

Outline zygmunt
bauman's key ideas
and discuss their
potential or actual
value to...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The above quote is taken from a brief speech made by the Dean of the University of Oslo to introduce the visiting Zygmunt Bauman in 1997. It clearly illustrates that Bauman is a much respected and valued writer, and a key intellectual in the postmodern era. In this essay I will briefly paint a picture Bauman's background, where he is from and what his influences were. I will then attempt to outline his key ideas and theories, drawing from my own readings of some of his works such as *Postmodernity and its Discontents*, *Modernity and Ambivalence* and *Globalisation: The Human Consequences*, as well as the readings and conclusions of others.

I will then endeavour to question the role and influence of these ideas in geographical thought and writing and discuss their potential or actual value to geographers. Zygmunt Bauman was born in Poland in 1925 into a Jewish family. In 1939 he and his family were forced to flee to the Soviet Union as World War two broke out, at this point Bauman thought little of sociology and believed there was little sociology to think of under Stalin's rule.

He later joined the Free Polish Army, aged 18 and managed to rise to the rank of Captain. Following his discharge Bauman began studying and eventually achieved an MA in Social Sciences, this lead him to further study and eventually to a lecturing post in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Warsaw in 1945. It was his time in Warsaw that teachers such as Stanislaw Ossowski and Julian Hochfeld influenced him, encouraging him to reflect on reason, ethics and philosophy.

It wasn't until 1971 that Bauman moved to the UK and began lecturing at the University of Leeds where he remained for several years and became head of

the Sociology Department. Following his retirement in 1990 Bauman became Emeritus Professor of Sociology at both the University of Leeds and the University of Warsaw. There are a number of works and theorists believed to have influenced Bauman many of which are reflected in his work.

Nineteenth century influences include that of Karl Marx and Max Weber, and in the twentieth century, Theodor Adorno, Cornelius Castoriadis and Emmanuel Levinas. The French philosopher Levinas is believed to be responsible for the moral turn taken in Bauman's writings on postmodernity. However of all the people that influenced Bauman and his writing it was, what Bauman himself referred to as the 'big triad' of influences: Antonio Gramsci, Georg Simmel and Bauman's wife, Janina (also an author).

Zygmunt Bauman has written many papers and books over quite a broad range of ideas, from basic sociology (Thinking Sociologically, 1990) to the cultural effects of Globalisation (Globalisation: The Human Consequences, 1998). However the common thread in the vast majority of his writings is that of the transformation of modernity and the emergence of postmodernity, which is reflected in the titles of a number of his major books such as Culture, Modernity and Revolution, Imitations of Postmodernity, Postmodern Ethics, Post-modernity and Intellectuals, Liquid Modernity and Postmodernity and its Discontents.

Barry Smart describes Bauman's work as "analytically sensitive and acutely responsive to a diverse range of complex local and global processes of transformation to which contemporary social life and human experience continues, inevitably under modern conditions, to be subject" (Elliot &

Turner, 2001: 327). It is almost impossible to outline Bauman's key ideas due to the volume and variety of his works. However I propose to sketch trends in his writing as well as outlining the significant ideas that have emerged from them.

The most fundamental trend in Bauman's work is his quest toward a more critical and emancipatory sociology, particularly evident in *Towards a Critical Sociology-An Essay on Common Sense and Emancipation*. That is Zygmunt Bauman is constantly searching for a better understanding of society. His focus here is on society, the way in which it works, the elements that constitute it, the influences on it and the potential possibilities for it.

In particular Bauman takes great interest in consumerism and the idea of a 'consumer society', believing that to truly get a grasp of contemporary society, and indeed contemporary social theory, there is a need to fully understand and analyse these concepts. This would most certainly tie in with geographer's investigations into retailing, consumption and space. In addition he believed critically analysing the traditions of the Enlightenment and Modernity were vital to learn about society today. What Bauman also considers in great detail is ambivalence.

He talks about ambivalence as "the alter ego of language and its permanent companion" (Bauman, 1991: 1), that we shouldn't perceive ambivalence as a disorder of language but accept it as a normal aspect of linguistic practice. He brings this idea back round to sociology by saying that if we are to study society then we naturally classify or segregate society, in other words we give the world structure. In creating a structure we are attempting to

eliminate any form of randomness, that something either fits into one class/category, or another but cannot exist as a random entity i. e. structuration tries to rid the world of ambivalence.

What Bauman believes is that if this process of structuration or classification is not perfectly adequate to segregate all things, if we can't fit every entity into a category, then ambivalence emerges regardless of the structuration's attempt at abolishing it. " The struggle against ambivalence is, therefore, both self-destructive and self propelling... it creates its own problems in the course of resolving them" (Bauman, 1991: 3). I think this idea could be of great use to geographers, particularly in cultural and social geography.

Ambivalence can certainly be used as ammunition in the great social class debate or indeed as an explanation of these classes. I certainly think it would be of interest to geographers in considering the concept of social exclusion; perhaps we could use ambivalence to explain why we have a social underclass, that in our definition of classes we are in some ways responsible for the socially excluded. In his book *Postmodernity and its Discontents* Bauman looks at both the gains and losses of ' human cohabitation' and the possibility of finding the most favourable balance between the two.

He looks in depth at security, freedom, individuality and solidarity, and their place in society and how he believes we have come to neglect them. He writes that perhaps society (to its discontent) has lost these elements or sacrificed them in some way, in our pursuit for purity and the perfect way of life. This is evident in his comparison of the modern and the postmodern: "

The discontents of modernity arose from a kind of security which tolerated too little freedom in the pursuit of individual happiness.

The discontents of postmodernity arise from a kind of freedom of pleasure seeking which tolerates too little individual security" (Bauman, 1997: 3) He goes on to show that the postmodern world's pursuit of purity leads only to the creation of social undesirables and promotes negative attitudes to persons, such the unemployed or homeless, that might fall under such a category. By desiring a pure we are inadvertently generating an impure, "the extremity of the form promoted as pure" (Bauman, 1997: 16).

Again such ideas could be of great value to cultural geographers seeking an explanation or solution to society's excluded and Britain's underclass. It also ties in with the idea of cultural identities; peoples' cultural identities must in some way stem from their perceptions of what it is pure. It also induces thoughts of the role of social undesirables, which Bauman believes to be 'functional' as "it is their all-to-blattant hardships that reduce ones own worries to marginal inconveniences.

It is their evident unhappiness that inspires the rest of us to thank God daily" (Bauman, 1997: 44). Bauman's work on globalisation is certainly of great value to geographers and economists alike, indeed it has formed the basis of my dissertation in which I am investigating the effects of globalisation in the media and advertising industry. In *Globalisation: The Human Consequences* (1998) Bauman attempts to unravel globalisation by looking at its social roots and consequences.

In doing so he examines the role of structures, institutions and social processes and the way in which they oppress the human condition. “

Zygmunt Bauman shows in his detailed history of globalisation, while human affairs now take place on a global scale, we are not able to direct events; we can only watch as boundaries, institutions and loyalties shift in rapid and unpredictable ways” (Columbia University Press Website). Bauman suggests that despite globalisations uniting forces it is actually responsible for emphasising and enlarging the disparity between the rich and poor.

This idea could certainly be used by geographers in their investigations into wealth disparities and possibly try to detect whether the force of globalisation varies geographically, and therefore results in spatial differences in wealth (North-South Divide). Bauman also believes that with new technologies and the globalisation process we are fast losing individuality “ Rather than the hybrid culture we had hoped for, globalisation is creating a more homogenous world” (Columbia University Press Website).

Zygmunt Bauman has written, and continues to write, detailed investigations and analyses of modernity, postmodernity and sociology. “ Bauman is one of the most articulate and theoretically sophisticated interpreters of modern - that is postmodern life... Bauman's stance is that of an interpreter of modern life, not an intellectual seeking to legislate or prescribe” (Trinity & All Saints Website).

His works are extremely accessible to the reader and he writes in a way that is extremely easy to understand in comparison to the majority of his peers. A prolific writer, Bauman offers his analyses in prose that is always lucid and

<https://assignbuster.com/outline-zygmunt-baumans-key-ideas-and-discuss-their-potential-or-actual-value-to-geographers-essay-sample/>

accessible" (Trinity & All Saints Website). He writes to produce a text "demanding that the reader should look at things s/he would rather leave unexamined" (Bauman, 1997: 4). It is my belief that much of his work is of little value for physical geographers but to the human aspect of the subject I think Bauman's writings are of significant value.

Humanistic geography, phenomenology, cultural, social and economic geographies can all benefit from the ideas the great writer promotes. I might even go so far to say that it would be poor practice for geographers to neglect Bauman's ideas, as we cannot ignore that morals, security, freedom, individuality, solidarity, purity, ambivalence, consumption and globalisation are important aspects of every day life, of society and of geography.