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TONY BLACKSHAW
Sheffield Hallam University, England

Too Good For Sociology

Abstract: The point of this article is on the one hand to make sense of Bauman's merely ghostly presence in sociology, and, on the other, to demonstrate why sociology itself (unlike Bauman) is incapable of achieving a sociological imagination made to the measure of a world that is modern in a different way than it was in the past. Before providing the justification for choosing Michel Foucault's idea of the discursive formation as the basis for my critique, I mobilize some ideas from Jacques Derrida and Jacques Rancière to suggest that sociology's Platonic *ontology* carries with it a 'national' discourse that is 'contemporary only to itself' and discuss what this implies for its relationship with the *dead-living* spectre of *Zyg-geist Bauman*. Thereafter, I critically discuss sociology's mythological practice and its game-culture before offering an insight into the ways and means of Bauman's liquid modern alternative which has its *hauntological* basis in the 'the privileged space of incertitude' found in literature. I conclude with the observation that what we have in Bauman is an authentic and ethically responsible thinker who despite imagining sociology as his natural intellectual home is really much too good for that place.

Keywords: sociological imagination; 'nation' and 'national' sociology; discursive formation; liquidity; hauntology; authenticity

There are plenty of unremarkable sociologists writing today whose work we are told is important but when you read it leaves you baffled as to what all the fuss is about. There are others whose work is paradoxically less instantly recognizable at the heart of things—by which I mean the discursive formation that constitutes and reconstitutes itself through the major sociology departments, the key associations, journals and conferences—but which nonetheless has an almost tsunami significance and lays down some new guidelines to thinking for the rest of the tribe—for certain of their readers, at least—but whose ideas despite their *pro patria* appeal to value seem predestined to exist ethereal, no more than a haunting presence. Zygmunt Bauman must be the first greatest living sociologist who has had to endure this ghostly function.

Of today's leading sociological lights there is no star that shines brighter than that of Zygmunt Bauman and it is hard to think of any contemporary sociologist, and certainly none writing in English, whose list of subjects for scrutiny has his range—liquidity, Europe, identity, love and terror, to name just some of his most recent topics—and his amazing ability to rise to the test every time. Recently, while

Tony Blackshaw teaches social and cultural studies in leisure and sport at Sheffield Hallam University. He is author of *Zygmunt Bauman* (2005), *New Perspectives on Sport and 'Deviance': Consumption, Performativity and Social Control* (with Tim Crabbe, 2004) and *Leisure Life: Myth, Masculinity and Modernity* (2003). Email: t.blackshaw@shu.ac.uk

trawling through his more recent books to mediate some ideas I had for an article on community, I found myself thinking that by now his relatively freshly minted idea of *liquidity* must reverberate ubiquitous throughout the discipline; it must be *the* sound of sociology. Pondering some more, I thought about the lecture I had delivered earlier that day on a course called *Social Perceptions of Leisure*, which had seen me utilizing the metaphor the whole time and even generating a protracted debate amongst the students about the liquid significance of that elusive concept of cool (or to be precise, a discussion about the fuck-you-cool imperatives associated with hip hop and gangsta rap). The lecture had, I reflected afterwards, gone down well and the *liquidity* had sounded exactly right, the apposite expression for interpreting contemporary patterns of leisure, just as Chris Rojek's (1985: 178–181) "New Rules for the Sociology of Leisure" (now in my view only marginally useful) had done during my own time as an undergraduate.

After the lecture, one of the students suggested that we ought to invite Bauman as a guest speaker on our course. I told him that this would be difficult given his punishing writing schedule and that fact that he is so much in demand elsewhere. As I pointed out, Bauman has a ubiquitous presence on the global scene and no major symposium on global affairs seems complete without him. This is a sociologist who now, at the age of 80, is still at the height of his powers both as a thinker and a sage, and recently his work has been profiled extensively in the *New Statesman*, the *Guardian* and the *Observer* in the United Kingdom. Yet he is a paradox because although he is a sociologist who is widely feted by conference organisers, journalists, leftist think tanks, political activists and academics from a range of disciplines, within sociology itself his thinking has little intellectual reach. If you happened to attend this year's British Sociological Association annual conference—the major event in the British sociological calendar—you would have been astounded to find that there wasn't even one paper delivered there dedicated to his ideas and might have been left thinking that his work was unimportant. It would seem that the country in which Bauman has chosen to live is a place where he continues to remain largely unknown. Why is this?

The Platonic Ontology of the National Consensus

The convoluted answer is that, in the words of Jacques Derrida (1979: 94–95), what sociology cannot tolerate is radicals like Bauman who tamper with its language, meaning both its *national* language and its ideal of translatability that neutralizes this national language. It is a discipline that can "bear more readily the most apparently revolutionary ideological sorts of 'content,' if only that content does not touch the borders of its national and universal language and of all the juridico-political contracts that it guarantees." Consequently there is a sentence of Friedrich Nietzsche which hangs over sociology: "I fear we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar." What I mean by belief in grammar is the widespread conviction in sociology that it's tried and tested concepts, theories and methods somehow presuppose an order of discourse that mirrors its conviction to a ready-made way of conceptualizing

the already existing reality which it perceives is more adequate than any other. As the Derrida analogy suggests, sociology is reminiscent of a nation state with its own national language and when it is confronted with what Richard Rorty calls 'foreigners" alternative cognitive frames, rather than changing its grammar, it merely *translates* their contents into its own language instead of trying to imagine what those cognitive frames might mean if they remained *untranslatable* languages.

The more straightforward answer is that Bauman's detractors tend to be of the national orthodoxy, and if they are not a passionate lot, they do tend to make the same obsessive and unintelligent objections to his sociology: Why is it that what Bauman elucidates in his sociology rarely extends beyond what is in his head? And why has he moved from sociology's concern with the *reality* of the lives of *real* men and women to the *fantasy* of human lives *imagined*—or at the very least to a generalised rather than an empirically contextualised commentary about the quotidian. Sociology's conclusion about the value of Bauman's work is that absence of empirical evidence means evidence of absence and the upshot is that it is unprepared to accept that his observations have an everyday reality. It would appear, to use Jean Baudrillard's (2005) apt expression, that the 'hypothesis of objective reality' is sociology's suit of armour—it gives it its strength and focus, is in truth its *raison d'être*, and it thinks that Bauman is trying to spoil the whole thing and is nothing less than resentful of him.

However, in asking these kinds of questions sociology stumbles on the same footholds as other disciples intent on understanding the world through such a limited and limiting normative-national approach. And what I want to argue in this article is that to demand unequivocal answers to questions like these is not only apathetic—more precisely what Baudrillard would call 'by far the easiest solution'—but it is to mistake the nature of Bauman's role as poet-intellectual. It is also to ask the *wrong* type of questions because it is not so much that Bauman is a relativist unfazed by the prospect of mixing the 'fantastical' or the 'magical' together with the 'real,' so much that he works with the assumption that it would be ridiculous to think that anybody—not just a sociologist—could work under the illusion that 'fantasy,' 'magic' and 'reality' are something apart.

For all its ostensible plurality, what is unmistakable is that the discursive formation known as sociology is grounded in a Platonic ontology of Plotinus *Being*, which if it denotes the totality of 'beings,' also rejects the idea of indeterminate 'being,' and is grounded on what Jacques Rancière calls 'the impossibility of doing two things at once.' The upshot of this is that it finds poet-intellectuals objectionable because they have a predilection for mimesis as well as their conventional academic concerns.[1] That Bauman is himself a poet-intellectual, then, has major implications for his relationship with sociology, not least because he refuses to speak to it merely in its national language, thinks outside its putative epistemological, ontological and methodological frameworks, and like all good poets imitates the actions of others and dabbles in

[1] Interestingly, as Arthur Hilary Armstrong (1989: 249) points out, Plotinus himself believed in magic but since he thought that it could "not affect the higher life of the soul, it was of no importance to him."

fantasy and magic. It is for these reasons that sociology perceives him as a threat to the very foundations of its national authority.[2]

Zyg-geist Bauman: The Ghost in Sociology's Machine

A spectre is haunting sociology—the spectre of *Zyg-geist Bauman*—and the discursive formation is unable to contemplate the implications of its haunting presence. However, contrary to its relationship with the *living-dead* spectre of Karl Marx (see Derrida 1994), sociology cannot bear Bauman's *dead-living* critical gaze and finds it impossible to return his look. Bauman is therefore a paradox in sociology; it knows who he is, and it knows not who he is; but because it knows more about not who he is, it does not so much fear him as dread him. It is this not really knowing who he is that makes Bauman seem so profoundly disturbing to sociology; at the same time, though, it makes it easier for the discursive formation to deal with him and his ideas. The upshot is that his influence is rarely felt in any intensity because as we have already seen, sociology merely assigns some rational causes for its refutation of his ideas. However, what I shall argue in this article is that sociology has difficulty avoiding the dreaded Bauman because he is too *authentic* to be completely extinguished. He is, as Agnes Heller (1999: 227) would say, an intellectual true to the leap, *authentic* in his existential choices, pulled and not pushed—somebody who is a personality and has got as close to perfection as a modern person can—who serves as an embodiment of the virtues he writes about and who is true to the challenges currently confronting his vocation.

What the subsequent critique will also suggest is that this *authentic* Zygmunt Bauman's *hauntology* offers sociology a new 'poetics of knowledge' (Rancière 2003), which in aligning itself to 'the privileged space of incertitude' found in literature (Fuentes 2005), consigns its pervading scientific *ontology* to the metaphysical dustbin and replaces it with something approximating the poetic operations of analysis, synthesis, description and narration tied up with analogy, irony, metaphorization, metonymy and symbolization. In other words, I shall argue that Bauman offers sociology the world of a writer who has absorbed many, many ideas because he loves books, savours them, devours them, and wants to change the world with them. Bauman is the sociologist as reader, as definite and as marked a category as that of poet, for whom all the activity and pleasure of life derives from the experience of words. Just as his work is imbued with everyday life so it has Milan Kundera in it, and Miguel de Cervantes, and Robert Musil, and Italo Calvino, and a whole host of other literary greats, from Honoré de Balzac to Emile Zola, and more conventionally thought of intellectuals, too, from Karl Marx to Antonio Gramsci, Georg Simmel to Jean Baudrillard. Bauman's work is not simply sociology then: it has the full force of the sociological imagination with it, which makes it innovative and fresh and urgent, both in what it says and the way it says it.

[2] In developing this argument I am indebted to Peter Hallward (2006) and his incisive critique of the political philosophy of Jacques Rancière.

Bauman also challenges sociology's tacit ways and means in other ways by firmly placing the sociological enterprise in the realm of politics and the 'equality of speaking beings.' To paraphrase Rancière, what Bauman does is provide sociology with an alternative critical discourse that undoes the boundaries which predicates its national authority on the assumption of a specific ways and means fitting the specificity of its particular field of objectivity. So his own practice of sociology goes along with his idea of politics. In this way its alternative *hauntology* is anarchical, in the sense that it traces back the specificity of sociology's discursive competences to the 'egalitarian' level of linguistic competence and poetic invention (Rancière 2003: 12).

This critique will also suggest that if sociology were to make the effort to come to terms with Bauman's *authenticity* it would also learn that by trying to remain sociological in the solidly modern meaning of the founding fathers it is merely preserving concepts, theories and methodologies from the past, of which it has built up a considerable archive. The crux of this argument will be that what sociology needs to recognize is that if Bauman's work carries with it a strong belief that the discipline is an institution worth preserving, this has to be combined with an impulse to confront the limits of the nation and its national language. Under the local orders of the nation it has simply become insipid, too dependent on its own ready-made cognitive frames, and as a result is uninspiring and uninspired; Bauman is, on the other hand, imaginative, autonomous and original. Sociology is moribund; Bauman is a man who maintains his soul alive. Sociology is domesticated—it never ponders its *doxa* values—and nationalistic; Bauman is radical and cosmopolitan. Sociology is unproblematically a realist and empirically driven social science; Bauman is a furiously metaphorical allegorist and teller of tales. Sociology steadfastly continues to follow its quest for the truth of *deep* meaning over what it perceives as postmodernism's fictionality of *surface* dead-ends; Bauman gets on with the magical pursuit of life's unlimited *rhizomatic* pathways and dealing with the moral dilemmas with which he is confronted in the process.

Dealing with the Discursive Formation of Sociology

In anticipation of my critics, who will no doubt point out that I draw on scant empirical evidence in order to back up this critique, which also treats sociology homogeneously, I should like to point out at the offset that this is to miss the point of utilizing Michel Foucault's (1972) idea of the discursive formation as the basis of my critique—a semantic tableau of empirical data rendered for its own sake simply would not do. To contest discursive formations, whose structures and strictures, as Foucault argued, are always imbued with a *microphysics* of power-knowledge, is to critically assess them, not by reference to either the flickering surfaces of truth used to nourish their empirical validity, nor on the basis of their putative deeper ideologies, but in relation to what they are in themselves as authorities of delimitation and government. The essence of this critique is that, in the words of the Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes, it asks some 'operative questions' of the discursive formation known as sociology: Whose voice is it, whose imagination, whose language, whose desires, whose dreams—whose power-

knowledge does it speak? These are the critical questions confronting a discipline which in the last ten years or so has become old very quickly.

I should like to stress at the offset, however, that my adopting the idea of the discursive formation does not mean that I take Foucault's poststructuralist position as the basis of my own, not even that I am altogether convinced by the idea as the basis for effective critique. On the contrary, my rationale for choosing the idea of its tactics is based on two beliefs. The first of these follows Clifford Geertz's (1973) dictum which is that there is not a critical theory which can 'explain everything, not even everything human, but it can still explain something,' especially if it is good at 'isolating just what that something is.' The second is my belief that the idea has the deconstructive ability to allow me to engage the discursive practices of sociology on its own ground in order to contest its claims to 'a spurious objectivity' (Norris 1982: 88). To paraphrase Geertz once again, it is this cutting of sociology down to size, therefore actually insuring its continued importance, rather than undermining it, that is the purpose of my critique. Since Bauman continues to think of sociology as his intellectual home, this enables me to develop this critique from within so to speak; that is, it allows me to use his work to challenge the sociological *doxa* and point to inconsistencies in its ways and means.

Sociology's Order of Discourse

My starting point is that if 'interdisciplinary' has always been sociology's watchword, it's plurality for the most part currently takes place under the restrictive conditions placed on it by the solid modernity of the discursive formation. Sociology seems to 'take over' whatever it interprets about the world in order to transform it ready-made to fit its own interior universe. It's as if all of reality has to be 'sociologized' and that all the many faces of the world have to be understood through sociological eyes. Consequently, its key concepts, theories and methodologies—which have been so-often-written and so-often-read—become not just concepts, theories and methodologies, but the way that sociology thinks—its national language. In the event, its incumbents tend to think not just with but only through its own *doxa*. Maintaining the present-day sociology is in this regard a matter of faith which demands of its protagonists a certain suspension of disbelief and a willingness to engage in its prescriptive language games. The upshot is that dated concepts in sociology—class, community, gender, 'race,' society, youth and so on and so forth—are now unaccompanied by actual social phenomena and new social phenomena are unaccompanied by appropriate concepts.

What that most astute student of the particularities of waste disposal Colin Burrow (2006) recently said of the lives of clothes, furniture and writers is currently true of sociology's key concepts: most of them are at that awkward period in their existence 'when they become more than dated but something less than a piece of history.' As Bauman points out, what tends to happen to things that have exceeded their efficacy in liquid modernity is that we throw them away without a second thought. However,

in sociology 'things' that have exceeded their sell-by-dates seem to be much more complicated phenomena, because not only do they not embarrass their adherents, but they also appear to carry on captivating them. It's as if sociology is unable to look at its 'things' whose usefulness has reached the point of no return with a sense of historical contingency because, in Burrow's words, these things are "much more complicated and intriguing than they might at first appear. They open a gap in our ways of perceiving because they fall between our aesthetic and our historical sense." What this observation suggests for sociology is that when it looks at it's tried and tested concepts, it gives the impression of being unable to recognise that an age has past, and it does not have the means of giving those things the benefit of a historical perspective, which also suggests that as an institution it has developed neither the reflexivity nor an effective ways and means to think about *how* tastes for concepts are made and *why* they change. In sum, sociology is not yet preoccupied with its own senescence, with its place at the tail end of a solid modern sociological imagination that has run its course and outrun its credibility.

Sociology's Mythological Practice

As Ernst Bloch (1991: 97), that most insightful theorist of the great contradiction of time, might well have put it, the subjectivity of sociology is one of non-contemporaneity: it is a national institution which belongs to an earlier time while inhabiting the globalization of the present. If sociology and the world outside it co-exist, they do so only externally, through the fact that they merely can be seen to be doing so—but the truth is that they do not between them share the same time and space. In the event, sociology has become an exemplary example of the twenty-first century version of Roland Barthes' idea of *mythological* practice.

As is well known, Barthes (1972) argued that *mythologies* are those ideological signifying practices which sustain the bourgeois hegemony. However, he could never have anticipated that sociology would one day commit the paradoxical Barthesian theft of high-jacking from *itself* the signs of its *own* worn out concepts, in the process giving them uncorroborated saturated surplus meanings in order to give its contemporary contingency a putative justification: since time has robbed sociology of its myths, it decides to rob them back. Yet these appropriations result not in any 'true mythology,' not a new 'unified and unifying myth' made to the measure of contemporary global conditions, but merely versions of concepts deconsecrated of their putative objectionable features and repackaged as something like their solid modern counterparts of yesteryear, which sociology's unimaginative adherents can take 'ready-made' off the peg. As Baudrillard might say, once sociology exchanged itself for itself in this way, it became no longer the 'science of society' but the idea sociology and in the process replaced the sociological imagination with the twofold curse of 'an immersion in the real and banality,' and that conceptual absorption in itself. As he explains:

> This is precisely what the 'ready-made' does, when it simply withdraws an object from its function, without changing it in any way, and thereby turns it into a gallery piece … in the grip of a devouring aesthetic,

and everywhere takes its place in a kind of virtual museum. And so we have the museification, like a 'ready-made,' of the whole technical environment in the form of an industrial wasteland (Baudrillard 2005: 111).

To this extent sociology is absorbed in its own 'Glass Bead Game' to recall Hermann Hesse's (1971) memorable conceit. What remains for sociology now is to play with the existing elements of its Game-culture, whose adherents are performers rather than creators who play the sociological Game according to its own 'special language and set rules,' which is a form of intellectual alchemy based on both exoteric and esoteric aspects (Meakin 1995): an exotericism which reflects sociology's commitment to its own limited techniques of knowledge absorption and an esotericism reflected in its misplaced confidence in the ability of its *lingua sacra*.

As Foucault after reading Martin Heidegger might have put it, in making the world under the normalizing gaze of its own national language, the discursive formation known as sociology merely communicates its own truth by calling to attention what is there. But its language has by now lost touch with the outside world to which it ostensibly refers; it merely spreads untruth and establishes inauthentic existence. Instead of mediating human being-in-the-world by revealing it intelligible in its interpretations, sociology obscures it instead by *covering it with itself*. In effect the intermediary becomes the principal of attention and the true principal is displaced. The language of sociology itself, which spreads untruth, becomes more authoritative than the truth because the reference by which the truth should be authenticated is obscured and forgotten and therefore raises no questions; the upshot is that what is commonly said passes because there is nobody there to be challenged. Losing touch with the already existing reality its incumbents turn from one thing to another, seeking accomplishments, insatiable in their curiosity, living ostensibly 'full' intellectual lives, but becoming increasingly alienated from themselves and others and, at the end of the day, the world itself. In this way, the discursive formation known as sociology is today insensibly without a sense of its intended vocation.[3]

That Was Then but This Is Now: Sociology Made to the Measure of Liquid Modernity

The world is not what it used to be and sociology's heart no longer beats in time to its new instincts. In marked contrast to the solid modern survival instincts of the orthodoxy, however, Bauman is concerned not only with questioning our putative assumptions about modernity but also with what it means to practise sociology in a world that is modern in a different way than it was in the past. In this sense he is what Derrida would have called sociology's thinker of the untimely, who just as he treats its tacitly acknowledged lexicon of concepts with suspicion also puts into question the idea of whether a discipline which seems content to be only 'contemporary to itself' really is in a position to understand a liquid modern world whose time is always 'out of joint' (Derrida 1995).

[3] In developing these ideas I am indebted to Harold John Blackham's (1961) perceptive summary of Martin Heidegger's existential philosophical work.

One of the major differences between the patterned lives made to the measure of a *solidly* modern social class society and underpatterned lives made to the measure of an in-between *liquid* modern sociality is that the strictures and opportunities which governed the former *were* primarily *structural* and are therefore experienced in *societal* ways while the opportunities and strictures which govern the latter *are* experienced with an immediacy which confronts *individuals* long before they have the chance to grasp their structural causes. In the event, Bauman knows that we need the kind of sociology which is able to deal with the *psychological* as well as the *sociological* realism of the kind of existence in which "each one of us, is instructed (to paraphrase Ulrich Beck) to seek biographical exits from the socially concocted mess" (Bauman in Blackshaw 2002: 3).

In marked contrast to the 'legislating' ways of sociology made to the measure of a 'solid' focused modernity, Bauman is unable to derive easy explanations for this 'liquid' life or that 'melting' moment as they emerge in the hustle and bustle of the contemporary world, simply because it is difficult to put a 'solid' name on 'liquid' phenomena which have runny properties that transcend the staple concepts suggested by the orthodoxy. The foremost difference between 'solids' and 'liquids' is that the latter do not tolerate the pressure differences between any two points and in adopting this law of physics as an analogy, what Bauman is suggesting is that sociology must reject the dichotomies which have nagged it since its inception, and which it has for far too long imagined are the mainstay of the human condition, at the same time as recognizing that it is individualization which is modernity's own indelible force.

Liquid modernity is a world that slips out of reach just when you think you have a grasp of where it's going; and what is needed is a sociology made to the measure of grasping this contingency. What this requires is a sociology centred not on individuals but on *Dasein* and the contingency of human being-in-the-world. It is through his recognition of Derrida's important insight that *in-betweenness* is most useful—unlike orthodox sociological categories, such as class and community, it has no 'full sense of itself'—that Bauman disrupts what Rancière calls the 'great police project' of social control reflected in sociological discourse which still wants to see people properly 'rooted in their place and time' (quoted in Hallward 2006: 118). He does this by mapping for us how liquid modern lives are lived through contingency, for the most part unclassed and unclassifiable, rhizomatic rather than rooted, their trains of experience busy with unremitting new arrivals and speedy departures, as well as unexpected diversions, derailments and cancellations rather than the secure tracks that once sustained being-in-the-world in modernity's formative years.

The Contingency of the Ineffable

It is commonly said that historians feel that they need a gap of time to see how public events shape private lives and how private lives shape public events, but Bauman also works with the knowledge that sociologists, too, cannot escape this kind of contingency. The liquid modern sociality of men and women is always in the making

and sociologists are always inevitably one or two steps behind that. In the event Bauman knows that a sociology made to the measure of liquid modernity must have a ways and means for dealing with the ineffable. The ineffable is that what is unknown about what we individually and collectively experience in the world and for which we do not yet have words. As that most discerning interpreter of the human experience Jenny Diski (2005) recently suggested, the ineffable is something we can see, hear, taste, touch, smell, but we cannot say exactly what it is, its precise meaning always evading our attempts to put it into words. The ineffable says no to conceptualisation, not only because of its absence of clear cognitive presence, but also because it is always on the brink of slipping away.

Bauman knows that sociology cannot re-invent its vocabulary overnight and that its starting point must be from what Milan Kundera would call 'the already known.' However, what sociology needs right now is a way of writing sociology that is capable of dealing with the ineffable *and* that 'individual' part of the human experience which has traditionally been the concern of existentialism and psychoanalysis, with the premise that the ways and the means of the individual psyche can be traced to wider societal processes and events. In dealing with this contingency, Bauman's work operates in the manner of Jean-François Lyotard's (1988) *differend* to the language game of sociology. The ineffable of the not yet spoken of his metaphors and analogies call into question sociology's unities of discourse by developing alternative ways of understanding the world that do not as of yet exist as ready-made concepts. In this way, Bauman puts off until further notice sociology's predisposition for the closure of meaning implied by its absolute faith in the national language, which under the auspices of the spurious unity of the discursive formation signals the domestication of the sociological imagination.

Ambivalence and the Sociological Imagination

One of Bauman's prime concerns is the ambivalences presented by contingency—one of the most incurable sites being individual men's and women's seemingly irreconcilable twin desires for freedom and security—that currently take place against an uncertain, disordered and fragmented series of conditions which he calls *Unsicherheit*. What this attention to ambivalence teaches sociology is that whilst there are many ways of being-in-the-world, all humans share the meaning of what it means to be human—in other words, all human beings have the sense of an inevitable, universal, relation but with contingency attached to the cultural form it takes. It was this key insight of the convergence of the contingent and the inevitable that first alerted Bauman to the ambivalence of human being-in-the-world.

The ability to recognise ambivalence is to be blessed with the liquid modern sociological imagination which is itself the beginning of morality. Unfortunately, sociology does not recognize this contingency. As Bauman (2000) suggests in the essay "Afterthought: On Writing; On Writing Sociology," the dichotomy underpinning sociology from its inception was the one between *conformity* and *deviance*, which in

common with other binary oppositions involved a hierarchy. Under the auspices of sociology dominated by the hegemony of structural functionalism *conformity* was deemed to hold sway, but in the 1960s an alternative epistemology emerged to give sociology a conflict perspective it lacked, resisting in the process functionalism's remorseless abstraction of human experience. However, the binary opposition was eventually exhausted once it had been established that there could no longer be any satisfactory or general agreed definition of what *deviance* was—and therefore no way of being certain we could ever distinguish it.[4] The problem with exposing and deconstructing this hierarchy was that it led sociology down the path of postmodernism and made its own relativism explicit. Realizing that the relativist resting place is no resting place at all, sociology attempted a blind retreat and not only found itself caught between nostalgia and intellectual myopia, but decided to replace the opposition between *conformity* and *deviance* with the opposition between *truth* and *illusion*. In a nutshell, at the time when the dichotomy between *conformity* and *deviance* imploded, sociology tried to return to the common sense solidity of the world and ducked the opportunity to re-imagine itself anew in ways that challenged, stretched and redefined the sociological imagination.

As I have argued already, there is no certain way of telling the 'real' from the 'fantastical' or the 'magical.' Accordingly, Bauman (2000) suggests that the challenge facing sociology today is not about uncovering the 'truth' behind the 'illusion,' but about the opposition between *responsibility* and *bystanding*. In other words recognizing the key predicament that ambivalence poses for sociology is that being confronted with ethical decisions is never going to go away. For Bauman, it is not that ambivalence is necessarily a problem, but how to deal with it is. To make a decision about ambivalence based on 'legislative' truths or as a matter of taste for ready-made concepts is to act without moral evaluation and in an irresponsible manner. To remain indecisive about ambivalence is equally irresponsible because not only does it mean bystanding and "taking shelter where responsibility for one's action need not be taken by the actors" (Bauman 2000: 213), but it is also a denial of one's individual freedom to act. To be moral is to be interested in decision-making about ambivalence and its contingencies and consequences. It is, in other words, about taking 'responsibility for your responsibility,' which is to embrace the freedom to act and embrace the autonomy and the opportunity for an authentic, moral and magical existence that accompanies having something individual to say, which is precisely the kind of accountability that a healthy democratic society as well a healthy democratic sociology thrives on.

Some Concluding Remarks: On Re-Imagining Sociology

What Theodor Adorno once said of humankind's relationship with nature is true of sociology's relationship with the world: it will not let it speak for itself, because it fears that if its gives it its own voice it would mean its own death. What Bauman offers sociology is a way of stripping away the protective layers of this closure between itself

[4] For a fuller discussion, see Chapter One in Blackshaw & Crabbe (2004).

and the world—those worn-out double glazed windows that muffle its ability to hear and mist its ability to see—that at the present time prevents it from doing its job. In effect, what he teaches sociology is that 'things' don't have to be dark and difficult and that the sociological imagination comes into its own when they are more clear and straightforward.

In this regard it is a play on the figure of Hegel's Owl Minerva that best symbolises Bauman's enduring gift to a discipline which is aware of him only as a ghostly presence. However, whereas Hegel's nocturnal bird begins its flight at the onset of dusk, Bauman's rises to the air at dawn and has flight of the eagle and the wingspan of the albatross (Fuentes 2005). When Bauman started painting with his multi-coloured intellectual palette, a formidable body of wisdom and knowledge came back to life and was rejuvenated with an exceptional boldness of the sociological imagination far-reaching in its scope and founded on what Umberto Eco would call an 'open work,' which thrives on handing out limitless invitations and in its enthusiasm for the world compels anybody interested in its ways and means to engage and contribute to its *universite*.

As the late Edward Said always used to say, it is the role of the intellectual always to be asserting the alternative. And so it is with Bauman, who offers us a version of sociology whose watchword might be 'only the impossible can arrive.' In this regard, the Derridaean task that Bauman has set himself is the impossibility of asserting the rights of sociology as an intellectual heterodoxy without losing the sense of what sociology is (and can be) as a discipline. With regard to his own contributions, all that Bauman asks of his readers is that they temporarily suspend their own favoured positions and imagine that for now ontological questions do not apply and in the process take his word in assuming that certain things are 'true,' his objective being to inspire some critical dialogue and hopefully accomplish something worthwhile for humanity along the way.

The great virtue of Bauman's sociology—which is a vindication of his moral message that we all need to actively take 'responsibility for our responsibility'—is that not only does it encourage us to think for ourselves but it also thinks with us rather than leaving us to try and make sense of things alone. But the ambivalence of this selfless opening out to the Other comes with an inevitable sense of loneliness for Bauman himself. Like Edward Said's medieval wayfaring monk, Hugo de San Victor, Bauman knows that the intellectual who feels most comfortable in his own homeland can aspire to be at best nothing more than a tender beginner, while he who feels at home everywhere is not only more open to new ideas but his own are also characteristically more interesting and complex. I have argued in this article that Bauman has had to pay the price that comes with this kind of intellectual autonomy: the feeling of being an exile everywhere, but particularly in his own chosen home. Had he been alive today, Hugo de San Victor would have commented that Bauman has merely grasped the essence of what it means to be an authentic modern intellectual.

All great sociologists stand apart from their time. They are not afraid of leaving the past and operating in some version of the present that is altogether their own. Bauman is that kind of sociologist. To paraphrase Salman Rushdie's (2006: 4) incisive

assessment of the great novelist and playwright Samuel Beckett, Bauman is the man who speaks sociology's national language more beautifully than most. Yet this does not stop him choosing to learn foreign languages, which he learned to speak with great difficulty, so that he is obliged to choose his words carefully, forced to give up fluency and to find the hard words that come with difficulty, and then after all that finding he puts all that learning into sociology's national language, and in the process creates a new sociology containing all the difficulty of foreign languages, of the coining of thought in a second language made to the measure of liquid modernity, a new sociology with the power to change sociology for ever. This is Zygmunt Bauman. This is his great contribution to sociology. This is a sociology that is different to what it used to be. This is a sociology that is too good for the discursive formation known as sociology.

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