Critique and overcritique in sociology

Richard Kilminster

Volume 2, Issue 2, July 2013

Permalink: http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0002.205 [http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0002.205]

[http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/]

> *Is not the construction of the future and dealing with it for all times not our affair, in which case it is all the more certain what we have to accomplish in the present: I mean the ruthless criticism of all that exists, ruthless in the sense that it is neither afraid of the results it arrives at nor of conflict with the powers that be.*
> ***Karl Marx, letter to Arnold Ruge, September 1843*** [1] [#N1]

Abstract: The concept of 'overcritique' is defined as a type of melodramatic, negative, one-sided and total critique of society, which developed in the latter part of the twentieth century out of the Critical Theory strand of Western Marxism. As an aid to understanding the notion the multiple meanings of the much used terms critique and critical in sociology and the humanities generally are clarified and their origins are traced in Kant, Hegel and Marx and the work of the Frankfurt School. The equivocal term 'critical' is shown to function in overcritique in particular as a political code word for a generalised commitment to eliminating all forms of unequal power balances between interdependent groups, which relations are prejudged as subjugation, oppression or domination. Overcritique is shown to be one-sided, over-abstract, destructive and socially iatrogenic, based on dubious transcendental arguments and overstated to the point of absurdity. These drawbacks are illustrated by reference to some of the recent writings of Zygmunt Bauman.

Keywords: Hegel, Marx, critique, transcendence, Critical Theory, overcritique, nihilism, social blaming, Zygmunt Bauman

Introduction

Marx's call to arms above comes at the end of an argument against various French socialists whose solution to the problems of the emerging industrial society was to put forward a single, ready-made, abstract model of an alternative socialist system, such as Etienne Cabet's*Voyage en Icarie*. Marx tells Ruge that this solution is dogmatic and doctrinaire because it is presented as an abstract, ahistorical, ideal social arrangement to which people would implicitly be forced to submit, since the forces of production and bourgeois society as a whole were not sufficiently developed to make it possible. But Marx could never have imagined the fate of his counsel. Over time, the relation between the two major economic classes became relatively more levelled, integrating the interdependent antagonists and pacifying the class struggle, thus pulling the rug out from under the possibility of socialism via forceful revolution [2] [#N2]. By the middle of the twentieth century all that was left of the socialist utopia in Western Europe was negative denigration of modern society in its name - a type of total social criticism found in variants of Western Marxism, for which I coined the term 'overcritique' in my book *Praxis and Method* (Kilminster 1979: 250, 255).

Specifically, this mode of critique came into prominence in the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School from the 1930s onwards as the result of the non-occurrence of the wanted and expected proletarian revolution and the initial triumph of fascist and National Socialist movements. In this tradition of social critique the 'delayed' proletarian revolution is transformed into the myth of the as-yet-unrealised 'truth' of history preserved in

theory as a possibility, even as the historical process apparently deviates from its allotted path. Individual and society will finally be reconciled in an imaginary future utopia of collective labour, freedom, community, solidarity and co-operation. This vision is then justified philosophically and employed as a transcendental yardstick to place up against the contemporary economic institutions, culture and politics of society as a totality. Social developments which are running in the opposite direction are denied, suppressed or reinterpreted as counteracting phenomena, deviations from the historically necessary, true path to the supposed future socialist society.

My argument is that unalloyed overcritique today is destructive because against this idealised model of the unrealised, but transcendentally inferred, society of pure freedom, equality, collective labour and direct democracy, the present social reality must always be found severely wanting in virtually every respect. This perspective systematically interprets the affirmation of anything that is good about society and worth preserving as ideologically suspect and serving the interests of the privileged. The result is the relentless, gloomy and often melodramatic depiction of modern society as wholly noxious and oppressive. Just to give two contemporary examples: Holloway, Matamoros and Tischler declare that our society is one:

> in which in all our variety and difference we are put in prison, the prison of capitalism. Dialectics is … the escape plan, the thinking-against-the-prison, thinking-against-the-wrong-world, a thinking that would no longer make sense if we were outside the prison of the wrong world – but we are not (2009: 6).

In a similar vein, in a discussion of the play motif in consumption, work and politics, Cremin refers to contemporary consumer society as ‘the factory of enjoyment, where exploitation and comedy come together in a nightmarish world with all the appearance of the ludic and the iron fist of enterprise that capitalism demands’ (2011: 137). Later I will discuss a selection of the recent writings of the prolific social philosopher Zygmunt Bauman, whose sweeping indictment of contemporary society provides another vivid and sophisticated example. Meanwhile, I will explore the deeper presuppositions of the style of ‘critical’ thinking lying behind his overstatements and similar ones in our time.

‘Critical’ as a code-word [3] [#N3]

In the social sciences at the present time, variants of the Critical Theory perspective derived from the Frankfurt School are probably the most adopted (but by no means the most cogent) solution to the perceived problem of what should be the relationship between sociological research and political and moral convictions as to how society ‘ought’ to be organised. That the examples mentioned in the Introduction fall into this camp is obvious. The ‘critical’ viewpoint is one side of a polarization of opinion on the issue of the role of values in sociological research. The parameters of this controversy are well-known. Briefly, one view accepts that research can be ‘value-free’ in Max Weber’s sense, in which matters of moral values, political ideology or ‘normative’ questions generally are suspended for the sake of dispassionate inquiry. On this viewpoint, sociology works towards value-freedom, as an ideal or this is employed as a regulative principle, in Kantian language.

Proponents of the Frankfurt School derived Critical Theory, on the other hand, argue that the pursuit of ‘value-freedom’ in sociology is undesirable because it does not put eliminating social inequality and ‘domination’ at the centre of research informed by those aims. It should be substituted by social scientists placing values and normative concerns (typically referred to by high-level abstractions such as freedom,

emancipation, equality, social justice, social transformation, self-determination, and so on) at the centre of research, shaping its focus and priorities to inform on-going political activity. This perspective is very pervasive in sociology and books about it are legion. As we will shortly see, this is partly because in the complex globalised world of the contemporary period, it provides people with a means of orientation. Sociologists embracing it often describe what they are doing as 'critical' sociology or 'critical' social theory, always contrasted with and in opposition to, the 'value-free', mainstream orthodoxy, seen as complicit in domination. It is a position ultimately derived from Western Marxism and is presented as the fusion of social science and politics or theory and practice.

The word 'critical', as one of a family of words including critique, critiquing and criticism, is ubiquitous at the present time in sociological writings and in the milieus of teaching, research, publishing and abstracts of conference papers. The obligatory adjective critical has developed an almost incantatory, magical aura, although it is often used carelessly. Sometimes it is used indiscriminately in the same piece of writing with different meanings, such as 'crucial' or 'fault-finding', without explanation, causing confusion. Important Kantian, Hegelian and Marxian meanings are often conflated or elided, or not mentioned at all. Furthermore, the whole matter has become even more blurred by the arrival in literary, cultural, film and gender studies of the loose field comprising history, philosophy and sociology also known as Critical Theory. Buchanan (2010: 101) has pointed out that the term Critical Theory in this sense refers to 'any form of theorizing in the humanities and social sciences'.

However, despite the fact that the term critical has become desperately equivocal in contemporary usage, sociologists and others in the social sciences continue *self-consciously* to commit themselves to a sociology that is avowedly 'critical'. The meaning of the term does not have to be specified, nor separated from other definitions, because it is a code-word aimed at initiates who know what meaning is intended. It is difficult for the uninitiated to guess what is meant, the more so in view of the plethora of meanings of the word that are in common usage. When being used as a codeword it refers to a generalised political commitment to reducing inequality, oppression and injustice, broad parameters that encompass a wide range of political positions and moral viewpoints, largely on the Left of the political spectrum. It functions for many sociologists and others as a talisman, conveying ennobling moral or political beliefs. The code-word satisfies the writer's conscience as well as signalling to others a broad commitment or allegiance. They will, in turn, recognise that the author is 'one of us'. The code word plays an important part in the formation of personal and group identity. It also goes hand-in-hand with what Benthem van den Bergh (1986: 110) described as the tendency to look for individuals or groups to *blame* for unplanned social developments that thwart our pursuit of pleasure and fulfilment; or for 'guilt-causes' in ever more abstract and personified categories. Writing about the sometimes threatening international and intra-societal conflicts in the twentieth century, he argues that:

> The lesser the degree of controllability of such problems and the greater the uncertainty and fear, the stronger the tendency to blame somebody or something will become. In such cases the basic categories and questions of a mythical-magical way of thinking, though they have become more abstract (not God or the Devil, but 'capitalism or 'communism' and the like) still largely determine the way in which people orient themselves. They will attempt either to blame specific individuals or groups, or to look for what I shall call 'guilt causes' in more abstract categories, which are often personified and endowed with consciousness, intent will and purpose, in the same way as mountains or rivers in former days (Benthem van den Bergh 1986: 110–11) .

Writers who self-consciously describe their inquiries as 'critical' take it for granted that entities such as 'capitalism', 'communism' or 'consumerism' are to blame in that sense. At the time of writing, the personified

concept of 'modernity' appears to be performing a similar function of 'guilt-cause' for many sociologists struggling to come to terms with conflicting political allegiances after the collapse of Soviet communism in 1989. The new geo-political figuration after the Cold War has created a situation in which the previously time-honoured, clear-cut targets for social blaming have become confused and ambiguous. What has been superseded since that time has been the widespread view that in assessing social ills, capitalism is the problem and socialism the solution. A widespread argument now is that the so-called 'socialist' societies of the former Soviet Union, as well as the so-called 'capitalist' ones outside it, were *both* part of the wider phenomenon of 'modernity' and that *this* is the source of their *common* problems (Bauman 1992: 222). 'Modernity' steps into the vacuum. Modernity, in other words, is now to blame.

'Critical' inquiries in Kant and Hegel

Let us now turn to some of the technical meanings of the term 'critical' in philosophy and sociology, which are tacitly implicated, but rarely made explicit when it is being used as a code-word.

1. In the *Kantian* tradition, 'critical' means showing presuppositions, that which 'makes possible, X or Y', in knowledge and culture. The focus is on the limits [*Grenzen*] of what can be known or envisaged. Kant's philosophy was known as The Critical Philosophy and its rudiments will be familiar. He was trying to shed light on the true nature of reality and what could and could not be known, by establishing the conditions of possibility of experience. He, like Hegel and Marx and many others, was part of a wider cultural movement which Goudsblom (1980: chapter 7) has termed the pursuit of 'the truth imperative'. This tendency can, however, Goudsblom argues, lead to the uncertainties, torments and intellectual paralysis of nihilism, the paradigm case of which is to be found in the philosophy of Nietzsche. Kant's Categories of the Understanding were the *a priori* universals (for instance, time, space, number) presupposed in knowledge and the process of knowing. Later, in the work of Habermas (1970) and Apel (1980) the approach was extended into the transcendental importance of language and language communities. Here the 'ideal speech situation' has been posited as a regulative principle and yardstick for social criticism. Against the ideal speech situation, it is possible to point to 'distorted communication' as the result of the intrusion of hierarchy and inequality and power differentials into communications between groups of people.

The Kantian tradition has been very influential in classical sociology and beyond. It is well-known that Kantianism in various forms has been the single most influential philosophy in shaping the contours of sociology, even more so than pragmatism, important though that has been. The work of Durkheim, Simmel, Weber, Parsons, Giddens, Lévi-Strauss and Foucault (not an exhaustive list by any means) was founded on Kantian philosophy or transcendental principles inspired by it. Parsons, for example, was interested mainly in the conditions that make social action *possible*, not in people acting, as such (Kilminster 1998: chapters 2, 4 and 5). A Kantian approach to social science tends to be analytic, breaking up social reality into analytically conceived, abstract aspects, as in Parsons's cybernetic hierarchy, Weber's ideal-types, Simmel's forms of sociation or the sociological categories in Giddens's structuration theory (Kilminster 1998: chapter 7).

2. In the *Hegelian* philosophical tradition 'critical' refers to comparing a particular institution or other object with its universal ideal form. Hegelians work with universals. So, for the Hegelian, anything that is finite is a particular determination of its embeddedness in what leading philosophers amongst the nineteenth-century British Hegelians (for example, FH Bradley and Bernard Bosanquet) glossed as the *concrete universal* (see Stern 2007). 'Critique' here means relating the finite appearance of the object with its universal quality or essence, which it also *is*. In this way of thinking, what is perfect, infinite and universal has already been partially realised in the imperfect, finite, concrete world. For example, if one compared a given particular

national judicial system with the pure concept of Justice then it would always be found empirically to be falling short of what it could *ideally* be but partly *is*. This method gave the Left Hegelians of the 1840s the means to become merciless critics of society in the name of the Absolute. Society in every aspect never matches the perfection of the embedded idealisations; it could always 'do better'. In the epigraph to this paper Marx was drawing on this pre-existing Hegelian tradition of critique which was in the 1840s widely practised in political argument amongst diverse radical groups.

Herein lies the origins of the contemporary attitude of Critical Theorists who criticise society relentlessly as not matching up to an idealised utopia of equality, democracy and solidarity (Kilminster 1998: 53–4). The writings of Marx and later Marxists are essentially secularised, social-scientific versions of this kind of thinking, on to which is grafted a practical, political force to provide the putative means of *realising*, that is making real in practice, what society could ideally be. Here we find the deeper significance of the code- word. In Hegel, to repeat, universals such as pure freedom or the 'Absolute ethical life' for example, are seen as actually embedded in the finite and imperfect world, or 'relative ethical life' (Kilminster 1998: chapter 2). In the *Theses on Feuerbach* Marx advocates 'practical-critical' activity, which is essentially a political rather than an epistemological statement. We can reasonably assume that he means by this *making* society become what it could ideally be *in revolutionary practice*, not just criticising it purely verbally in the name of the idealised utopia. The whole structure of this way of thinking leads to the characteristic contrast in later Marxist work between society as it *is* and society as it *ought* to be (freedom, true community, communism, etc.). The communist stage of human society was said to be embedded in the present society as its *telos,* a material potential built into the developing forces of production, yet to be fully realised by the enabling political victory of the proletariat (see Kilminster 1998: chapter 3). [4] [#N4]

However, once the possibility of proletarian revolution faded in the 1930s with the initial triumph of the National Socialist and fascist movements, the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse and others) sought to preserve in theory, as a possibility, the transcendental truth of socialism, communism and freedom (Kilminster 1979). This effectively meant a return to the Hegelian dialectics which Marx employed in his letter to Ruge in my epigraph. Since the practical agent for the realisation of the Ought, the proletariat, had apparently deserted its historical mission, so the historical opportunity to realise a new world of freedom, equality and solidarity in practice had not been taken. Defiant total societal critique in the name of its possibility filled the political vacuum. As Adorno said: 'Philosophy ... lives on because the moment to realize it was missed' (Adorno 1973: 3). In his opposition to 'identity thinking', Adorno posited the 'utopian moment of the object' (quoted in Rose 1978:p.44) and others in this tradition have talked of the 'utopian horizon' as a yardstick for social criticism (for example Ebert 2010). Later theorists such as Habermas, Apel and Bauman have looked for new models of the as-yet-unrealised utopia to provide a philosophically defensible criterion for the social criticism of inequality and injustice in the present. These analyses have mixed together transcendental arguments from both Kant and Hegel in the service of remaining loyal to the 'idea of a future society as the community of free men ... and to it there must be fidelity amid all change', as Horkheimer put it (Horkheimer 1972 [1937]: 217). These models have taken the form, for example, of Habermas's and Apel's ideas about distorted communication and the presupposed 'ideal speech situation' or 'speech community' (Habermas 1970; Apel 1980), which are argued in a Kantian fashion in the service of a Hegelian–Marxian critique.

It is obvious that there are archaic philosophical and metaphysical hangovers pervading this kind of (ultimately needless) argumentation. I would further contend that there are two other serious drawbacks: overstatement and the nihilism of pursuing the inherently unachievable. It is by no means the case that 'critique' in this sense always has a positive outcome. It is a common but erroneous assumption that Critical Theory, being on the side of the underdog, is life-affirming. It has been pointed out by Michael Zank (2002:

197) that *Kritik* in German can be translated as either critique or criticism, so contains either the intention to establish the true nature of reality (pursuing the 'truth imperative') or to achieve a condemnation of it ('criticism'). In other words, it can take either or both of two connotations: constructive or destructive. In the contemporary code word 'critical', the second meaning (which coincides with the dictionary meaning in English of fault-finding [5] [#N5] or censorious, carping, passing judgement) comes to the forefront. The 'critical' theorist finds only what is *wrong* with society, which must be morally condemned. This is usually conceptualised as various combinations of stark inequality, control, oppression and exploitation, often conceptualised as *domination*. In the words of Luc Boltanski:

> Critical theories of domination posit the existence of profound, enduring asymmetries which, by assuming different forms in different contexts, are constantly duplicated to the point of colonizing reality as a whole. ... The dominated and the dominant are everywhere, whether the latter are identified as dominant class, dominant sex or, for example, dominant ethnicity. What is involved is not only directly observable, but also invariably eludes the consciousness of actors. Domination must be unmasked (Boltanski 2011: 2).

The formulation here is not untypical of the sweeping depictions in this tradition of society as totally riven with forbiddingly harsh inequalities and oppression. Like all of them, this one also *prejudges as subjugation* all the complex, uneven, shifting balances of power between *inter*dependent groups (Elias 2012a [1978]: 187–188). Also, there is no theoretical device to deal with the empirical evidence for the relative lessening (although not the disappearance) of power differentials between groups since the nineteenth century brought about as an unintended consequence of the ongoing integration of social strata within pacified nation states. As I argued earlier, these were the social developments which pulled the rug from under Marx's model of a deepening class war ensuing in a final revolution. In the case of the critical theorists, they have passed a (severe) judgement, as Horkheimer insisted, on the developing relations between social groups, in the name of fidelity to an unrealised, *but notice, ultimately unattainable*, idealised state of perfect freedom, democracy, equality and authentic community. One serious problem with the relentless pursuit of idealised goals or the comparison of society with a pure or ideal yardstick, is that we are fated to experience unending frustration. We can never fully give ourselves credit for our achievements, because we know that against the perfect, but forever unattainable goal, our efforts will *always* fall short. Yet we must keep working towards the goal even though we *know* it is sociologically infeasible. Durkheim warned of this outcome a long time ago: 'To pursue a goal which is by definition unattainable is to condemn oneself to a state of perpetual unhappiness' (Durkheim 1951 [1897]: 248).

Furthermore, Arpad Szakolczai (2008) has drawn attention to the broader negative consequences of this kind of 'critical' or utopian, orientation in sociology (see also Remmling 1967; Kilminster 1979: Part 4). He sees its essential destructiveness, in theory and in practice, citing communist Eastern Europe under the Soviet Union and China. This orientation results in a 'politics of suffering' as well as serving to exacerbate or *even to bring about*, exactly what it is being criticised.

> Criticism ... is a very old concern, safely located at the heart of modern disciplinary traditions, just as critical theory, in most of the social, political and human sciences, has become fully integrated within the mainstream. But ... the oldest and clearest traditions – doubt, suspicion, critique, denouncing, looking for whatever is bad, ugly, questionable, or, that which shows suffering, pain, frustration, is *not*, after all, a nice thing to do. Bad things, of course, do happen, and they should not be ignored; they should be analysed, with due serenity, instead of

> continuously shown up, in a repetitive, quasi-incantatory way. After all, as the political, economic, social and cultural history of the past century has amply demonstrated, criticism and critical theory in all its varieties managed to produce one certain effect: to render things worse by magically and contagiously reproducing exactly those aspects of life it wanted to 'criticise' (Szakolczai, 2008: 277–8).

Notice that the dictionary definition of the word '*un*critical' means the opposite of the kind of critique referred to above – that is, lacking in judgement, complacently accepting. For the 'critical' sociologist, any inquiry that is not self-described or vaunted as critical *must* be indifferent to or complicit in, the overstated inequalities and injustices of the society being criticised. But, as Boland has rightly said, 'it is hubristic and naive to imagine that one's own position has a monopoly on critique and that the discourse of all others is "uncritical"' (2007: 123). The essentially political character of the commitment to a self-consciously 'critical' approach in sociology, and its function for relatively privileged intellectuals, is obvious. Complacent acceptance runs counter to the self-image of the 'critical' sociologists and drives them to pursue the 'guilt-causes' of today's social ills in such personified entities as 'capitalism' and 'modernity'. Reinhart Koselleck has remarked how the state of absolute freedom implied in utopian thought functions for the critic: 'A truth that will not appear until tomorrow absolves the critic of all guilt today' (Koselleck 1988 [1959]: 110).

We can now turn to the way in which this motif and other features of overcritique play themselves out in the influential work of Zygmunt Bauman. Whatever the durability of his work proves to be in the future, remains to be seen. But his approach illustrates for present purposes the anatomy of overcritique and, more broadly, the pitfalls of the metaphysical and transcendental hangovers still persisting in sociology.

Overcritique in the work of Zygmunt Bauman [6] [#N6]

Bauman's conception of the contemporary globalized society as a condition of 'liquid modernity' (Bauman 2000) presented in a cluster of books with titles employing the same metaphor of liquidity, is widely known at the time of writing. However, as a direct result of the presuppositions of the Critical Theory tradition, Bauman one-sidedly undervalues the present society as producing and reproducing nothing but unrelieved anxiety and uncertainty. This gloomy diagnosis is made by implicit comparison with an ideal state of freedom, equality, collective labour and solidarity, which exists as a persistent possibility, 'nagging' the theorist, as he sometimes tellingly puts it.

In his influential book, *Postmodern Ethics,* Bauman develops a transcendental argument (Bauman 1993: 69–81) inspired by the philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas, to the effect that a person's moral responsibility for another person is 'unconditional and infinite' (Bauman, 1993: 250) but is channelled in various ways in concrete societies and often obscured. The depth and extent of his unquestioned philosophical commitments is clear: 'Morality is a *transcendence* of being; morality is, more precisely, the *chance* of such transcendence' (1993: 72; emphasis in original). This idea constitutes, he argues in a Kantian vein echoing Simmel, a new sociological *a priori*. Empirically, people can choose whether to exercise that responsibility and hence the moral self is '*always haunted by the suspicion that it is not moral enough*' (1993: 80; italics in original). Moral responsibility is thus ambivalent because it contains the sense of a standard that can never be reached. A person knows when they are in the realm of moral choice, says Bauman, when they feel 'moral anxiety' (1993: 80), 'constant anguish', 'conscience' (1993: 250) and 'guilt' (1993: 81).

From this guilt-driven view of the world, it is very difficult to conceptualise a notion of progress. Hence it is difficult to assemble a balance sheet of the longer-term social and scientific achievements accumulated

unintendedly by humankind which must praised and preserved. To the critical mind, social praise is dangerous because to laud what is good in society blinds us to what is wrong, so playing into the hands of the advantaged power holders who can then claim that we live in the Leibnizian 'best of all possible worlds' as satirised by Voltaire in *Candide*, an allusion often made by Bauman. The lofty moral tone of the critical imperative ensures that the high level of abstraction and hence vagueness, of the principles to which the code-word is said to commit the initiates – such as freedom, emancipation, liberation and social transformation – will go unnoticed.

Like all critique and social criticism of this kind, critical sociology is destructive in a double sense. On the one hand, the knowing pursuit of the inherently unattainable generates nihilism and persistent discontent in the habitus of its adherents. On the other, the cataloguing of all that is wrong in society at the expense of a more balanced picture involving achievements and benign compulsions, not only contributes to that gloom and pessimism but also reproduces, through a kind of contagion, exactly the bad things it relentlessly denounces. Without careful specification of what can, cannot, and should not be changed, the statement that society could always 'be other than it is', becomes a vacuous slogan.

There is another problem: the empirical *extent* of the developments Bauman so eloquently traces and evaluates. There is in his later writings little or no direct corroborative empirical data about modern societies deployed or discussed, something which runs counter to the central principle in the culture of social science since the Enlightenment: the interplay of theory and empirical verification. Without the *consistent* control of evidence there is no strong defence against myths, ideologies, prejudices, irrational beliefs, wishful thinking and overstatements of all kinds intruding into and shaping scientific research. But nevertheless, Bauman makes high level generalisations about social transformations and a good deal of evaluation and prescription goes on. But one can ask: *how far* has our society become a consumer society? Are people's identities as totally consumption-driven as we have been led to believe? If consumption has moved to the centre of our economic system, what has happened to production? Have global economic processes *entirely* disempowered nation-states? Bauman tends to depict globalisation as virtually total. He also discusses people's attempts to create communities in such an undiscriminating way as to impair understanding. What kind of the 'neo-tribal' activity is he referring to? Does it include new social movements? football crowds? events such as Glastonbury festival? groups of bikers or other style groups? Does he include parent-teachers' associations? local cricket clubs? neighbourhood watch groups? Bauman's analysis, because it is presented in such a sweeping and absolute fashion as a moral indictment of a global capitalism as a radically dehumanising force, it is not framed in such a way as to take account of differentiations such as these. *A more discriminating, empirically sensitive account could crucially affect the moral and prescriptive conclusions he draws.*

Furthermore, there is an empirical issue about exactly *how far* contemporary consumer societies are now '*unstructured*', which is a central assertion in Bauman's diagnosis. There is a good deal of citable material available to show that boundaries, structure, constraints derived from interdependencies of various kind and even certainties, are alive and well in contemporary societies. Bauman (1992: chapter 9) simply asserts the incessant 'mutability' of society without any assessment of empirical evidence as to its extent, and against a massive weight of sociological tradition and contemporary evidence which points in the opposite direction. He also seems to have accepted the hugely overstated view of the extent of globalization characteristic of the early stages of that debate in the late 1980s and early 1990s. When the tenor of a good deal of recent commentary has been to reaffirm the continuing importance of nation-states for at least the monopolization of the means of force, political legitimacy, the levying of taxes within a territory and for generating a sense of national identity via language and culture (Kilminster 1998: chapter 6). This is not to say that globalisation is not a compelling force; it is just the extent of its effects that I am questioning.

To reiterate: Bauman's later writings constitute a passionate moral indictment of global capitalist society couched in the language of massive overstatement. He sees global capitalism as creating a treadmill of insecurity and fears with little or no sign of respite. It is judged and found wanting in the name of an as yet unrealised and completely imaginary utopia of collective freedom, community, solidarity and co-operation. However, there is an inconsistency: on the one hand, Bauman warns of the futility of people trying to create communities through individual involvement alone because these communities exist only as a 'pure' or 'imaginary' ideal, a postulate. Yet, on the other hand, his entire total critique of society presupposes just such an imaginary postulate. Against such a perfect, but unrealised social model, Bauman's diagnosis can only relentlessly paint an unremittingly bleak, one-sided and sombre picture of society. He finds nothing positive, life-affirming or enabling in the social world of the present. In terms of Bauman's perspective, it is impossible to frame a positive, affirmative analysis of a society in any aspect. His recent work is the polar opposite of the 'Durksonian' perspective he so strenuously attacked for its apparent society-justifying character and incapacity to mount a critique of society (Bauman 1976:ch 2). For example, probably because of his experiences of bureaucratic rule in Poland under the communists, Bauman only sees the dominating, arbitrary and heartless potential of rule-following and bureaucratic organization but not its usefulness, even-handedness and even progressive nature. This was something which even otherwise realistic and unsentimental sociologists such as Max Weber and Ferdinand Tönnies acknowledged.

In a word, because Bauman's social critique is so total, negative and persistently one-sided, it peters out in its own absurdity. He has led himself down into the same *cul-de-sac* in which the classical critical theorists of the Frankfurt School also lost themselves, that is the eloquent, but desperate, evocation of the tragic human situation that results after the moment to realise the utopia has apparently been missed (yet again).

Conclusion: sociological implications

A broader problem arises from Bauman's use of transcendental arguments largely from Emmanuel Lévinas. This reveals his total capitulation to philosophical argumentation, a feature of his work which often goes hand-in-hand with overcritique. Bauman argues, following his *praxis* formula (Bauman 1973), that people in general as a species structure their worlds continuously, hence morals cannot by definition come from society. Therefore he has to go 'outside' any given society to find a source of *unconditional* responsibility for the Other, something which he finds in Lévinas. Bauman further argues that morality cannot in any case be said to come from society anymore, because now society is so individualistic that it has become a mass of under-patterned encounters that have no structure as such (something that Durkheim, for example, assumed on empirical grounds). That is why he has to turn to an *a priori* theory and Lévinas provides the inspiration. But the argument executes a sleight of hand because of its unproven assumption of the end of *structured* society. But an analysis of social interdependencies can surely show otherwise, even the persistence of traditional certainties. The 'critical' mind shuns such realities because their importance has been stressed in conservatism. Even if historically it has always been conservatives who have focussed on these developments, this just means that they have emphasised them, not that they do not exist.

It is sociologically inconceivable that social morality (meaning people taking account of others as Durkheim put it) could come from 'outside' society and history, the phrase itself surely being a contradiction in terms. This capitulation to transcendence, which the entire sociological revolution of modern times was committed to overcoming (Kilminster 1998: chapter 1) is a retrograde move and one that is simply unnecessary, even if one is seeking to be 'critical' of society. Furthermore, the model of human beings assumed by Lévinas/Bauman is that of the highly self-controlled individuals of Western societies whose pattern of impulse and instinct control is extensive, all-round and very firmly disciplined. The philosophers who argue

that people are inherently compassionate and will behave kindly to each other left to their own devices, do so in the taken-for-granted certitude of their *own* capacity to do that. The question is, however, what specific social developments have to be in place and consolidated to make it possible for even some people consistently to think and behave like that?

The psychoanalyst Louisa Holt asked the key question a long time ago: ‘How is it that human impulses become so firmly disciplined that people can have the illusion that man is *instinctively* an ethical being, or a rational being?’ (1950: 171) The self-experience of the rationalist philosophers seems to them utterly indubitable, but it has been built up over generations in internally pacified societies and has a fragile existence (Elias 2012b [1939]). From the point of view of such a self-experience, what can be seen on examination to be a far-fetched theory of morality coming from something ‘pre-social’ can seem incontrovertible and profound. But it is a naive and unsociological projection of the self-experience of a small elite of learned and cultured people, elevated into an *a priori* theory of human nature and applied in a sweeping critique of society.

One can speculate that the impetus for taking this transcendental road may have originated for Bauman in his experiences of Eastern European and Russian state communism. To ground morality in society under these conditions would mean grounding it in the society dominated by the all-pervasive party rulers and state elites who controlled the entire society as a police state, including immigration and emigration, economic life and access to information. So, in developing a sociological theory of morality one resists in principle *any* theoretical move in this direction because it can be co-opted by such rulers to justify their power advantage as not only legitimate but also morally right (see Kilminster, 1998: 53—54). Hence, one has to move into a fictitious realm ‘outside’ society in order to develop a moral theory with which to criticise the bureaucratic, state socialist elites. It is a dubious whether this extravagant moral-theoretic move (even if it were intellectually credible) was ever necessary. It is a further moot point whether it is any longer necessary or relevant in the more open, liberalised European societies of the post-communist world.

Biography

Richard Kilminster is Honorary Research Fellow in Sociology at the University of Leeds. He previously studied sociology and literature at the University of Essex and and got an MA in sociology at the University of Leicester, where he was taught by Norbert Elias. He gained his PhD under Zygmunt Bauman at the University of Leeds in 1976. In the 1980s he worked with Elias at the University of Bielefeld as part of the Utopieforschung Group. He is author of Praxis and Method: A Sociological Dialogue with Lukács, Gramsci and the Early Frankfurt School (1979), The Sociological Revolution: From the Enlightenment to the Global Age (1998) and Norbert Elias: Post-philosophical Sociology (2007) and numerous articles on the sociology of knowledge. He is Chair of the Editorial Advisory Board for the Collected Works of Norbert Elias, has edited volume I, The Early Writings (2006), The Symbol Theory (revised edition 2011) and co-edited (with Stephen Mennell) three volumes of Essays (2008—09) all with UCD Press, Dublin.

References

Adorno, Theodor (1973) *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Apel, Karl-Otto (1980) *Towards a Transformation of Philosophy*, trans. Glyn Adey and David Frisby. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Bauman, Zygmunt (1973) *Culture as Praxis*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Bauman, Zygmunt (1976) *Towards a critical sociology: An essay on commonsense and emancipation*, London, Routledge.

Bauman, Zygmunt (1992)*Intimations of Postmodernity*, London, Routledge.

Bauman, Zygmunt (1993) *Postmodern Ethics*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers.

Bauman, Zygmunt (2000) *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Benthem van den Bergh, Godfried van (1986) 'The Improvement of Human Means of Orientation: Towards Synthesis in the Social Sciences', in (eds) Raymond Apthorpe&AndreásKráhl, *Development Studies: Critique and Renewal*, Leiden: E.J.Brill:109–136.

Boland, Tom (2007) ‘Critical Subjectivity: Towards a Gnomonic Model of Subject Constitution’, *Culture, Theory & Critique*, 48 (2): 123–38.

Boltanski, Luc (2011) *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Buchanan, Ian (2010) *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cremin, Colin (2011) *Capitalism’s New Clothes: Enterprise, Ethics and Enjoyment in Times of Crisis,* London, Pluto Press.

Durkheim, Émile (1951 [1897]) *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. London: Routledge.

Ebert, Norbert (2010) ‘Decent Society: Utopian Horizon Or “the Way is the Goal”’, *Thesis Eleven*, 101(1):72—80.

Elias, Norbert (2012a [1978] *What Is Sociology?Collected Works, Vol 5*, UCD Press, Dublin.

Elias, Norbert (2012b [1939]), *On The Process of Civilisation: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations, Collected Works, Vol 3*, UCD Press, Dublin.

Goudsblom, Johan (1980) *Nihilism and Culture*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell.

Habermas, Jürgen (1970) ‘On Systematically Distorted Communication’, *Inquiry,* 13, 205–18.

Holloway, John, Matamoros, Fernando and Tischler, Sergio (eds) (2009) *Negativity and Revolution: Adorno and Political Activism*, London, Pluto Press.

Holt, Louisa P. (1950) 'Identification: A Crucial Concept for Sociology', *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic*, Vol 14, pp 164—73.

Horkheimer, Max (1972 [1937]) ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’, in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays: Max Horkheimer*. New York: Seabury Press, pp. 188–243.

Kilminster, Richard (1979) *Praxis and Method: A Sociological Dialogue with Lukács, Gramsci and the Early Frankfurt School*. London: Routledge.

Kilminster, Richard (1998) *The Sociological Revolution: From The Enlightenment to the Global Age*. London: Routledge (reprinted 2000, paperback 2002).

Kilminster, Richard (2011) ‘Norbert Elias’s Post-Philosophical Sociology: From “Critique” to Relative Detachment’, in Stephen Mennell and Norman Gabriel (eds) *Norbert Elias and Figurational Research: Processual Thinking in Sociology*, Sociological Review Monograph Series, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell

Kilminster, Richard (2013) ‘Norbert Elias and Sociology’s Two Tracks’, *Journal of the History of the Social Sciences, Special Issue on Norbert Elias and Process Sociology - Across Disciplines).* October

(forthcoming).

Kilminster, Richard (with Ian Varcoe) (2002) ‘Zygmunt Baumans Sozialkritik: Themenstellungen und Kontinuitäten’ in *Zygmunt Bauman: Soziologie zwischen Postmoderne und Ethik* (eds) Matthias Junge and Thomas Kron, Opladen, Leske and Budrich.

Koselleck, Reinhart (1988 [1959]) *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Lukács, Georg (1971[1923]) *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. London: Merlin Press,

Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich,(1975) *Collected Works Volume 3, March 1843–August 1844,* London, Lawrence &Wishart.

Remmling, Gunter W. (1967) *Road to Suspicion: A Study of Modern Mentality and the Sociology of Knowledge,* Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall.

Rose, Gillian (1978) *The Melancholy Science: an Introduction to the thought of Theodor W. Adorno,* London, Macmillan.

Stern, Robert (2007) ‘Hegel, British idealism, and the curious case of the concrete universal’, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 15 (1) pp. 115–53.

Szakolczai, Arpad (2008) ‘What kind of political anthropology?: An external insider view’, *International Political Anthropology*, 1 (2): 275–282

Zank, Michael (ed. and trans.) (2002) *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings (1921–1932)*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Notes

1. In Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, 1975: 145, translation amended. [#N1-ptr1]
2. I have explored this issue at length in a paper entitled ‘Norbert Elias and Sociology’s Two Tracks’ (forthcoming April 2014, *Journal of the History of the Human Sciences*, *Special Issue on Norbert Elias and Process Sociology - Across Discipline).* [#N2-ptr1]
3. In this section and the subsequent one have I have utilised some theoretical materials that I presented in Kilminster (2011) in the course of arguing a broader case that Elias’s resolute work on involvement and detachment suggests that sociology, properly done, can be ‘evaluative’ or ‘critical’ in a more inclusive and more constructive, sense than we find in the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School and its contemporary derivatives. It also renders unnecessary the elaborate, arduous and obscure transcendental arguments developed in that tradition to justify ‘critical’ inquiries. [#N3-ptr1]
4. Georg Lukács’s distinction in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) between the actual consciousness and imputed consciousness (embodying the *telos*) of the proletariat was a classical piece of sophisticated transcendental reasoning of this kind. His incredible claim was that the imputed consciousness (imputed, that is, by the theorist) existed on a ‘higher scientific plane objectively’ (Lukács 1923: 181) from the actual consciousness that could be established empirically (see Kilminster 1979: chapters 6 and 7 and pp 243-244). [#N4-ptr1]
5. In addition to ‘crucial’ and ‘fault-finding’, the *OED* also mentions the meaning of where one state passes over into another, as in the crisis of a disease (‘the patient’s condition is critical’); or in physics, in the

concept of 'critical mass'. On the relation between 'crisis' and 'critique' in the Enlightenment, see Koselleck 1988. [#N5-ptr1]

6. This section draws upon part of a joint article on Bauman which I wrote with Ian Varcoe (Kilminster and Varcoe 2002). [#N6-ptr1]

Hosted by Michigan Publishing, a division of the University of Michigan Library.
For more information please contact mpub-help@umich.edu.
Online ISSN: 2166-6644