

Book review

Zygmunt Bauman. 2011. *Collateral Damage: Social Inequalities in a Global Age*. Polity Press, 224 pages.

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Zygmunt Bauman's most recent book *Collateral Damage* is the author's new exploration of 'liquid modernity.' 'Collateral damage' is another coinage through which the author names a whole range of 'casualties' brought about by our global age. The thesis of the book is social inequality. The 'collateral damage' metaphor projects its sinister spectre onto virtually all of us, while highlighting the derelicts of the world: the immigrants and the poor. However, in Bauman's approach, this military jargon phrase does not translate only inequality, but also the erosion and degradation of essential human bonds: family, friendship, community and genuine communication.

The Introduction is a survey of the 'collateral damage of social inequality.' The first chapter 'From the Agora to the Market Place' looks into the increasing difficulties the 'social state' has in solving problems of inequality and envisages 'the social planet' as a 'vehicle' that might generate solutions at an 'extraterritorial' and 'cosmopolitan' level (p. 26). After a reconsideration of the possibilities offered by a system that opposes consumerism in 'Requiem for Communism,' Bauman analyzes 'the fate of social inequality in liquid modern times.' In 'Consumerism and Morality,' the author shows how consuming becomes a moral act and a way of connecting and committing to others in societies which have entered a process of serious social disintegration. Bauman argues that if the 'social state' was efficient all along the 'solid' stage of modernity in keeping inequality limited and under control, Ford's panopticon model has been liquefied under factors dictated by market economy into what looks like a crisis of the state. In his account, liquefaction makes the state's protective methods downright inefficient. According to Bauman, the state no longer has the power to ensure the citizens' safety. As a matter of fact, individuals have stopped being 'citizens.' Instead, they are people living 'out of touch together,' a phrase expanded into a whole chapter in *Liquid Times*. Moreover, the devastating force of liquefaction has eroded 'society' itself, which in this stage of modernity looks like a heap of individuals cropped

together haphazardly and forced to find biographical answers to global problems generated by diffuse extraterritorial powers.

At the heart of the crisis lies the divorce between power and politics. Being devoid of power, what the populist politicians do is to transfer the anxieties, fears and frustrations of this humanity living on the edge onto the Other, i.e. the immigrants and the poor. A whole chapter which may be regarded as the core of the book, 'Strangers Are Dangers...Are They Indeed?' argues that what political administrations do is not merely to manipulate the people's fears but, unable to offer protective measures that would justify their legitimacy, the card they play is to artificially generate a sufficient volume of fears like pandemics and terrorist attacks. The insidiously inoculated apprehension is that disaster may strike any moment, and when it does it comes from the 'faceless' Other that is never actually in sight: either the immigrant or the poor. These are the 'collateral damage,' the unintended victims who come from remote or unfamiliar places and whose annihilation may be carried out in the name of everybody else's personal safety – yet another artificially generated bubble.

In the Introduction, Bauman warns that this is not a work of synthesis. It is mostly a collection of lectures prepared and delivered in 2010 – 2011 and amended for publication. However, the close interaction between inequality and collateral casualties may be foregrounded in some of its chapters, while in others it may serve as a backdrop. In Chapter 6, in which inequality looms in the background, Bauman looks into 'privacy, secrecy, intimacy, human bonds – and other collateral casualties of liquid modernity.' Referencing Alain Ehrenberg, Bauman endorses the landmark set by the French sociologist for the collapse of the boundary between the private and the public. The anecdotal event carries us back in the 1980s, in 'an autumnal Wednesday evening' (p. 83). What happened that evening was no Romantic tryst, as one might expect. Vivienne, an 'ordinary French woman,' confessed during a TV show matters of a most intimate nature. That, argues Bauman, marked the beginning of an invasion and 'colonization' of the public by the private, turning us into a 'confessional society.' (p. 84) Bauman's contention is that the consequences of that trivial event are serious and deep. What they amount to is a gradual disappearance of the 'sacrosanct' division between two 'spheres of human bodily and spiritual life.' (p. 84) Moreover, exposing one's most private sex life for it to be consumed by a prying public robs sex of its power to hold men and women together, which brings about the crisis of privacy.

Bauman states that there is an inextricable connection between this crisis and 'the weakening and decay of all and any interhuman bonds.' (p. 90)

In the same chapter, Bauman reveals another 'casualty.' Since the strain on human attention is so high, we have to 'zap' and 'surf' through channels, but we are never expected to explore anything into any depth. That is not overtly called 'collateral damage,' but by dint of its major significance for any human society it must imply a serious loss. Bauman is not the first to observe it. Nevertheless, the conclusions he draws have the effect of raising our awareness of an alarming crisis of meaning. In just a few lines, the author explains that from elaborate letters through 'brief yet juicy' e-mails to the drastically simplified iPhone 'texting' and onto 'twittering,' the content of our messages is 'the shallowest and the least burdened with meaning.' (p. 91)

Bauman's latest book is an intellectual stand against the uncertainty and meaninglessness about which he writes. *Collateral Damage* explores territories beyond its main concern when it looks into 'A Natural History of Evil' and maps out the whole field of sociology when it probes its 'whence and whither' in the last chapter. Cutting across disciplines with rhetoric elegance and stylistic refinement and never in short supply of irony, Bauman refers his readers not only to philosophy and sociology, but also to a broad range of literature and the arts, which he not merely references, but also twists and puts into a new context. Using 'sound and fury' as a leitmotif, the writer echoes both Shakespeare and Faulkner. When his compelling narrative alludes several times to Macbeth's 'tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing,' Bauman implies that ours, like Benjy's, are times of 'sound and fury,' whose lost meanings can be at least accounted for and considered.

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