

by FRED INGLIS

Freedom and Consumerism: a critique of Zygmunt Bauman's sociology

by Mark Davis

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"Who is Zygmunt Bauman? The greatest sociologist writing in English today ..." announces an early chapter epigraph in this book. Well? If he isn't, who is? Mark Davis, in his plain, open-minded and admirable study, takes nothing for granted about his grand subject, but works his way through an account of Bauman's enormous *oeuvre* to a conclusion which leaves us in little doubt about the man's importance .

Davis joins quite a throng of Bauman-commentaries, and in a diction and with a tone always stately, sometimes ponderous ("to this I now turn....."), and elsewhere quaintly adorned with Latin tags ("*spiritus movens*", "*differentia specifica*"), guides us through the vocabulary and architecture of Bauman's theory of contemporary consumer society.

That he has to do so without any recourse to grown-up economics is perhaps in itself a criticism of his original, particularly at a season in which economic catastrophe has split open consumerism at the seams. For I do not doubt that the "inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind" which Wordsworth invokes so movingly will restore once avid consumers to the stolid virtues of daily domesticity and neighbourly thrift still deep-rooted in the culture.

In saying so, I intend no disparagement of Bauman's sombre warnings and dark judgements. Davis slights none of these, taking us carefully through Bauman's sociology, circumscribed by the key concept of "liquid modernity" or the familiar experience of (as Marx put it in 1848) "everything solid melting into air". Desperately trying to catch this ungraspable, quicksilver pouringness of experience, postmodern individuals believe themselves to find freedom and fulfilment according to the 'agenda' of the open market and abiding by the "codes of choice" with which it seduces its guileless victims.

We need to brace ourselves by recalling the sheer familiarity of the experience of lostness. Not long after Marx saw capitalism melting down community, J A Froude wrote of "the intellectual lightships all breaking from their moorings" and just around the corner of the century lay Eliot's *Waste Land* and D H Lawrence's *Apocalypse*. Lostness and liquefaction have been with us since the first declaration of modernity.

Not that that is much consolation, and Bauman's steely condemnations of the colossal self-indulgences unleashed by headlong consumerism since the great boom began to resound have dateless force. He picked up (as Davis shrewdly tells us) the implicit theory of consumer totalitarianism to be found in the works of the old Frankfurters, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and here, pertinently added by Davis to the books of the prophets, Erich Fromm, and wrote their minatory apprehensions into a curse spoken over the echoing note of the shopping mall.

Davis, in his shy way, seeks to moderate Bauman's awful severity. He objects that retail therapy has, dash it all, its keen pleasures, and that in any case its customers may well be able to see through its transience even as they take such pleasure in it. In particular, he objects, as well he might, to the confidence with which Bauman ascribes an ethical psychology to what is going on in the minds of millions as they observe the rituals of exclusion (another new and key social function in Bauman's sociology) in those dreadful orgies of narcissism practised in *Big Brother* and all that.

Surely Davis is right in his reservation? But surely he is not quite robust enough in making the argument turn on the issue of liberalism. Both he and (on his account) Bauman define freedom pretty well as Isaiah Berlin did in his Cold War propaganda essays, as "freedom from ..." and "freedom to ...". This version of freedom then dwindles down to the pinpoint of 'choice'. The free chooser is, however, hardly the free citizen. In the struggle for liberty before liberalism, as Quentin Skinner has many times reminded us, freedom was found by Milton in self-government and self-reliance. In Amartya Sen's powerful attempts to make freedom the recoverable condition of the world's poor, it is created out of those local 'capabilities' which may truly serve a free person's free 'functionings'.

Nonetheless Davis is right to put the question of freedom at the heart of the human sciences as it is at the heart of Bauman's mighty labours. Bauman himself, more a cultural critic in the

tradition of Ruskin and William Morris, or in his native Poland of Bronislaw Geremek, than a grand theorist, is in turn right to locate the queasiness in the guts of postmodernity as caused by the mixture of fear and freedom. But the great moral tradition of leftist humanism to which both Bauman and his expositor pay their allegiance is a damn sight tougher and more resilient than either of them allows.