

Poet-Intellectual and Public Sociologist

An Interview with Zygmunt Bauman

*Michael Hviid Jacobsen**

(born 1971) is a Danish sociologist and Professor of Sociology at Aalborg University, Denmark. He has written extensively on the work of Zygmunt Bauman in books such as *Zygmunt Bauman* (2004), *Bauman Before Postmodernity* (with Keith Tester, 2005), *Bauman Beyond Postmodernity* (with Sophia Marshman & Keith Tester, 2007), *Bauman's mosaik* (2006), *The Sociology of Zygmunt Bauman* (edited, 2008).

*Keith Tester**

(born 1960) is a British sociologist and Professor of Sociology at University of Hull, England. Throughout many years he has written on and analyzed the work of Zygmunt Bauman in titles such as *The Social Thought of Zygmunt Bauman* (2004), *Bauman Before Postmodernity* (with Michael Hviid Jacobsen, 2005), *Bauman Beyond Postmodernity* (with Michael Hviid Jacobsen & Sophia Marshman, 2007) and recently the edited volume *Bauman's Challenge* (2010).

Biographical notes

Zygmunt Bauman (born 1925) is a Polish sociologist living in Leeds, England, and Professor Emeritus at the Universities of Leeds and Warsaw. He has for decades contributed generously to sociology with a host of acclaimed book titles, e.g. *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), *Postmodern Ethics* (1993), *In Search of Politics* (1999), *Liquid Modernity* (2000), *Wasted Lives* (2004) and the latest title *Collateral Damage* (2011).

Introduction

Zygmunt Bauman, a Polish-English sociologist writing from Leeds, is one of the most exciting, publicized and celebrated of contemporary social thinkers. For almost half a century – the first decades in Communist Poland and since the early 1970s from his exile (first forced, then voluntary) in Great Britain – Bauman has provided critical analyses and in-depth diagnoses of the human condition and he has developed a comprehensive and colourful conceptual apparatus to chart the contorted and tortuous path from premodernity through solid modernity to postmodern society or what he today prefers to label 'liquid modernity'. Throughout more than thirty-five books published in English he has tangled with and touched upon a multitude of themes ranging from sexuality, poverty and morality via globalization, freedom, community and individualization to the Holocaust, death, love and utopia (just to mention a few). Despite his current status as a renowned stalwart in the sociological landscape, Bauman nevertheless still remains a peculiarly marginal presence – at one and the same time an insider and an outsider. Bauman has never embraced the sociological mainstream and his many books all provoke conventional sociological understandings or social common sense and iconoclastically and consciously sit astride the academic barriers erected in order to keep things apart.

Not only thematically and when it comes to challenging common sense and taken-for-granted knowledge does Bauman's work diverge from the mainstream. Also his way of writing or communicating sociology – as a strange mixture of sociology and poetry – has attracted attention. Based on an appreciation of this particular quality to Bauman's work, British sociologist Tony Blackshaw once labelled him a 'poet-intellectual', while another British sociologist, Dennis Smith, dubbed him an 'accomplished storyteller'. But Bauman is not merely a peculiar poet-intellectual with a distinguished sense for the literary and poetic – he is also a public sociologist who eagerly participates in debating the events of the day in newspaper articles and at, academic conferences and public seminars. In short, Bauman's sociology is an all-out engagement with the human world, and contrary to academically abstract definitions of the discipline of sociology he defines sociology as an ongoing – and for all practical purposes and intents also endless – dialogue with human life experience.

In the interview extracts reprinted below, Bauman reflects on his role as a sociologist, on his intended readership and on his own way of communicating sociology to those who want to engage with his ideas. Contrary to those social thinkers convinced of the utter importance of their own ideas, analyses or interpretations, Bauman's ambition is much less self-focused. As he once insisted, it is not so important desperately to seek definitive answers to questions as to keep curiously questioning the world in which we are bound to live.

The Interview

MHJ/KT *For whom do you write? Do you write for an audience that you are confident exists, or is it an audience that remains to be made; a hoped for audience? If you write for the latter – hoped for – audience, how do you reconcile this with the pressures from publishers who want definite audiences?*

ZB I apologize in advance for the lengthy argument which is bound to follow your query – but this apparently simple question of yours can't be answered without looking back, in search of the reasons which caused such a question to be asked and an answer to it sought.

My generation witnessed a slow yet relentless decomposition of the 'historical agent' – hoped by the intellectuals who were mindful of the 'organic' standards set for them by Antonio Gramsci's code of conduct – to usher, and/or be ushered into a land in which the long march towards liberty, equality and fraternity – adumbrated by the thinkers of Enlightenment but later diverted into the capitalist or the communists cul-de-sacs – would finally reach its socialist destination.

For at least a century, the prime intellectual choice for the role of the 'historical agent' of emancipation was a collective composed of the assortment of skills and trades summarily categorized as the 'working class'. United by selling their labour at a fraudulent price, and by the refusal of human dignity which went together with such sale, it was hoped that the working class would become the one part of humanity which, according to Karl Marx's unforgettable sentence, could not emancipate itself without emancipating the whole of human society and could not end its misery without putting an end to all human misery. Once it had been ascribed such potency, the working class seemed to offer a natural and se-

cure haven to hope; it was a haven that was so much more secure than the far-away cities, where the writers of early modern utopias used to place the enlightened despots legislating happiness upon their unwitting or unwilling subjects.

Whether the ascription was or was not warranted, was from the start a moot question. It could be argued that, contrary to Marx's belief, the restlessness on the early capitalist factory floors was prompted more by the loss of security than by the love of freedom, and that once security was regained or rebuilt on another foundation the unrest would inevitably boil away, stopping well short of its allegedly revolutionary destination. Indeed: after a long period of initial unrest associated with the melting of pre-modern economic and social structures there came the period of 'relative stability', underpinned by the emergent, apparently solid structures of industrial society. The politically administered instruments of the 'recommodification of capital and labour' settled as a constant feature of the capitalist world – with the state being given an active role of 'pump priming', promoting and insuring both the intensive and the extensive expansion of the capitalist economy on one side, and the reconditioning and rehabilitation of labour through the multiple provisions of the social state on the other. However harsh the hardships suffered at the receiving end of the capitalist expansion, and however disconcerting the fear of periodic bouts of economic depression, the frames fit to accommodate life-long expectations and equipped with the tested and trustworthy repair tools appeared firmly set, allowing for the long-term planning of individual lives, confidence in the future and a rising feeling of security. Capital and labour, locked in an apparently unbreakable mutual dependency, and increasingly convinced of the permanence of their bond and sure to 'meet again and again' in the times to come, sought and found mutually beneficial and promising, or at least tolerable, modes of cohabitation – punctuated by repetitive tug-of-wars but also by the rounds of successful renegotiations of the rules of cooperation.

Frustrated and impatient with the ways things seemed to be going, Lenin complained that if left to their own ambitions and impulses workers would develop only the 'trade-union mentality' and so would be far too narrow-minded to perform their historic mission. What irritated Lenin, the founder of the 'short cut' and 'profes-

sional revolutionaries' strategy, was also spotted, but viewed with mildly optimistic equanimity, by his contemporary, Eduard Bernstein. He was the founder (with not inconsiderable help from the Fabians) of the 'revisionist' programme of accommodation, of pursuit of socialist values and intentions inside the political and economic framework of the essentially capitalist society, and of the steady yet gradual 'amelioration' rather than a revolutionary, one-off overhaul, of the status quo. As events kept confirming Lenin's sombre and Bernstein's sanguine anticipations, György Lukács explained the evident reluctance of history to follow Marx's original prognosis with a custom-made concept (which however looked back to Plato's shadows on cave walls) of 'false consciousness' which the deceitful 'totality' of capitalism insidiously promotes and won't fail to promote unless counteracted by the efforts of the intellectuals striving to see through the deceitful appearances into the inexorable truth of historical laws – and after the pattern of Platonian sages sharing their discoveries with the deluded cave-dwellers.

When combined with Gramsci's concept of 'organic intellectuals', Lukács's reinterpretation of the vagaries of post-Marx history elevated the historical destiny and so the ethical/political responsibility of intellectuals to new heights. But by the same token, a Pandora's Box of reciprocal accusations, imputations of guilt and suspicions of treachery was thrown open and the era of the charges of *trahisons des clercs*, un-civil wars, mutual defamations, witch-hunting and character-killings started. If the labour movement failed to behave in line with the prognosis, and particularly if it shied away from the revolutionary overturn of the capitalist power, no one but the intellectuals betraying their duty or botching its performance was to blame. Paradoxically, the adoption of such an unflattering view of themselves was for the acknowledged, aspiring or failed intellectuals a temptation that was difficult to resist, since it converted even the most spectacular displays of their theoretical weaknesses and practical impotence into powerful arguments reasserting their key historical role. I remember listening, shortly after coming to Britain, to a PhD student, who after perusing a few of Sidney Webb's writings hurried to proclaim, to the unqualified approval of the tightly packed seminar audience, that the causes of the socialist revolution's late arrival in Britain were all there.

There were writings on the wall, which – if read carefully – would have cast doubt on the intellectualist conceit of the British ‘New Left’; but the recently rediscovered thoughts of Lukács or Gramsci did not exactly help to decode the messages they conveyed. How to link, say, student unrest to the winter of discontent? Was one witnessing rearguard battles waged by troops in retreat, or the avant-garde units of advancing armies? Were they distant echoes and belated rehearsals of old wars, or signs and auguries of new wars to come? Symptoms of an end, or of beginning? And if a beginning, then ushering in what? News from abroad only added to the bewilderment and confusion, as the announcements of the ‘farewell to the proletariat’ drifted in from the other side of the Channel together with Louis Althusser’s reminders that time has finally matured for revolutionary action. E. P. Thomson’s enchanting vision of the working class’s immaculate conception or parthenogenesis met with a frontal assault by the *New Left Review* editors for its theoretical poverty (meaning, probably, the conspicuous absence of intellectuals in Thompson’s edifying story).

It is tempting, but it would be dishonest and misleading, to claim retrospectively one’s own advance wisdom, just like it would be unjust and not at all illuminating to blame those locked inside fast running affairs for their confusion. The impending end of the ‘glorious thirty’ (the three post-war decades have been so named only after the conditions for which they stood have ended, and only when it became obvious that they had) threw the familiar world out joint and made useless the tested tools of that world’s scrutiny and description. The time of hunches and guesses had arrived; orthodoxies dug in ever deeper trenches while heresies, growing thicker on the ground, gained in courage and impertinence, although moving nowhere near consensus.

To wind up the long and convoluted story: the explicitly pointed out or glossed over source of intellectual disarray was the apparent vanishing of the historical agent, at first experienced on the intellectual left as a growing separation and a breakdown of communication with ‘the movement’.

As the theoretically impeccable postulates and prognoses were one by one refuted by events, intellectual circles turned ever more zealously and conspicuously to self-referential interests and pur-

suits, as if in obedience to Michel Foucault's announcement of the advent of the 'specific intellectuals' era. Whether the concept of 'specific' or 'specialized' intellectual could be anything other than an oxymoron was of course, then as it is now, a moot question. But whether or not the application of the term 'intellectual' is legitimate in the case of university lecturers visiting the public arena solely on the occasion of successive disagreement on salaries, or the artists protesting about successive cuts in the subsidies for theatre or film making, one thing is certain: to that new, institutionally confined, variety of political stand-taking and power struggle the figure of the 'historical agent' is completely irrelevant and can be dropped from the agenda with no guilty conscience and above all without the bitter aftertaste of a loss.

However must the hopes and the jobs of emancipation follow the vanishing 'historical agent' into abyss, like Captain Ahab beckoning his sailors? I would like to argue that the work of Theodor W. Adorno can be re-read as one long and thorough attempt to confront that question and to justify an emphatic 'no' as the answer. After all, long before the British intellectuals' passions for a historical agent started to dull, Adorno warned his older friend Walter Benjamin against what he called 'Brechtian motifs': the hope that the 'actual workers' would save arts from the loss of their aura or be saved by the 'immediacy of combined aesthetic effect' of revolutionary art. (Adorno, 1999:127-133) The 'actual workers', he insisted, 'in fact enjoy no advantage over their bourgeois counterpart' in this respect – they 'bear all the marks of mutilation of the typical bourgeois character'. And then came the parting shot: beware of 'making our necessity' (that is the necessity of the intellectuals who 'need the proletariat for the revolution') 'into a virtue of the proletariat as we are constantly tempted to do'.

At the same time, Adorno insisted that though the prospects of human emancipation focused on the idea of a different and better society now appear less encouraging than those which seemed so evident to Marx, neither the charges raised by Marx against the world unforgivably inimical to humanity have lost any of their topicality, nor has a clinching proof of the unreality of the original emancipating ambitions been thus far offered by a competent jury; and so there is no sufficient, let alone necessary, reason to take emancipation off the agenda. If anything, the contrary is the

case: the noxious persistence of social ills is one more and admittedly powerful reason to try yet harder.

Adorno's admonition is as topical today as it was when first written down: "The undiminished presence of suffering, fear and menace necessitates that the thought that cannot be realized should not be discarded". Now as then, "philosophy must come to know, without any mitigation, why the world – which could be paradise here and now – can become hell itself tomorrow". The difference between 'now' and 'then' ought to be sought elsewhere than in the task of emancipation losing its urgency or the dream of emancipation having been found idle.

What Adorno hastened to add however was the following: if to Marx the world seemed prepared to turn into a paradise 'there and then' and appeared to be ready for an instantaneous u-turn, and if it therefore looked that "the possibility of changing the world 'from top to bottom' was immediately present" (Adorno, 1999:14) – this is no longer, if it ever was, a case ("only stubbornness can still maintain the thesis as Marx formulated it"). It is the possibility of a *shortcut* to a world better fit for human habitation that has been presently lost from view.

I would also say that between this world here and now and that other, 'emancipated' world, hospitable to humanity and 'user friendly', no visible bridges are left. Neither are there crowds eager to stampede the whole length of the bridge in case such a bridge was designed, nor the vehicles waiting to take the willing to the other side and deliver them safely to the destination. No one can be sure how a usable bridge could be designed and where the bridgehead could be located along the shore to facilitate smooth and expedient traffic. Possibilities, one would conclude, are *not* immediately present.

So where does all that leave the intellectuals, the guardians of the unfulfilled hopes and promises of the past, the critics of the present guilty of forgetting the hopes and promises, and abandoning them, unfulfilled?

As Adorno repeatedly warns, "no thought is immune against communication, and to utter it in the wrong place and in wrong agreement is enough to undermine its truth". (Adorno, 1974:25) And so, when it comes to communicating with the actors, with would-be actors, with abortive actors and those reluctant to join the

action: "For the intellectual, inviolable isolation is now the only way of showing some measure of solidarity" with those 'down and out'. Such self-inflicted seclusion is not in Adorno's view an act of treachery; neither a sign of withdrawal, nor a gesture of condescension (or both: "condescension, and thinking oneself no better, are the same", as he himself points out). Neither did it signal an intention to break communication – only the determination to protect the 'truth' of the human prospects of emancipation against the threat of being 'undermined'. Keeping a distance, paradoxically, was an act of engagement, in the only form in which engagement on the side of unfulfilled or betrayed hopes may sensibly take: "The detached observer is as much entangled as the active participant; the only advantage of the former is insight into his entanglement, and the infinitesimal freedom that lies in knowledge as such". (Adorno, 1974:26) The strategy of communication proposed by Adorno is one of the 'message in a bottle'.

The 'message in a bottle' allegory implies two presumptions: that there is a message fit to be written down and worthy of the trouble needed to set the bottle afloat; and that once it is found and read (at a time which cannot be defined in advance) the message will be still worthy of the finder's effort to unpack it and ingest, absorb and adopt. In some cases, like Adorno's, entrusting the message to the unknown reader of an undefined future may be preferred to consorting with the contemporaries who are deemed un-ready or unwilling to listen, let alone to grasp and retain, what they heard. In such cases, sending the message into unmapped space and time rests on the hope that its potency will outlive the present-day neglect and survive the (transient) conditions that caused the negligence. The 'message in a bottle' expedient makes sense if (and only if) someone who resorts to it trusts values to be eternal or at least holding more than momentary significance, believes truths to be universal or at least not merely parochial, and suspects that the worries that currently trigger the search for truth and the rallying in defence of values, unlike the fleeting 'crisis management' concerns, will persist. The message in a bottle is a testimony to the *transience of frustration* and the *duration of hope*, to the *indestructibility of possibilities* and the *frailty of adversities* that bar them from implementation. In Adorno's rendition, critical theory is such a testimony, and this warrants the metaphor of the message in a bottle.

In the postscript to his last magnum opus, *La Misère du Monde*, (Pierre Bourdieu, 1993: 1499-1554) Pierre Bourdieu pointed out that the numbers of personalities of the political stage who can comprehend and articulate the expectations and demands of their electors are fast shrinking; the political space is inward-focused and bent on closing upon itself. It needs to be thrown open again, and that can be done only through bringing the (often inchoate and inarticulate) 'private' troubles and cravings into direct relevance to the political process (and, consequently, vice versa). This is easier said than done, though, as public discourse is inundated with Émile Durkheim's *prénotions* – the rarely spelled out overtly and even less frequently scrutinised presumptions, which are uncritically deployed whenever subjective experience is raised to the level of public discourse and whenever private troubles are categorised to be processed in public discourse and re-represented as public issues. To do its service to human experience, sociology needs to begin with clearing the site. Critical assessment of tacit or vociferous *prénotions* must proceed together with an effort to make visible and audible such aspects of experience as normally stay beyond the individual horizons, or beneath the threshold of individual awareness.

A moment of reflection would show, though, that "to make aware of the mechanisms that render life painful or even unliveable, does not mean yet to neutralize them; to draw the contradictions into light, does not mean to resolve them". A long and tortuous road stretches between the recognition of the roots of trouble and their eradication, and making the first step in no way assures that further steps will be taken, let alone that the road will be followed to the end. And yet there is no denying the crucial importance of the beginning – of laying bare the complex network of causal links between pains suffered individually and conditions collectively produced. In sociology, and even more in a sociology which strives to be up to its task, the beginning is yet more decisive than elsewhere; it is this first step that designates and paves the road to rectification which otherwise would not exist, let alone be noticed. Indeed, one has to memorize – and to practice the best one can – Bourdieu's commandment: "those who have the chance of dedicating their lives to the study of the social world, cannot rest, neutral and indifferent, in front of the struggles of which the future of the world is the stake". (Claude Lanzmann & Robert Redeker, 1998: 14)

Now I can return to your question 'for whom I write'... But I guess it is no longer necessary, because the recapitulation of my generation's experience provides the best answer I can offer – if not for my practice as it has been, then for how I would dearly wish it to be. Perhaps I scribble messages destined for a bottle. Bottle messages have no preselected addressees (if they had, there would be no need of consigning them to the waves), but I trust the messages to seek and find, after the pattern of 'smart missiles', their targets: to select, among the individual sailors whom our liquid-modern society has burdened with the task of seeking and finding solutions to the problems with which it confronts them, such sailors who might be eager to open the bottles and absorb the messages inside them.

MHJ/KT *Some of your recent books, especially from Postmodernity and Its Discontents (1997) onwards, seem to entertain a certain element of nostalgia in that you appear to decry the state of the contemporary social scene. Would you agree with such a claim that your books contain nostalgic undertones? Do you see any function of nostalgia in sociology?*

ZB I know of no arrangement of human togetherness, present or past, which could be seen as an optimal solution to the aporia of human condition. It seems that linearity of history, by whatever criterion plotted, could be only a product of reductionism (when reported) or utopia (when projected). The trajectory of successive re-arrangements is reminiscent more of a pendulum than a straight line. Each arrangement tried to reconcile incompatible demands, but the efforts ended as a rule with resigning a part of one for the sake of gratifying a part of another. And so each re-arrangement inspired sooner or later a demand for another; each next step brought more of the 'good things' missing – but at the expense of some other things whose 'goodness', indeed indispensability, was revealed only after the exchange was made (their 'goodness' stayed unnoticed as long as they were 'self-evident', or unproblematic to the point of invisibility). The other way to say the same is that each improvement brought new shortcomings (or re-evaluation of old). As Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling opined almost two centuries ago – *Erinnerung* (reminiscence) is a 'retrospective impact' of the end on the beginning; beginnings stay unclear until the end is reached, and the antecedents reveal themselves only through their consequences

... We may add that the 'revelation' of the 'unclear' is not a one-off event, but in principle an infinite process, and that – contrary to its definition – 'the past' is as motile as its futures that go on reshuffling and re-assessing its contents.

For many years now I've been repeating after Sigmund Freud that 'civilization' (meaning: a social order) is a trade-off, in which some values are sacrificed for the sake of others (usually it is the lot of such values as seem to be had in sufficient quantity to be given away in order to attain more of the values who are felt to be in short supply). In these terms, one may say that history of systemic changes is a succession of trade-offs.

The passage from the 'solid' to the 'liquid' variety of modern life was a reversal of the trade-off which Freud noted in the passage to modernity. Centuries that followed the disintegration of the *ancien regime* (the pre-modern order) could be described retrospectively as a long march toward restitution (on a different level and with different means) of the shattered security; we are now in the midst of another long march, this time towards dismantling the constraints that have been imposed on individual liberties in the course of the long march to security resting on the intensive and extensive normative regulation and thorough policing. Let me note, though, that this new 'long march' seems to be destined to be much shorter than its predecessor ... Signs gather, and quickly, of the return of the old value preferences. Symptoms accumulate of a new tendency to trade off personal liberties for personal (corporeal, bodily?) safety. This new tendency is not a return to the preoccupation with the kind of securities described by Freud; but it signals another turn of the pendulum between security and freedom – solidity and flexibility, determination and open-endedness, constraint and uncertainty...

What you see as 'nostalgia' is perhaps the reflection of the unpleasant, though hardly avoidable fact that the full costs of a new trade-off can be calculated only at the end of the accounting period. For the 'leap to order' (as I tried to document in *Modernity and the Holocaust* and *Modernity and Ambivalence*) enormous and atrocious price needed to be paid – but this does not mean that repairing the unprepossessing features of 'solid' modernity ushered into a cloudless and faultless form of human togetherness that would leave no room for dissent. Each arrangement has, I repeat, its own shortcomings crying for attention – and each needs to be judged in

terms of its own virtues and vices. And due to the 'pendulum like' trajectory to historical sequences, a close proximity of 'forward and backward' or 'utopia' and 'nostalgia' pregnant with confusion is virtually inevitable...

MHJ/KT *You often seem to equate literature with sociology – the role of the novel with that of sociology. Moreover, you have expressed intellectual affinity if not kinship with some of the great novelists of the 20th century. Can you explain how the novel, or literature more generally, can enrich sociology and our appreciation of it?*

ZB In his latest book, *Le rideau (The Curtain)*, Milan Kundera writes of Miguel de Cervantes: "A magic curtain, woven of legends, was stretched over the world. Cervantes sent Don Quixote on the journey and tore up the curtain. The world had prostrated itself before the Knight in all comic nudity of its prose...". Kundera proposes that the act of 'tearing up the curtain of prejudgements' (Bourdieu's *prénotions*?) was the moment of birth of modern arts. It is the 'destructive gesture' that modern arts have since repeated endlessly. And the repetition needs to be, and cannot but be, endless, since the magic curtain promptly sews backs the patches, glues the slits and promptly fills the remaining holes with new stories to replace those discredited as legends. Piercing the curtain is the main and recurrent topic of Kundera's new book and the key to the interpretation of the history and the role of the novel to which that book is dedicated. He praises Henry Fielding for aspiring to the role of 'inventor' in order to commit, in his own words, "a quick and sagacious penetration into the true essence of all the objects of our contemplation" – that is the piercing of the curtain that bars us from looking into that essence. He also commends Jaromir John, the author of *The Exploding Monster* published in Czech in 1932 (the title referred to the mechanically generated noise, singled out as the as the devil running the modern hell), for abstaining "from re-copying the embroidery on the curtain of pre-interpretations" and displaying instead the "Cervantesque courage in tearing it apart".

Not unexpectedly if you know his 'topical relevances', Kundera focuses on the 'destructive gestures' of *novelists*. But the image of the 'magic curtain' and its tearing apart strikes me as eminently appropriate as the job description of the practitioners of the *sociological*

vocation. Piercing through the 'curtain of prejudgements' to set in motion the endless labour of reinterpretation, opening for scrutiny the human-made and human-making world 'in all the comic nudity of its prose' and so drawing new human potentialities out of darkness in which they had been cast, and stretching in effect the realm of human freedom and retrospectively revealing all that effort as the constitutive act of free humanity. I do believe that by doing or failing to do such job sociology ought to be judged.

I am far from 'equating', as you suggest, novel-writing and sociology-writing. Each activity has its own techniques and modes of proceeding and its own criteria of propriety, which set them apart from each other. But I would say that literature and sociology are siblings: their relationship is a mixture of rivalry *and* mutual support. They share parenthood, bear unmistakable family resemblance, serve each other as reference points which they can't resist comparing, and as yardsticks by which to measure the success or failure of their own life pursuits.

It is as natural (as it is useless) for the siblings to dissect obsessively their differences – particularly if the similarities are too blatant to overlook and affinities too close for comfort. Both siblings are, after all, after the same goal – piercing the curtain. And so they are 'objectively' in competition. But the task of human emancipation is not a zero-sum game...

MHJ/KT *Since the end of the 1980s you have become a 'big name' in intellectual circles who travels internationally and whose books have become widely publicised. Does this mean that your own work has been commodified and, if it has, can it still be critical?*

ZB I would gladly exchange the doubtful honours of being a 'big name' for a bit more effectiveness of critical efforts. To take a hint from Daniel Boorstin: a 'big name' is a person who is known for being well-known, and that sad foible of our times puts a yet sadder meaning into Wittgenstein's already sad conclusion that 'philosophy leaves everything as it is'.

But your worry is accurately directed. I share the feeling that my work 'has been commodified' and I fully agree with your view that commodity markets are not the best sites from which to launch a critical reassessment of reality, let alone the fight to save

or recover certain aspects of human togetherness from commodification.

I have been breaking my head in vain to find a way out of the quandary. The *agora* of our times is filled to the brim with market stalls and admits only the buyers and sellers of commodities. Information travels only when it is commodified, only when it is sold and bought. And if you wish to repair that sorry state of the *agora*, you must first gain an entry. You have to be listened to if you wish to be heard. Gaining entry to the market stalls is anything but the guarantee of being heard. But it is, alas, its unavoidable preliminary condition.

The End

Notes

- * This interview contains extracts from different interview sessions with Zygmunt Bauman by Michael Hviid Jacobsen and Keith Tester. The extracts have previously appeared in: Michael Hviid Jacobsen & Keith Tester (2005): *Bauman Before Postmodernity*. Aalborg: Aalborg University Press; Michael Hviid Jacobsen, Sophia Marshman & Keith Tester (2007): *Bauman Beyond Postmodernity*. Aalborg: Aalborg University Press; and Michael Hviid Jacobsen & Keith Tester (2007): "Sociology, Nostalgia, Utopia and Mortality: A Conversation with Zygmunt Bauman". *European Journal of Social Theory*, 10 (2):305-325.

References

Adorno Theodor, "Adorno's letter to Benjamin of 18 March 1936", in Theodor Adorno & Walter Benjamin Correspondence 1928-1940, Harvard University Press, 1999.

Adorno Theodor W., *Minima Moralia*, Verso:London, 1974.

Bourdieu Pierre, "La misère du monde", sous la direction de Pierre Bourdieu, Éditions de Seuil:Paris, 1993.

Lanzmann Claude & Redeker Robert, "Les méfaits d'un rationalisme simplificateur", *Le Monde*, 18 September, 1998