

Bauman in the wilderness: sociology in the dry state of modernity

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Dabbling in a ludicrous study, *Sociology at prayer: utterances in the wilderness*, generates the need to attend to fellow sociological travellers, not as rivals but as sources of support from those who also hazard into unknown territory, and for me Bauman is a notable companion. This is not to imperialise Bauman to some sort of Catholic hegemony but rather to pay respects to the theological prospects he wrests from his sociology, all the more original for emerging from an agnostic Jewish sociologist. Bauman stands singularly in English sociology, not merely in his accomplishments but also in terms of his decent references to Catholicism. His comments on John Paul II are warm, and this response is more than one Pole giving respect to another.

In these openings one finds an unexpected source of sociological solidarity, one especially needed in the present deeply secularised culture where the mass media seems to have re-invented the implicit religion of English society: anti-Catholicism. The possibility of a dialogue, as between Pope Benedict XVI and Habermas on post-secularity and the place of religion in modernity would be inconceivable here, so entrenched are secular prejudices. It takes intellectuals of stature with European sensibilities to see these possibilities and in that context Bauman can be appreciatively appraised.

An indication of his status and significance as a European intellectual and sociologist is well indicated by inspection of the reverse of the title page of *Modernity and the Holocaust*. It is difficult to think of one living sociologist, whose print history for one book runs to four lines, the study being repeatedly re-printed, and of late twice in one year. That study is one of an amazingly productive writing career, one that has yielded over twenty books and encouraging for many, one that blossomed in retirement. It is by his concepts and insights that Bauman has made mark a remarkably career of self-reflection and adjustment to the times.

In itself, Bauman's long career of addressing the switching frontiers of sociology's uneasy relationship with modernity is worthy of comment. But he has done much more than this. While not his term, Bauman's sociology is characterised by a reflexivity that returns to the concerns of Weber and Simmel, being marked by a concern with the moral quality of a culture of modernity as it matures into post and liquid versions. For those of my generation, the song by the Byrds, 'Turn! Turn! Turn' (based on the Book of Ecclesiastes) provides resonances. It seems to denote properties of the hermeneutic circles that mark sociology's own turnings of late, so that having turned to culture in the 1990s, the present turn is into religion. Yet, this carries an illusory property, as if religion had gone away but only awaited sociology's re-discovery of its return.

Reluctantly, as if opening a closet to find a ghost, sociology keeps finding religion has returned. One thinks of Daniel Bell's 'Return of the Sacred' in 1977; the realisation that Adorno and Benjamin had theological form; and the emergence of cults and sects as the rate busters on secularisation. Perhaps the rise of Islam in the West and 9/11 has forced sociology to make another turn to religion. These matters unsettle those wishing to keep sociology unsullied by any religious considerations, as if these were profoundly unsociological. For some strange reason, the border guards of sociology seem to have become lax in the inspection of passports at the frontiers of the discipline. Somehow, theology has slipped in behind religion and on to the territory of sociology. The unsettlements so generated seem to reflect a point of Taylor, in *A Secular Age*, that the victory of secularisation is pyrrhic. But if the war against religion was won and Comte's hopes were fulfilled, is sociology up to the mark of fleshing out its own Religion of Humanity? What is to be thought after secularity?

This has been an abiding concern of Bauman whose sociological career has moved through the fixations of the discipline, adulation of reason, hermeneutics, the limits of modernity and its fracture into postmodernity, the ethical considerations it generates, concerns that coincide with the realisation that the solidity which gives comfort to sociology has liquefied. Bauman compounds the

difficulties these movements yield by attending to the tyranny of choice these dilemmas generate. Further discomfort arises over the realisation Bauman brings to the fore that reason risks becoming tyrannical and that the trump card of modernity is dangerous to play with certainty, hence the need for ambiguity, uncertainty and unbelief. What he presents is a vision of sociology without theological props, a discipline seeking a basis of mutuality where man is called to express from his own resources ultimate god-like properties and a capacity to transcend the exigencies of existence. Over his long career, Bauman comes to a realisation that such a vision has become constricted as modernity matures from a belief in the solidity of social foundations to a sense of disbelief at ending up in a cultural quagmire, the circumstance of liquidity.

In surveying his long writing career, what emerges is the sense of journeying to some sort of accommodation with the implications of modernity as its moral properties unfold and this comes to finest expression in his latest book, *The Art of Life*. Perhaps it takes twenty books to write the one book that matters for it confronts a decidedly human need, to grope for the light. That light presupposes a contrast with the dark. That concern frames the book, but the reference is to Seneca not to John. Given his disenchantment with reason, it is not to be assumed that the source of reason comes from the illuminations that form the gifts of the Enlightenment. The source of the light is to come from elsewhere, and there the chinks of a theology emerge.

All this takes Bauman into a peculiar sociological territory and to beyond, to a theological frontier where few of discipline seem to have gone before. Perhaps that is why one notices a strange unsociological trait to the book: wisdom. It is less a study that yields understanding and explanation, the ordinary virtues of the better sociological tome, they are there, rather it produces an unusual virtue: wisdom. The book is wise in its realisation that in the end all that counts is love, not characterised by the exultation derived from the exercise of powers of calculation but a trait that transcends these by the disinterest that marks its enactment. This affirmation echoes Marx's reflections on love in the Early Texts. Somehow the property endures, risky, elusive, repeatedly subject to exploitation and abuse, but nevertheless a defining human trait where in relation to the other

(lower case), the self uncovers traits of Divinity within. Perversely, it might seem, theological considerations spring to life from within a sociological consideration. Is it fair to charge Bauman with being a cultural dope (to use Garfinkel's term) for letting theological entities over the border of sociology as illegal immigrants?

It doesn't take very long to realise that sociology is more in hock to theology than many want to realise. Comte conceived of sociology as a missionary resource for his Religion of Positivism, but when that virtual version was formed it emerged in the image and likeness of what he had ejected: Catholicism. Like Mead, Comte was highly influenced by Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, that tract on seeking where the self lets go to find something greater. Likewise, is it possible to think of reflexivity, testimony and self-scrutiny, those fashionable terms of sociology, without reference to St. Augustine's *Confessions*? Re-appraisals of Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religion* by Pickering exhibit a peculiar realisation that Catholic reviewers found much to praise in the book – it seemed to affirm that which they valued, even if the appraisal was purely sociological and emerged from a Jewish agnostic. Somehow, sociology seemed to grow in thrall to Catholicism.

The myth of the sociologist as super-hero finds ample expression in Weber. Did he not scorn those weary of endless analyses who retreated to the rest home of Catholicism? The implication is that those who wrestle with modernity do so without regard to spiritual considerations. The virility of the sociological quest derives from its expulsion of theological comforts; these are ejected to see the horizons more clearly. This edict might be founded on a myth that Weber was a man immune to spiritual sensibilities, the matter of his deafness to religious resonances being often invoked to signify this point.

But as Radkau indicates in his splendid biography, Weber was deeply disturbed in matters pertaining to God and for his sins wrestled with the demons within. He was not so much licked by the hound of heaven as repeatedly bitten and not with false teeth as many in sociology comfort themselves by concluding. This biography places the ending of 'Science as a Vocation' in its proper theological understanding. Remarkably, the ending is similar to another great work on modernity,

Huysmans' *Against Nature*. It too arrives at the frontiers of theological perplexity, though unlike Weber, after his experiences with the lower depths of life, Huysmans, for good reasons, desperately sought sanctuary in the rest home.

In sociology, those who see most are marked as its prophets for they discern that which others lost in disciplinary particularities do not. In this way, Bauman is to be understood as a seer exploring in text the unfolding patterns of modernity and their hidden designations. The most striking facet of Bauman's long career in sociology is the story he tells of sociology that reveals some hidden plots that implicate it in the tragedy of modernity. His discernments arise from ruthless appraisals, exhibiting an integrity of discernment and seeing not such much Weber's inconvenient facts as inconvenient insights. Like Simmel and Weber, Bauman is no conformist to the expectations of what it is to be a professional sociologist, one now marked by concerns with impact, and scrupulosity in measuring the immeasurable. What marks out Bauman is his reaching beyond the boundaries of sociology to find greater truths in ethics, philosophy and theology. In so passing on, has Bauman left his identity as a sociologist behind?

At its best, that is the risk of sociology, that it finds its completeness in the immolation of its disciplinary identity. Breaking the conventions generates inquests such as Goffman faced at his doctoral viva, where considerations arose as to whether his thesis was in sociology or outside it. But it is greatly to Bauman's credit, that like Bourdieu, he never scorns his sociological roots. Repeatedly, Bauman returns to these for intellectual nurture. Brilliant sociologists give great permissions to disreputable entrants to the craft, even those in theological habiliments, who spurn Weberian mantles as the only garments fit for sauntering about in the fields of modernity.

The range of Bourdieu's interests and his equally long and productive trek through sociology suggests a comparison with Bauman. Both can be considered as legendary dominant figures in the shaping of sociology in the last quarter century. If Bauman comes to theological routes by the circuitous analyses of the ongoing maturation of modernity, Bourdieu's relationship to theology, that of Catholicism, is more direct.

The whole critical focus of his sociology, his metaphors and understandings are the fruits of his plundering of Catholicism to express what he finds inexpressible from within the resources of the discipline. Habitus, oblates, consecrations and of course, the backhanded complement of *Pascalian Meditations*, mark his efforts, all cast in the great French tradition to exalt sociology but in the ascendance to kick away the rungs of the Catholicism that so enabled seers to climb high. By contrast, Bauman's encounter with theology (however implicit) is more innocent, honest and direct.

The route of Bauman's long career of analysis takes him to concerns that are intangible, quizzical and irresolvable. These deal with issues of ultimate concern, love, displacement, mutuality, ethics and evil and perhaps more brave, the pursuit of happiness as treated in *The Art of Life*. These matters might belong to religion, but not in its usual sociological understandings; rather they seem more properly the properties of theology. Few in sociology are likely to notice these properties in his writings or to be concerned by them. They are by no means dominant in his work. As with many, there is an early Bauman and late Bauman, and it is in the latter that these theological issues emerge. It might be suggested that since Bauman's status in sociology derives from his enormous range, through current affairs, into art, philosophy, but (and unlike many other sociologists) that some theological crumbs are to be found on the table. But for those with dispositions cast in a theological direction they are there *on* the sociological table and are not to be swept off it.

This realisation points to another achievement of Bauman, that he draws attention to is the conformist and conservative nature of sociology itself, what it includes and what it excludes. No sociologist could think in the simplicities of Dawkins and just be concerned with the scientific facts. Sociology has always had higher ambitions to think beyond these. In his *The Sociological Imagination*, C. Wright Mills provided a charter for sociologists to imagine to moral advantage, to feel the cultural pulse and diagnose accordingly. There did not seem to be any limits to this imagination, yet, it seems to have come to pass by some unreflexive decree that dabbling in matters of theology is unimaginable. It signifies bad spells, the undermining of the code of sociology and the violation of its canons.

If there is a persona in Bauman's identity as a sociologist, it seems cast as Simmel's stranger, the one who lives between boundaries but is of no fixed abode. That state of transience, one of liminality, confers on those who so pass great powers of trust and analyses. Perhaps the rise of reflexivity has presented all sociologists with ambitions to be strangers in their own territories. But in so treating themselves as strangers is the cost a nagging sense of estrangement within, a sense of being doomed never to belong? Is that the price of being the 'good' sociologist seeking connections for others but having none himself?

In assessing the hypothetical notion of Bauman's theological universe, an obvious difficulty emerges. Whereas fun and games can be found in spotting the Catholic fingerprints on those sociologists who claim to be emancipated from its clammy grip, finding equivalent marks on those whose theology is Jewish is more problematic. A need to look for these traits has emerged recently in relation to Durkheim. Likewise, much more needs to be known about those in sociology and philosophy who moved from Judaism to Christianity. For instance, how is Simmel to be treated? He might have been Jewish by ethnicity and agnostic at the end of his life, but he was uncommonly well versed in Catholic theology as is well illustrated in his use of Nicholas of Cusa in his essays on the sociology of religion. *Modernity and the Holocaust* might mark Bauman's own response to the tragedies of his tribe, a payment of his sociological dues, but that issue of his Judaism lies recessed. Some of its influences can be found in an essay he wrote entitled: 'Assimilation into Exile: the Jew as a Polish Writer'.

Published in 1996, this remarkable essay seems to disclose the origins of the Catch-22 dilemmas he ascribes to postmodernity. Despite a sense of immediacy and connection to life as lived in his writings, displaying a remarkable degree of awareness for a man of his age, Bauman is a remarkably private man, almost anonymous and disembodied. This seems a trait of endurance of many sociologists (one thinks of Bourdieu, his marriage and family – his autobiography was not one). But in Bauman's case, there is a paralysis in his approach to commitment expressed as a sense that any club worth joining risks becoming totalitarian. As with Weber, one suspects that what shapes

Bauman's sociology lies in his biography, the resentments and accomplishments of being Jewish and Polish, but in exile in the suburbs of Leeds.

In the essay, on the Jew as a Polish writer, Bauman writes that 'to be in exile means to be out of place; also, needing to be rather elsewhere; also, not having that "elsewhere" where one would rather be'. Exile, assimilation and the price of identity lend a disenchanting property to his readings of the tragedy of a Jewish writer in Poland. It is the treason of assimilation that haunts Bauman, a plight to be found in *Modernity and the Holocaust*, where the hosts of civility slaughtered the guests. Lurking in Bauman's hesitations regarding over theology, its crumbs to lie on the table, but are not to be eaten, is the horrible question of the God absent in the Holocaust, a Divine failure of attendance that seems a betrayal of the chosen people. But for Bauman, this imposes a moral duty on modern Judaism not to flee the implications of that absence, but to live with these. Thus, he writes, as a consequence, 'Jews are people with a new mission: they are the carriers of the truth that humanity would otherwise be liable to forget at its moral and physical peril'.

For Bauman, within Judaism, there is a tribe within a tribe, the Central European Jewry and in Polish history they represented an embarrassment, a threat to the more sophisticated assimilated Jews. It is the treacheries within Judaism, of being faced with inhuman dilemmas of collusion, or death that haunt Bauman and these underpin the gloom of his sociology. In that article, there is something of the scorn felt by the marginalised, the humiliation of their rejection and removal to the margins that reminds of the resentment exhibited by Bourdieu in his war as a provincial against Parisian centralism. It was only through state socialism that liberation could be found for the unassimilated and perhaps this point relates to Bauman's career in Communist Poland. Perhaps this dilemma accounts for his concerns with choice as a moral necessity in postmodernity, when in his past, he was unable to exercise one. It might also suggest the sense of relief he felt with the advent of postmodernity but also his disillusion with it, for it maximised choice in a setting where the solid foundations of society melted.

Bauman conceives of postmodernity in one beneficial way, that it loosens the grip of reason and denotes the fracture of its powers. Reason is intolerant of the untidy and seeks to expel those weeds which grow in its garden hence the way the quest for neatness can be conceived in terms of ethnic cleansing. Bauman affirms those who resist these tyrannical powers, hence his unexpected support for religious fundamentalism – it forms part of the licence to resist the closures of modernity. But in this essay on the Jew as Polish writer, Bauman writes ‘..that in the postmodern atmosphere of the West the only place where assimilation can live is in historical memory’. It offers a dream but one built on the ruins of memory, of haunted lands marked by betrayals, of collusion and guilt. It is in this section on the ‘haunted lands’ that one can discern the demons that haunt Bauman as much as Weber. Issues of treachery return for Bauman in his sad reflections on how Poles felt Jews to be betrayers, when they sided with the invading Red Army. It is the hurt of never being a Pole, never being fully fledged in allegiance that haunts Bauman in this essay, where he reflects beautifully on the customs of Judaism. The hopes of the exiles, the refugees, seeking assimilation lead Bauman to reflect back and to assert that ‘it will thus forever be remembered as a folly, perhaps but not a sin’. Perhaps more than any other sociologist, a sense of tragedy provides the impulse to his sociology, one that shapes its contours.

Bauman is forced back to the terrain of sociology to confront its most elementary question: the basis of the duty of reciprocity. From it, Bauman generates a question that turns in a theological direction as the title of a recent essay suggests: ‘Am I my brothers Keeper?’. As in *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Bauman is fascinated by the mystery of disinterested love, especially where an individual lays down his life for a stranger, a donation that is exemplary in its disinterest and one above calculation in terms of the redemption it yields in memory. The act goes against assumptions of human nature and returns sociology to an issue it has to face: ‘who am I to the stranger?’ Invoking Levinas, Bauman confronts a question explicable when set in a theological frame but inexplicable when placed in a sociological equivalent. Writing against the spirit of the age that accentuates individualism, Bauman asserts that ‘my brother’s dependence is what makes me an ethical being. Dependence and ethics stand together and together they fall’.

What fascinates about Bauman is what he wrests from his sociology in terms of moral demands. These have a Stoical cast, a denial of easy fashionable options where vexation is resolved by transfer from one comfort zone of modernity to another', and in so moving the confrontation with hard issues can be indefinitely postponed. He writes that 'for the ethical world, ambivalence and uncertainty are its daily bread and cannot be stamped out without destroying the moral substance of responsibility, the foundation on which that world rests'. He goes on to add that 'all this is bad news for the seekers of peace and tranquillity. Being one's brother's keeper is a life sentence of hard labour and moral anxiety, which no amount of trying would ever be put to rest'. It is this recognition of the hazarding properties of morality that gives Bauman the need to break from the conventions of sociology to find larger issues of character and virtue. Unsettlements and testing echo the properties of facing down the wagers life presents that are to be found in Goffman's essay 'Where the action is'. This property of leaning against to realise a self also emerges in regard to Goffman's lunatics in the asylum. Creelan has provided the best account of Goffman's writings by situating them with reference to the Book of Job, one that pays respects to the theology of Judaism. A theme in Bauman's writing, one that goes as a thread through it, is a disdain for reducing character to a laboratory specimen whose form of life can be explained by reference to rats in the cage.

There are no theological surprises in Bauman's work that suggest a leap of faith is in prospect. Something deeper and more methodical is to be found in his pilgrim's progress through the peaks and troughs of sociology. Unlike Bourdieu, who used Pascal to build his sociology, one denoted by the dethronement of God from heaven and his replacement with a god of society, Bauman sees deeper uses that take him to the borders of theology. His analyses bring him close to Augustine's reflection on restlessness, where the heart can find no peace save in God (*The Art of Life*, pp. 36-37).

The Tree of Knowledge, the fate of eating the apple and the unhappiness yielded seem to reflect a point that continually strikes one in Bauman, that sociology is an expression of the fall from innocence yielding a descent into a chaos of knowing, the fruit of its lustful curiosity and its fixation on experience. Its fate is to offer endless prospects of expansion but with no termination and more

crucially, no means of generating resolution of the choices so amplified. Again, this might seem a speculative point, one which sociology can contain by means of postponement. But for Bauman, that is illusory. A deeper issue needs to be confronted, one that emerges from the Holocaust. It generated issues that ruthlessly exposed the limits of sociology. As Bauman observed, 'in the face of human choices between good and evil, sociological wisdom was found to have nothing to say...' (p. 96). It is this incapacity to speak that requires sociology to defer to theology to utter that which seems unutterable. In his contrast between Nietzsche and Levinas, Bauman finds his own voice for what he seeks of the ultimate. It is to be found the exercise of responsibility for somebody else. The conclusion that 'I am for others' is so sociological in what is expressed, but so solid a conclusion as to be worthy of donation back to theology. It seems to embody Donne's warning that no man is an island so that perhaps in the social, each finds his upper case deity. Perhaps that is what 'groping for the light' means ultimately.

References:

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