

BOOK REVIEWS

Zygmunt Bauman, *The Art of Life*. Cambridge, Malden: Polity Press, 2008.
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A Consumer's Happiness

A recipes for happiness speak with many voices. It is mainly due to the fact that some peoples look for guaranteed methods, while the others are ready for risky ones. An average man is able to risk, when he/she will obtain his/her happiness without sacrifices, living pleasantly and without effort. The philosophers look for an ideal, foolproof recipe for happiness, even if it means sacrifices. Difficult life is not happy—says an average man. There is no happiness without certainty that happiness will come; let it be difficult but it must be sure—says philosopher.

Wl. Tatarkiewicz (1947)

In his book Zygmunt Bauman undertakes a complex operation: he takes an issue clearly exceeding the boundaries of sociology (when we agree that this science is mainly interested in human social functioning and how the social factors shape the human existence), he reconstructs it within sociological discourse in relation to the philosophical tradition and finally he proposes a concept, that in my opinion is again more of metaphysical than of empirical genre. The transition between philosophical, sociological and back philosophical discourse should clearly mark the complexity of this project.

This book, concerned with the art of living, is in fact a book about the art of living happily. In the sociological language: what factors may make us happy and how should we estimate our happiness. Bauman does not make an “operationalization of the happiness”—he even poses balanced criticism on combining the category of happiness with well-being category, measured with gross domestic product indicators (p. 8).¹ But the happiness is a social category in the true sense of the word: the moment we can assume that it was achieved (or was not) is culturally specified. The happiness's indicators seems not to be metaphysically but rather socially or culturally defined. We learn what does it means to be happy during the socialization process and we are gathering the knowledge about living happily through our entire life.

In Bauman's *Liquid Society* the consumption plays a dual part. It is culturally specified goal and simultaneously our social standing indicator. So when the society wants us to consume, the consumption directly leads to the happiness. *Consumare*

¹ Henceforward I will refer to the *Art of living* by placing page number in brackets.

necesse est: “How strong and how widespread is the *belief* that there is an intimate link between the happiness and the volume and quality of consumption” (p. 9), remarks Bauman. We learn it even before we start philosophical deliberation about the nature of happiness. The happiness of a teenage Vogue reader is based on a shopping pattern. The pattern is based on some consumption patterns shown by her admired journalist. What makes you happy? The thing that is told to make you happy; your dream cloth is chosen, named and pointed elsewhere.²

The indicator of happiness is clear here: to be happy the one should obtain a social standing that is marked by a label’s or brand’s social recognition (see p. 12). A brand may be used as an identity indicator: identity is being obtained but not inherent; we still manipulate it all the time. We are rebirthing every now and then.³ The brand gives us a new distinction: the better it is, the more we have to sacrifice to obtain it.

Bauman critique is multidimensional. On one hand he refers to a concept of autotheological character of consumption. The satisfaction cannot be obtained: when we get an object we must find another phantom and so ad infinitum. A consumer’s happiness is unattainable. The consumption leads not to surety and safety, but to the escalation of anxiety (p. 23).

Therefore “In a society of shoppers and a life of shopping we are happy as long as we haven’t lost the hope of becoming happy” (p. 15). This conception is known from Bauman earlier works. In *Wasted life* (2004) a vicious cycle of consumption causes an ascenization of human-waste and permanent feeling of a risk both in an economical and existential sense of the word.

On the other hand the consumption as an indicator of happy life is an empty index. “Whatever your cash and credit standing, you won’t find in a shopping mall love and friendship, the pleasures of domesticity, the satisfaction that comes from caring for loved ones” (p. 5). The goal shown by consumption is empty not only because it is unattainable, but also because it wreaks havoc in other values and goals that forms (or has already formed) an ideal of happy life.

This ideal was always at the center of many thinkers interest. Its transformations resemble a logic of liquid modernity development. All the elements that constitute the state of happiness were not arranged in a hierarchy in Athens of Aristotle. The modernity has replaced the state of happiness with the pursuit of happiness. Bauman shows the evolution of a happiness as a culturally specified goal. Thereby he does not repeat a philosophical question about the sense but focuses on (sociological) questions about social determinants of achievement of culturally specified goal (and its relativization). He refers both to the sociological classics (like Durkheim) and to the protosociologists (like de Tocqueville).

The process of consumerisation of a happiness is closely connected with an individualization. Bauman names the consumer a new narcissus of Christopher Lasch (1991). The final effect of happiness’s consumerisation—in the liquid modernity—

² By the way we may ask (lets refer to the *La société de consommation* by Jean Baudrillard, other prominent postmodernist, per instance) what makes the Vogue so attractive for (male) sociologists since the writings of Roland Barthes?

³ Cf. P. Sienkiewicz (1995).

is a compulsion to pursuit of the happiness. The individualization of consumption caused transformation of *pròs tò télos* of Aristotle “good life.”⁴

But Bauman is not susceptible to quite simple, sociological diagnosis. He tries to propose some model. He refers to his own experiences here, which makes his narrative very personal (and simultaneously distanced to the recent cultural issues). “Myself, I belong to one of those ‘past generations’” he declares (p. 65), travestyng a phrase of Hana Świda-Ziemba. According to Świda-Ziemba, while ‘past generation’ is oriented both on the past and the present, for contemporary youth only the present exists.

Bauman’s statements about the transformation of contemporary morality enclosed in the last part of the book are strong. The concept of responsibility and responsible choices, based on ethical duty of care for the needs of the Other has been shifted to the risk and income/outcome calculation or—in other words—an adiphorization. Empathy was replaced with accountancy. The responsibility is limited to the actant him/herself. The transition from *responsibility to* (an authority, a “noble cause”) through *responsibility for* (the welfare, the Other dignity and autonomy) ends in *responsibility to* oneself and *responsibility for* oneself (p. 107–108). The Other is being replaced by the Self.

The morality focused on Self was dominated by market-like regulation. “If you decide to be kind to others *because* you expect a reward for your kindness, if the hoped-for *reward* is the motive of your good deeds, if ‘being kind and good to others’ is a result of calculating your manifestation of a *moral* stance, or rather one more case of mercenary, selfish behavior?” (p. 95, emphasis original).

Bauman quotes Necham Tec’s (1986) research on Righteous among the Nations, a little bit ironically quoting his statistical analysis. Let’s quote Tec himself:

I have examined many influences on the decision to undertake selfless rescue—social class, political beliefs, degree of anti-Semitism, extent of religious commitment, the prospects of monetary reward and friendship. While each of these may offer a partial explanation, none is a fully reliable predictor of precisely who would attempt the protection of Jews (p. 150).

So, when there is no variable (or set of variables that—in the sociologists’ opinion—regulate action), what the Righteous were acting on? Bauman answer is worthy of quotation:

“The helpers, unlike many or most other people of the same social category, education, religious faith and political loyalties, *could not do otherwise*. They would not be able to go on living if they failed to defend the lives of others. Protecting their own psychological safety and comfort could not make up for the spiritual distress caused by the sight of people who were suffer. [the ones who refused help] decided that their lives were more worthy of care than the lives of those others for whose survival they refused to care” (p. 97, emphasis original).

This is a language of rational choice theory. Bauman skips *homo sociologicus* approach, according to which action is caused by socialization (when we agree with Bourdieu that all the dimensions described at the beginning of previous paragraph

⁴ Cf. P. Ricoeur (2003).

are formed in reproduction process), and proposes something we may call “morality of exchange” or “economy of altruism.” Each individual has to weight the pluses and minuses of helping. When psychical safety and comfort is worthy more than physical safety action was undertaken. When physical safety prevails—individual will refuse a help.

We could assume, that the view of individual’s egoism is striking here. But I do not want to consider the author of *The Liquid Modernity* (who also wrote *Towards a Critical Sociology* and *Socialism: the active utopia*) view of human nature. After all in Becker-like views the category of egoism is morally neutral (in classic economy it has even positive value from the point of view of the community). Bauman uses national choice perspective mainly (or only) to show the limitation of sociological shortcuts: the understanding of some actions in a terms of “objective” variables and marks the transition to the modern, Self-centered morality.

Maybe the “morality of exchange” is a *post hoc* category, created only as a justification of action already undertaken. So what does regulate actions instead of widely understood sociological determinants? We should move back to the category of happiness here.

When we are filling out our balance sheet, we usually forgot that its frame is behind our bad or good will. The pursuit for happiness is normative regulated as any other kind of action. Bauman touches an amazingly interesting and complex issue here: the one cannot deny happiness. It is enclosed within the category itself—the existence of happiness (even as a mere possibility) marks the necessity to obtain it. “The human way of being-in-the-world is a way that contains the idea of happiness” says Bauman elsewhere (2002).

It leads us to the following question: whether happiness is a metaphysical state, or socially constructed pattern? And in consequence: who should speak about the happiness—the philosopher or sociologist? The one who knows how the things should be, or the one who knows (or at least try to find out) how the things are?

In my opinion Bauman asks the questions about the social reality, and locates himself within analytical, empirically based discourse, but he seems to propose an answer embed in idealistic language. His entire narrative is marked by the tension between experience and ideal, or in other words: sociological daily bread with some philosophical spices.

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Bartłomiej Walczak,
University of Warsaw
e-mail: b.walczak@anthro.edu.pl