic theory of culture, Marxist theory, and the method of ideal types is reflected in his analysis of the influence that consumerist culture has on individual aspects of social life.⁶ To exemplify this type of analysis, I have chosen for my discussion two planes: the formation of interpersonal relations, and axiological transformations. My focus on these aspects follows, first, from the fact that Bauman devoted a great deal of attention to both of them during the Polish and English stages of his scholarly career, and second, because the critical dimension of Bauman's reflection—

⁶ Mateusz Marciniak, in his insightful analysis of Bauman's vision of consumerist culture, distinguished seven such planes: time, space, artefacts, interpersonal relationships, individual identity, values, and society. This distinction was reflected in empirical research aiming to identify the extent to which the claims regarding the consumerist syndrome need to be verified ([Marciniak 2011](#)).

which will be the focus of the ensuing portion of the article—clearly came to the fore in his reflections on these issues.

One of the primary aspects of the typology of human communities, outlined by Bauman in *Culture and Society*, was the argument that the growing social complexity is accompanied by a decreasing “syngenism”⁷ at the level of culture and “synergy” in social life (Bauman 1966a: 186–232). Bauman claimed that in a situation where access to socially desired goods is increasingly dependent on the position occupied by an individual in the social structure, group solidarity gives way to the constitution of “schismogenetic chains” (see: Bateson 1972: 71–82). Bauman linked these processes *inter alia* to the infiltration of market mechanisms into the world of social life. He argued that the relations holding between individuals increasingly often resembled a zero-sum game. What is more, he pointed to the occurrence of reification, based on one’s perception of others chiefly from the perspective of achieving one’s particular aims (Bauman 1966a: 442–444). Bauman claimed that as part of consumerist culture, human beings had been deprived of their pro-social inclinations and, consequently, that they had become subject to alienation (Marx 1977).⁸ This type of argument, which drew on many other theoretical inspirations, including the works of the Frankfurt school scholars (Adorno, Horkheimer 1979) and those of the critics of contemporary culture (Baudrillard 1970; Ritzer 1993; Klein 2000), remained the constitutive element of all Bauman’s later studies. In his examinations of the transformation of modernity, he devoted much attention to the manner in which the “consumerist syndrome” is reflected in the planes of professional relations (Bauman 2000: 130–167; see: Poder 2007: 136–153), romantic relations⁹ (Bauman 2003, see: Jasińska-Kania 2016: 327–356), and even parental relations (Bauman 2006: 5–10).¹⁰ In his view, what characterizes liquid modernity is the fact that human beings perceive others instrumentally, as commodities from which they may derive certain benefits. *Eo ipso*, people, like goods in a kaleidoscopically changing market, are assessed in terms of their usefulness, “consumed” and—more often than not—discarded when they are no longer needed (Bauman 2007).

The manner in which interpersonal relationships are formed in consumerist culture reflected, Bauman believed, a normative transformation. The socially and culturally heterogeneous, ideal-type society that he presented in his Polish writings assumes the relativization of values and norms; these he interpreted in terms of commodification. He wrote that “Cultural norms become part of the commodity market: one may purchase them or stop using them, relative to their pragmatic value. In cultural patterns there are no emotional values or values which are in any other way supermaterial (...)” (Bauman 1966a: 445). In the 1960s,

⁷ Bauman used the term “syngenism,” which was introduced by Ludwik Gumplowicz, to describe a feeling of unity and solidarity among the members of a social group (see: Gumplowicz 1975).

⁸ In addressing this issue, Bauman stated that “(...) interpersonal relationships have been reified; people contact objects occluding other people, the latter being overshadowed by them. It is not interpersonal relationships that now determine human behaviour; incentives to act are now supplied by the world of objects (...)” (Bauman 1966: 184).

⁹ In his analyses of the transformation of romantic relationships, Bauman relied on Giddens’s (1992) notion of “the pure relationship.” However, he assessed the manner in which such relationships are formed far more critically.

¹⁰ With reference to the formation of family planning as part of liquid modernity, Bauman wrote that “Having a child is presenting a hostage to fate or mortgaging your future, yet you have no inkling how large the repayment of your mortgage loan will be and how long it will take to repay” (Bauman 2006: 5).

Bauman assessed this situation very critically. He claimed that it led to the development of individualistic attitudes, which he then unambiguously identified with egoistic aspirations. He also argued that in a situation marked by the absence of universal moral norms, their role was taken over by quantitative and procedural criteria. The argument about the demise of universal ethical norms was also plainly discernible in Bauman's works from the last decades of his scholarly career (Bauman 1995; 1996, 2008a; see: Crone 2008: 59–74). This process was then related just as much to the compromising of universalist moral codes as it was to the growing pluralization of society. At the turn of the 1980s and 1990s—contrary to what he had written two decades earlier—he assessed this state of affairs favorably, claiming that it opened a hitherto inaccessible path for the development of morality (Bauman 1993). On the other hand, since the very beginning of his analyses, he pointed to the risks that consumerist culture brought with it. He addressed this issue in *Consuming Life*, writing that “‘Responsibility’ now means, first and last, *responsibility to oneself* (‘you owe this to yourself,’ ‘you deserve it,’ as the traders in ‘relief from responsibility’ put it), while ‘responsible choices’ are, first and last, those moves serving the interests and satisfying the desires of the self” (Bauman 2007: 92).¹¹ Bauman held that the influence of the consumerist syndrome on society had a similar effect to that achieved by stable modern normative codes. More precisely, it triggered the process of adiaphorization, which consists in the exclusion of certain areas from the pool of moral obligations. It is worth noting then that regardless of the transformations that Bauman's ethical thought underwent, he regarded consumerist culture as a factor that discouraged individuals from moral activity. This was one of the major factors in the development of Bauman's critical thought on the topic.

Summing up this part of the article, I would like to emphasize that—despite the numerous fundamental transformations which occurred in Zygmunt Bauman's work in the years after his forced emigration in 1968—one may see frequent convergences between the manner in which he highlighted the problems associated with consumerist culture in his Polish writings and those which he penned in exile. In the foregoing discussion I have demonstrated that Bauman's interpretations of consumerist culture drew on the systemic theory of culture, selected threads from Marxist theory, and the method of ideal types. I have shown how these inspirations allowed Bauman to create in the 1960s—and then to develop over the subsequent years of his work—the concept of consumerist culture, which is defined as a set of properties infiltrating all the planes of social life. Focusing on this aspect of Bauman's studies, I have tried, at the same time, to provide a more general description of other aspects of the continuity and changeability which are traceable in his writings during the two stages of his career that I have analyzed. Finally, I have also referred to some aspects of the critique of Bauman's concept of consumerist culture, arguing that it should be assessed both from the viewpoint of the explanatory function of his sociology and of its critical inclination. I will elaborate on the latter aspect in the next portion of the article.

¹¹ Very similar words can be found in Bauman's book *Culture and Society*: “A characteristic of individualism, which is being referred to here, is its positioning within the sphere of taking, and not giving (...). The individualism of the culture of an “Htht” society [i.e. a socially and culturally heterogeneous society—author's note] is egoistic individualism—and this is its characteristic” (Bauman 1966: 444).

The Critical Dimension of Bauman's Analysis of Consumerist Culture

Even before Bauman outlined his model of consumerist culture in the 1960s, he analyzed the manner in which that culture manifested itself in Western countries, as well as the extent of its infiltration into the People's Republic of Poland (Bauman 1955: 168–196; 1962: 77–90; 1965a; 1966d: 58–64). He critically assessed the acculturation of models and attitudes that developed as part of the drive toward capitalism in Eastern bloc. He argued that their supposed attractiveness—measured with ratios such as the degree of industrial, logistical, or technological development—is *de facto* delusive. Comparing this condition with the reality found in communist countries, he asserted that “(...) we are one hundred years behind America and one hundred years ahead of America. We are behind—in terms of technological and economic development. We are ahead—in terms of interpersonal relationships organized in a new, more perfect way, which for America is only a dream of the future” (Bauman 1965a: 130). At the same time, Bauman drew attention to the need to evaluate social development in terms of the synergy of social institutions and the syngenism of cultural models (Bauman, Wiatr 1953: 69–99; Bauman 1965a). He also stressed the need to attend to the personality model which—in the context of his later works—may be referred to as “a pilgrimage” (Bauman 1996: 18–36). The model was to be based on the adoption of a prospective temporal orientation manifested in the postponement of one's satisfaction in the work being done and in focusing on realization of the final goal. Bauman deemed the progressing internalization of consumerist culture to be one of the most significant risks for the development of this kind of attitude. In his words: “And here we are witnessing an astonishing phenomenon: the export of culture and ideas leaves far behind the export of the material conditions in which these were born. A moderate standard of living is being overlaid by a culture of wealth, while the lack of cars, refrigerators, and one-family houses is being overlaid by a culture of cars, refrigerators, and one-family houses” (Bauman 1965a: 126–127). In Bauman's writing at the time one can clearly see his engagement in strengthening the foundations of communist society, which at the same time translated into his unequivocally negative perception of consumerism, positioned at the other end of the ideological continuum.

In the context of the increasing contrast between Bauman's expectations relating to the development of the attitudes typical of socialist ideology in communist Poland and the growing implication of the then reality in models typical of consumerist culture, the results of empirical studies that Bauman conducted among Warsaw youth at the beginning of the 1960s are particularly noteworthy (Bauman 1962: 77–90). The studies were based on surveys conducted on a representative sample of young men aged between 18 and 24. Since the subjects were brought up under the communist regime and since they lived in a city that was subjected to an accelerated process of industrialization, it could be assumed that a large proportion of these men would align with the personality model described as “pilgrim,” oriented towards syngenetic values. However, it was found that the group of young people who actually adopted this kind of attitude was relatively small and that it consisted to a large extent of men with a university degree, and of students. By far the largest proportion of respondents corresponded to two other models of success that were accounted for in the preliminary hypotheses. One of the models represented a combination of Western career ideals

and the bourgeois worldview. It was characterized by a pursuit of higher social and material status. The other model combined the values typical of bourgeois ideology and the nascent mass society. In this model, success was equated with a peaceful and stable life, focus on immediate family members, and conformity with community norms. What united the two groups—and what at the same time separated them from socialist ideology—was their penchant for consumerism. The studies also revealed a structural variation in these inclinations:

Desires of a consumerist nature are particularly strong in environments characterized by a relatively low level of education, in the environments of the working class, craftspeople, and peasants, whereas in environments characterized by a relatively higher level of education and derived from other tiered subcultures, these desires cease to occupy the most prominent position only to give way to dreams about broader horizons and richer content” (Bauman 1961: 133).¹²

In his conversation with Keith Tester and Michael Hviid Jacobsen, Bauman confessed that the aforementioned findings were a great disappointment to him. Contrary to his expectations, the degree of internalization of socialist ideology in the generation brought up in communist Poland turned out to be exceptionally low. What is more, leftist values suffered a severe defeat in their confrontation with the market and consumerist culture. He admitted that “The new social setting was not working. Most certainly, it did not turn out to be the school of humanity whose prospect attracted so many, myself including, to the idea of socialism” (Bauman in: Tester and Jacobsen 2005: 44). Bauman’s conviction, encapsulated in the above words, mirrored the reassessment that occurred in his life and work. More precisely, he grew more critical of the contemporary authorities, who, in his view, were to the greatest extent responsible for the above state of affairs. He also gradually abandoned the assumptions of Leninism that had shaped his thought in the 1950s (Bauman 1957; Brzeziński 2017: 61–80). These transformations were not, however, accompanied by a disavowal of Marxist theory or the related vision of critical sociology. Of key importance in this respect was the inspiration he found in Antonio Gramsci’s philosophy, which he recalled as follows:

In a paradoxical way Gramsci saved me from turning into an anti-Marxist, as so many other disenchanting thinkers did, throwing out on their way everything that was, and remained, precious and topical in Marx’s legacy. I read good tidings in Gramsci’s *Prison Notebook*: there was a way of saving the ethical core, and the analytical power I saw no reason to discard from the stiff carapace in which it had been enclosed and stifled (Bauman and Tester 2001: 26).

From the perspective of this article, of greatest relevance is how Gramsci’s work affected Bauman’s use of critical strategies and, further, how these were reflected in his interpretations of consumerist culture. At this point it should be stressed first and foremost that Bauman appropriated the Italian philosopher’s characteristic conviction that reality derives only from human actions. What is more, under the influence of his concept of the “philosophy of praxis” (Gramsci 1971), Bauman assumed that cognition is not a purely scientific process, but, in fact, a practical act. “Social knowledge,” as he (1963: 22) wrote, “may be understood in its social role only if it is considered in light of the real processes which it

¹² The results of this research were published both in Polish (Bauman 1961: 103–138) and English (Bauman 1962: 77–90). The first of the two articles is more comprehensive and the quotation has been excerpted from this text.

intellectually processes and the practical social actions which it organizes. Social theory is then both in genetic and functional senses ‘imbued’ with practice and it may be analyzed and practiced only if interwoven with practice.” In accordance with the solutions proposed here, Bauman ceased to make a certain type of politics, or ideology, the goal of his engaged sociology; instead, he focused on an attempt to transform social awareness. In this context, he stressed the need to break away from the existing models and schemata—referred to by Gramsci as “cultural hegemony”—while at the same time condoning the creation and popularization of the new ways of arranging the human world (*ibid.* p. 19–34; see: [Tester 2004: 46–52](#)). This way of doing critical sociology—complemented in time by many other inspirations (see, e.g.: [Jacobsen, Hansen 2017: 107–135](#); [Aidnik and Jacobsen 2017: 136–162](#); [Davis 2011: 183–194](#))—remained characteristic of Bauman over the subsequent years of his career. In one of his retrospective texts, devoted largely to a demonstration of the significance of Gramsci’s thought, Bauman wrote that “By doing its job—re-presenting human condition as the product of human actions—sociology was and is to me a critique of extant reality. Sociology is meant to expose the relativity of what is, to open the possibility of alternative social arrangements and ways of life, to militate against TINA (‘There Is No Alternative’) ideologies and life philosophies” ([Bauman 2008b: 238](#)). Such a way of doing critical sociology also found its reflection in the analyses of consumerist culture.

In the foregoing portion of the article I have demonstrated that Bauman’s examinations of the role of the consumerist syndrome were invariably characterized by the hyperbolization of negative trends. I have argued that this resulted from the fact that the analyses were based on the method of ideal types. On the other hand, in accordance with the goals of his critical sociology, it may be established that the expressive foregrounding of the negative aspects of consumerist culture was aimed at provoking critical and alternativist thinking about its properties. Bauman wished to oppose the commonsensical perception of reality, defined by Gramsci as “the conception of the world which is uncritically absorbed by the various social and cultural environments in which the moral individuality of the average man is developed” ([Gramsci 1971: 419](#)). Similar statements are valid with regard to Bauman’s writings in exile. In these papers, apart from the clear emphasis placed on the processes of commodification and reification, which, as he believed, were derived from consumerist culture, he devoted a great deal of attention to the creation of social divisions of a binary nature¹³ ([Bauman 1998; 2011a, 2017a: 86–118](#)). On the one hand, he depicted those who, thanks to their resources, take full advantage of the opportunities it creates, and on the other hand, he described the so-called “flawed consumers,” who, despite living under the pressure of the said culture, are *de facto* excluded from it. Bauman focused not only on material, but also on relational and symbolic difficulties which members of the latter group have to face. The manner in which he portrayed their condition—with the use of numerous rhetorical devices which serve the conative function—seems to justify the claim that his goal was to break through the “hegemonic” barrier created by consumerist culture and to encourage reflection on the need to carry out a substantial reassessment of

¹³ Mark Davis considered this manner of conducting analyses based on binary oppositions as typical of Bauman’s work and referred to it as a “will to dualism” ([Davis 2008: 103–108](#)). In the context under study, one can distinguish the following oppositions, as used by Bauman: “tourists” and “vagabonds,” “the seduced” and “the repressed,” “privileged society of consumers” and “surplus population.”

the phenomenon. As Tony Blackshaw (2005: 79) aptly notes, “[Bauman] uses the rage of storm to shout at his readers, as it were: ‘look at the plight of these people and recognize your own conspiracy in their fates!’ In this way, he alerts us to the sickness inherent in our own culture of excessive consumption, which we enjoy at the same time as we are busying ourselves erecting walls to keep out those who are fleeing poverty, war and persecution.”

However, it should be clearly stated that so great an appreciation of the conative function of the message decidedly weakens its referential aspect. Carrying out one-sided analyses, the hyperbolization of the significance of individual phenomena, as well as a reduction of the problems diagnosed to binary oppositions all give rise to the critics’ justified complaints (see: Kilminster 2017: 210–223; Blackshaw 2008: 126–130; Elliott 2007b: 46–62; Ray 2007: 63–80).¹⁴ Even those interpreters of Bauman’s texts who justify the application of the aforementioned rhetorical devices in scientific discourse voice their reservations. For instance, Michael Hviid Jacobsen and Sophia Marshman (2008: 28) write that “Bauman’s sociology can be seen as a challenge to or show down with conventional sociological methodology with its insistence on rigid criteria such as measurement, verification, validity and reliability.” In pointing to the need to interpret his writings on consumerist culture through the lens of the critical orientation of his work, I similarly do not want to ignore the fact that some of his interpretations diverge from empirical research, while the extent of the influence exerted, as he held, by the consumerist syndrome seems to be exaggerated.¹⁵ Nonetheless, I believe that such statements should not conclude analyses of his work, but rather they should be a prelude to further reflection on the teleology of this manner of discourse formation. Henning Bech (2007: 374) addressed this issue in an interesting way: “I think that the critics make a category mistake. They read Bauman’s categories and analyses as if he intends to present a full, quasi-objective diagnosis of past and existing societies—whereas, rather, they are (or may be read more fruitfully as) founded on ethical concerns.”

Continuing the thought embodied in the above statement, I would like to remark that the ethical foundation of Bauman’s sociology was in no way an attempt at providing a detailed plan that would suggest implementable solutions. On the contrary, as early as in the

¹⁴ Several years ago, Blackshaw (2008: 126–130) grouped these objections regarding the vision of consumerist culture presented in Bauman’s writings into five categories. First, he stressed that according to some commentators Bauman’s interpretations are of a purely abstract or speculative nature. They represent a generalization of certain trends which are to be observed in some Western countries, without due attention being paid to the differences between them. Second, Bauman is criticized for one-sidedness in stressing the relation between the consumerist syndrome and indifference toward social problems. Critics underline the fact that the reliability of his analysis would require a presentation of examples indicating in what way contemporary culture generates new forms of opposition. Third, it is emphasized that in Bauman’s portrayal of individuals living in consumerist culture too great a role is attributed to individualism. This simultaneously leads to the marginalization of the meaning of collectivism and contemporary forms of community life. Fourth, some scholars point to the elitist nature of the views formulated by Bauman. This would lead to the world being presented from the point of view espoused by representatives of the privileged social strata living in Western societies. Finally, Bauman is accused of being an “armchair theorist,” relying on anecdotal evidence. *Eo ipso*, he is not able to provide a reliable picture of the importance and meaning of consumerism in the contemporary world.

¹⁵ Such research, carried out several years ago in Poland on a group of students at Adam Mickiewicz University, revealed that “(...) an ordinary, ‘average’ student is 40% consumer-oriented toward reality, similarly to Bauman’s consumer who is fully engulfed by the syndrome” (Marciniak 2011: 184–185).

conclusion of his book *Culture and Society* (Bauman 1966a: 451–464)¹⁶—he stressed the numerous risks arising from a conception of reality perceived in terms of “perfect planning.” He later repeated these interpretations multiple times (see: Bauman 1984: 173–178; 1987, 1991). Drawing on Russel Jacoby’s conceptualization, the way of thinking about the future which Bauman so greatly criticized may be referred to as a “blueprint utopia” (Jacoby 2005). This is contrasted with a so-called “iconoclastic utopia,” i.e., a vision that does not offer a concrete description of future reality but focuses on the process of change rather than its effect. Several years ago, Bauman relied on the latter concept in the following sense: “I propose to unpack the concept of ‘iconoclastic utopia’ as focusing (as in all utopias) on a critical revision of the ways and means of the present life as the main factor in an uncovering of the otherwise suppressed and concealed, and hitherto unknown, possibility of an ‘elsewhere,’ of another ‘social reality’” (Bauman 2010: 51). It was in this—iconoclastic—vein that Bauman criticized consumerist culture throughout almost his entire scholarly career.¹⁷ The pursuit of the initiation of processes that would be capable of questioning its dominance was accompanied by the presentation of a broad outline of changes that in his opinion should be implemented in order for a greater degree of “syngenism” at the level of culture and “synergy” in social life to be achieved. During the Polish period of Bauman’s work this trend was exemplified by revisionist thought (Bauman 1969: 1–17), whereas in his English writings on the transformation of modernity by the concept of post-modern ethics (Bauman 1993; 1995) and the reconstruction of the public sphere (Bauman 1999). The juxtaposition of these concepts with the portrayal of consumerist culture—which Bauman invariably presented in the form of a dystopia—was an element within a critical strategy in which liberation from commonsensical thinking was to be the foundation for new forms of communization.

Concluding the discussion presented in this part of the article, I would like to refer to the words Bauman included in the conclusion of his book *Liquid Modernity*: “There is no choice between ‘engaged’ and ‘neutral’ ways of doing sociology. A non-committal sociology is an impossibility” (Bauman 2000: 216). In accord with this position, Bauman focused on the need to take action that would lead to social change; he pointed in the direction such change should follow and, furthermore, he offered solutions that could provide an answer to the challenges posed by the contemporary world. As I have demonstrated, all these assumptions are apparent in Bauman’s interpretations of consumerist culture. While focusing on the Polish stage of his work, I have distinguished several of the inspirations behind his critical thought, which—despite the transformations which it underwent—remained its characteristic element. Of particular relevance in this respect are the inspiration of Gramsci’s “philosophy of praxis,” increased appreciation of alternativist thinking, and utopian concepts in the iconoclastic sense of this category. In my view, these aspects of Bauman’s oeuvre should always be taken into consideration whenever anyone ventures an evaluation.

¹⁶ This book was also published in English as an independent title (Bauman 1966b: 145–162).

¹⁷ Regarding the change that occurred in this respect between Bauman’s earliest writings and the texts created after he turned to revisionism, in a conversation with Tester, he stated that “I no longer believe (as I did, to my shame, once believe) that ‘the ends justify the means,’ and I do not believe it for the simple reason that ends cannot be humane if they require inhumane means to be promoted. And so the dialogue with the experience of free men and women is the only door which can be used” (Bauman and Tester 2001: 157).

Conclusion

Zygmunt Bauman's vision of consumerist culture has been the subject of numerous papers, written both by interpreters of his work and by scholars researching the transformation of the contemporary world. However, almost all of these analyses are based on the writings that he created during the English stage of his career and, furthermore, they are conducted in the context of Bauman's interpretations of the transformation of modernity. In this article, I have adopted a different approach. I have juxtaposed Bauman's writings in Poland and in exile on the aforementioned issues in order to focus on the relation between studies created during the two stages of his scholarly activity. Below I present several of the most important conclusions. First, I have demonstrated the continuity in Bauman's beliefs with regard to the key role of consumerist culture as part of the pluralizing world, and in regard to that culture's infiltration into all planes of human activity. Second, I have shown that both the manner in which Bauman conceptualized the commodification of his contemporary reality and the methodological solutions he used shared a number of similarities during the two stages of his work. Third, I have established that in his description of reality affected by the "consumerist syndrome," Bauman unvaryingly relied on rhetorical strategies aimed at the promotion of alternativist thinking. Fourth, I have highlighted the fact that the critical inspiration for his analyses at the time was consistently founded on the vision of "active sociology," which was itself a reference to Antonio Gramsci's "philosophy of praxis." Finally, I have demonstrated that any evaluation of Bauman's writings that focuses on consumerism should be based just as much on the writings' explanatory function as on their conative dimension. All of these examinations have brought me to more general conclusions regarding the stability and the variability of Bauman's sociological interpretations in his entire scholarly career of more than sixty years. Such studies have played only a marginal role for different reasons—in Poland for a long time for political reasons and in other countries due to linguistic considerations. This article justifies the need to conduct such research since, as has been shown, the inclusion of texts that Bauman wrote during his time at Warsaw University provides valuable insight into all his subsequent analyses.

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