

What Use is Sociology?

ZYGMUNT BAUMAN



Conversations with
Michael-Hviid Jacobsen
and Keith Tester

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Preface

This little book seeks to encourage sociologists to identify themselves as the active subjects of a way of addressing the world rather than the value-free technicians of an alleged science. The text consists of four conversations with Zygmunt Bauman, carried out between January 2012 and March 2013, combined with responses to questions, recordings of personal meetings between the three of us, letters and fragments from a couple of texts Bauman has published in less accessible outlets. The material has been arranged into loosely thematic strands in order to establish continuities, resonances and, sometimes, to leave threads deliberately dangling. We have tidied up the grammar where necessary (written English is, we noticed, often very different from spoken English and the latter sometimes looks extremely clumsy on the page) but deliberately done little else to the material. The aim has been to inspire a conversation going beyond the conversations in the book.

The intention is that the book will be used by current and future sociologists to encourage fresh reflection about what we do, why, how and who it is for. It is also an example of a possible different way of writing sociology. The form and content of the book go together. Throughout the aim is to encourage sociologists to apply to our own practice the moral and political message of Bauman's work: there is an alternative but it is up to us to make it.

Michael Hviid Jacobsen and Keith Tester

the less managerial, even anti-managerial, more traditional, humanistic variation of sociology ... aims at making human behaviour less predictable by activating inner, motivational sources of decision – supplying human beings with ampler knowledge of their situation and so enlarging the sphere of their freedom of choice.

Zygmunt Bauman in the *Polish Sociological Bulletin*, 1967

more than ever we must beware of falling into the traps of fashions which may well prove more detrimental than the malaise they claim to cure. Well, our vocation, after all these unromantic years, may become again a testfield of courage, consistency, and loyalty to human values.

We would be well advised if we carved on the walls of our sociological lecture rooms what Max Weber said more than half a century ago: 'If the professional thinker has an immediate obligation at all, it is to keep a cool head in the face of the idols prevailing at the time, and if necessary to swim against the stream.'

Zygmunt Bauman, Inaugural Lecture, University of Leeds, 1972

Introduction

The raw stuff processed by the sociological imagination is human experience. The end-product of the sociological imagination called 'social reality' is cast of the metal smelted from the ore of experience. Though its chemical substance cannot but reflect the composition of the ore, the product's content also bears the mark of the smelting process which divides the ore's ingredients into useful product and waste, while its shape depends on the mould (that is, the cognitive frame) into which the melted metal has been poured.

Zygmunt Bauman, *Society under Siege*, 2002

There are many different, constantly changing, ever expanding and mutually conflicting uses of sociology. This makes the question of the 'use of sociology' continuously relevant and pertinent.¹ Moreover, the question 'What use is sociology?' is particularly worth asking because sociology is different from almost any other area of intellectual work. Whereas most can identify an object 'out there' which it is their concern to investigate, sociology cannot. Sociology is itself part and parcel of the social world it seeks to explore. It is part of a social world in truth capable of carrying on without the insights of sociology.

There is a long standing tradition, and lots of current practice, which sees this situation as terrible and to be overcome at all costs. Various attempts have been – and are – made to put a barrier between sociology and the social world. There has been – and still is – a constant fetishization

of methodology, a stress on 'value neutrality', the development of a specialized and esoteric 'scientific' language designed to confuse the uninitiated, the adoption of the paraphernalia of professionalism – all of which function as a barrier between sociology and the world it investigates. In this way, sociology becomes some kind of scientific 'sorcery' that takes on a life of its own far removed and isolated from the life of the human beings it pretends to describe, investigate and analyse.² Sociology inside this barrier is said to be scientific and objective because, unlike every social activity sociologists explore, it is pretended to be uniquely free of power, self-interest and bias. The sociologists who seek to hide behind the barricades then attempt to sell their insights – or wait to be bought by power through research grants – on account of their willingness to march to the passing bells of policy-makers. The business of putting sociology into social life is then handed over to others. The result of all of this desperate denial of the status of sociology as an integral part of the social world it seeks to explore has been little more than the decadence of introspection, a banality of 'findings', an ideology hiding beneath terminology and last but not least a seduction by power. The result has been, in a word, *irrelevance*. The world carries on, sociology carries on, and rarely do they ever meet.

As a consequence, sociology needs to be rescued from sociology. This has been known since the late 1950s. American sociologist C. Wright Mills famously separated the sociological imagination from sociology and showed how the practice of the latter has absolutely no necessary connection with the former. Mills made an irrefutable case for the pursuit of a sociological imagination seeking to engage in a conversation with men and women. This conversation would be concerned to show how 'personal troubles' are inextricably linked with 'public issues'. The sociological imagination makes the personal political. It was

no coincidence that Mills lined up the practice of the sociological imagination alongside the work of people like novelists and journalists. For Mills, the sociological imagination – like novels and journalism – enables the development of a ‘quality of mind’ enabling men and women to understand and to narrate what is happening to them, what they feel and aspire towards. Sociology bereft of the sociological imagination can only provide information, and, as Mills saw, the world already has more information than it can deal with. The world has grown thin in stories, not information, and where stories are thin so too is the ability of men and women to make sense of their lives in its broader historical context. Then they, in Mills’s words, feel trapped. It is thus the job of the sociological imagination to show how personal life and individual biography is intimately connected with historical events and structural processes. It is the job of the sociological imagination to help people ‘understand the meaning of their epoch for their own lives’, and it is the ambition of the sociological imagination, according to Mills, to ‘make a difference in the quality of human life in our time’.³

The practice of the sociological imagination thus makes demands upon the practitioner. First of all, it is necessary to develop an account of the ‘epoch’. This account acts as the context in which men and women act. In the style of Honoré de Balzac it can intrude as an overwhelming presence in the lives of the characters or, as in Anton Chekhov, it can be quieter. But, nevertheless, the sociological imagination – with its concern to enable men and women to navigate in and understand the meaning of their historical epoch – requires an account of the context in which they live. The purpose of this account is to constitute a context for understanding, and therefore it has to have the facility to allow narratives to multiply. The measure of the validity of these narratives, as indeed of the account of the context, is the extent to which they resonate with historically lived

experience. The criteria of validity are not quantitative or informational; they are narrative and experiential.

Second, the practice of the sociological imagination demands alertness to the lives of men and women. Here the generality of the account of the epoch has to be connected with a fine-grained particularizing awareness of the lives of men and women. One way of achieving this awareness is to consume popular cultural products, since they are popular precisely because they deal with, or compensate for, the experiences of daily life. While the domination of information might have caused the world to become thin in stories, the work of the culture industries has surrounded lived experience with a surplus of stories. The successful stories in the marketplace are those speaking to general yet experientially particular anxieties, hopes and aspirations. If they did not so speak, they would not be popular. The practice of the sociological imagination requires an awareness of these popular stories of the personal issues of lived experience, and the construction of connections with the account of the epoch.

The necessity to develop an account of the epoch and an awareness of the cultural stories resonant with lived experience sets two traps. In the first case, the account might be so distant from experience that it seems meaningless for the understanding of lives. Meanwhile, an awareness of the cultural stories can too easily lead to a collapse of the sociological imagination into fandom and fashion. It is possible to identify corpses in both of these traps, and their avoidance itself makes demands on the practitioner of the sociological imagination. He or she must situate their work at the hinge between the account of the epoch and the lived experiences of men and women. The practice of a sociological imagination calls for work about connections, dialogues and conversations, not truths or monologues. This means work refusing to hide behind barricades and, instead, embracing its implication in the

social world. You know you have encountered such a work when it makes you *think*, when it provokes, annoys or raises a smile. You know you have experienced such a work when you have a leap of recognition which is immediately followed by the broken fall of awareness. You know it when you read about *them* or *us* and discover something about *I*.

Inasmuch as sociology achieves all of this it is *useful*. It is useful to men and women who have troubles and problems they experience as their own but which are, in fact, often rooted in the public issues of the historical moment. Sociology is *useful* when it offers narratives connecting epoch with experience. Sociology is *useless* when it gives information and it is actively *dangerous* when it is sold to the powerful. Sociology is *successful* when it is taken up by men and women as a tool through and with which they can connect their lives to their times and appreciate how transforming the former means acting upon the latter.

The work of the sociological imagination of Zygmunt Bauman is *useful*. Is it successful? Will this book be successful? The answers to those questions remain to be known.

Michael Hviid Jacobsen and Keith Tester

¹ See, for example, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, William H. Sewell and Harold L. Wilensky (eds), *The Uses of Sociology* (New York: Basic Books, 1967).

² Stanislaw Andreski, *Social Sciences as Sorcery* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974).

³ C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), pp.11 and 226. Mills's book was first published in 1959.