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Citation:

Till, C (2013) Becoming dislocated: On Bauman's subjective culture. *Thesis Eleven*, 118 (1). 116 - 124. ISSN 0725-5136 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513613501027>

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Becoming Dislocated: On Bauman's Subjective Culture

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Till, C. (2011) 'The Quantification of Gender: Anorexia Nervosa and Femininity' *Health Sociology Review* 118(1) 116-124.

<http://the.sagepub.com/content/118/1/116.abstract#>

Becoming Dislocated: On Bauman's Subjective Culture

Chris Till

Zygmunt Bauman,

Culture in a Liquid Modern World (Polity, 2011)

Collateral Damage: Social Inequalities in a Global Age (Polity, 2011)

This Is Not A Diary (Polity, 2012)

One of Zygmunt Bauman's greatest influences the sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel proclaimed that philosophy is an activity which expresses a certain world view (Oakes, 1980: 22). Philosophy should not, for Simmel, be judged on universal or objective criteria but its own immanent criteria, that of the adequacy of its expression. This adequacy is not based on correspondence with reality but 'the adequate expression of the being of the philosopher himself' (Simmel, 1959: 297). We can in this sense see Bauman's work as an on-going attempt to demonstrate the vital importance of what Simmel called subjective culture. For Simmel the cultural value of a particular artefact is in its contribution to the 'formation and development of the character of individuals' (Oakes, 1980: 31). It is, then, for the development and encouragement of individuals which Bauman writes. This is particularly true in his latest writings, but is achieved in somewhat unconventional ways. Most fundamentally in Bauman's case this is achieved through the active engagement of the reader's ethical imagination. On Simmel's terms Bauman's works, or any cultural artefacts, are themselves examples of 'objective culture', they are objectifications of thoughts, feelings, etc. Objective culture is vital in the development of subjective culture; the 'cultivation' of the individual. Cultivation, according to Simmel, is the development of a being 'in the direction of an original inner core [according to its] natural structural potential' (Simmel, 1971: 229). But this state of cultivation is not something that could be reached on its own; the cultivation which Simmel describes requires something external to be drawn in. The process of cultivation is, then, the attainment of a certain inner balance or 'unity' which can only be attained through the integration of external aspects. Bauman's work, and any other cultural artefact, is, therefore, an example of objective culture but it is produced in order to be incorporated into the individual for the cultivation of their soul or self. Subjective culture is not, then, a product in itself, rather it is the goal of Bauman's work. We can see how the encouragement of subjective culture is achieved across three of Bauman's recent books.

Those of us who have followed Zygmunt Bauman's work and revelled in the depth and profundity of his insights will perhaps feel a little dismayed that 'a new topic for scrutiny, a new theme for full-length study hoping to do justice to its object, is no longer on [his] cards' (Bauman, 2012: 3). He asserts that 'Things flow too fast to allow room for the hope of catching them in flight' (Bauman, 2012: 3). This is what fundamentally characterises the 'Liquid Modern' era, as Bauman

characterises our present state, a speed and impermanence which means that comprehension is ever more difficult. While he modestly suggests that it is his age that is stopping him from being able to connect the dots in a complex and dynamic world, really he is telling us that the problem is with the increasing liquidity of the social world. If he is right, perhaps, pithy interjections skipping from one event to another but penetrating them right to the core, as presented in these books, are what is most appropriate. Nevertheless, it is somewhat disappointing that there may never be another large-scale engagement with a particular substantive topic like his epochal *Modernity and the Holocaust* or a major challenge to post-modern theory like his *Liquid Modernity*. It becomes increasingly apparent, however, that perhaps Bauman's greatest contribution is his worldview, his perspective, rather than the specifics of any investigation. His recent writings, with *This is Not a Diary* as a paradigmatic example, enable him to cast his critical eye over the widest possible array of topics and demonstrate previously unconsidered theoretical insights without becoming bogged down in the laborious process of sustained methodical data generation and analysis. While the books discussed in this article address specific but disparate issues, often in some detail, what unites them is Bauman's formal analysis. Most valuable of all is his ability to help us to see the world differently; to 'defamiliarize the familiar'. The process of defamiliarization is precisely what Bauman is trying to instigate in order to fire up the ethical imagination of the reader.

Defamiliarization and ethical engagement require greater understanding of the world. It is necessary not to merely accept surface impressions or those interpretations which are shouted most loudly or most frequently. In this era of what Bauman calls *Liquid Modernity*, however, understanding on a large scale becomes increasingly difficult. For many years Bauman has warned us of the dangers of turning away from understanding, while remaining sensitive towards the temptations to do so. In *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991) he proposed that the preoccupation in modernity with classification was an attempt to impose order and control on a messy world which actually produced greater ambivalence through increasing complexity. Similarly, Simmel (1997) claimed in his famous essay 'Metropolis and Mental Life' that in order to deal with the increasing complexity of modern life we often close ourselves off from the outside world and become indifferent to it, instead focusing inwardly. Bauman extended Simmel's analysis to show the effects of such a situation on how people engage with morality and ethics in a particular manner. If people do not have the time to engage with each individual they encounter then they look to ethical rules to tell them how to behave with all people all of the time. This, Bauman suggests, creates a problem, as the individual becomes morally disengaged. Modernity, therefore, brought two things:

1. The floating of responsibility; no-one is responsible as responsibility lies with the system or is just 'how things are'.
2. Ethical indifference in which actions are amoral. This Bauman referred to as adiaphorization, where individual actions are seen as being devoid of moral significance.

Adiaphorization is central to Bauman's concerns in *Collateral Damage*, but in a body of work full of metaphors he has found new use for them again. The book demonstrates the sociological power of his techniques but also of the power they wield in the world at large. 'Collateral damage' in its original usage is a metaphor, or perhaps more properly a euphemism, which Bauman borrows from military and media. 'Collateral damage' and 'collateral casualties' refer to the 'unintended, unplanned – and as some would say, incorrectly, 'unanticipated' – effects, which are all the same harmful, hurtful and damaging' (Bauman, 2011b: 4). Those collateral casualties are not the deliberate targets of military operations but nor are they given much consideration in the planning

of operations. Bauman continues to suggest that 'Thinking in terms of collateral damage tacitly assumes an *already existing inequality* of rights and chances, while accepting a priori the unequal distribution of the costs of undertaking (or for that matter desisting from) action' (Bauman, 2011b: 5). The collateral casualties Bauman identifies include people, morality, privacy, secrecy, intimacy and human bonds. Applied to other contexts the metaphor usefully highlights the lack of regard some members of all global societies are given when decisions are made by political and military leaders, CEOs and consumers. The dangers and consequences of moral indifference are given fitting terminology in a phrase designed for its non-emotive character. Through re-appropriating the term Bauman instead turns it into a spur to action, he uses a phrase designed for adiaphorization to reignite morality. Collateral damage is a phrase that was designed to make us forget about the human cost of which Bauman constantly tries to remind us.

The reignition of morality through critical understanding is necessary now because of another collateral casualty to which Bauman dedicates an entire book, *Culture in a Liquid Modern World*. Culture began, Bauman tells us, as a source of Enlightenment for all, a utopian spreading of the most important and life enhancing knowledge. Subsequently, in the twentieth century, culture was transformed into a homeostatic enterprise which could maintain class positions and provide everyone with a pre-assigned position in society justified and perpetuated by engagement with cultural products. In the liquid modern world there are still cultural elites but they are not defined by engagement with some cultural artefacts or activities and not others, but by their consumption of all categories of culture. This change in the character of culture has led Bauman to claim that Bourdieu's class based typology of cultural consumption is dead. There is no direct mapping of 'high' culture on to bourgeois groups, instead today '[t]he principle of cultural elitism is omnivorousness – feeling at home in every cultural milieu, without considering any as home, let alone the only home' (Bauman, 2011: 14). The result of this situation is a lack of ability to critique culture; if all culture is deemed to be of equal value then we are losing the ability to make aesthetic, and ethical, judgements. This is exacerbated with the potential barriers which are being placed between many young people and the kind of education which would help them to develop a critical perspective on the world.

The cuts to university funding in England, Bauman states in *This is Not a Diary*, are in danger of leaving young people as intellectually unprepared for this economy as British recruits were physically unprepared for the Boer War. With the soon to be instigated 300% rise in tuition fees at English universities Bauman imagines a monetary Berlin or Palestine wall. This separation between young people and the kind of education that can help them to develop a critical understanding of the world is of particular significance to Bauman not only because of his long career in academia but because it is in the 'youth' that he sees the potential for the development of a genuinely critical 'counter-culture'. Bauman's concern with 'youth' has a long history. In an article published in 1962 he assessed whether the Polish youth were fertile ground for the development of the 'new man' of Communism. The Warsaw youth had been seen as the 'agents of salvation' (Tester and Jacobsen, 2005: 48) of the socialist state. Counter to the prevailing view of the time Bauman shows, in an uncharacteristically empirical study, that the overriding aspirations of the Warsaw youth were unsuitable as a catalyst for the development of the Communist utopia. In a later article published in 1967 (see Tester and Jacobsen, 2005: 66-67) Bauman addressed this issue on a more strictly theoretical level. He suggests that due to the character of rapidly changing social forms, youth are always radical because they cannot easily accept the world in which they find themselves. This

inevitable radicalism will only be political, Bauman claims, if three criteria are met; there are sufficiently broad channels of political action, political activity is seen to provide access to social goods and the youth have been denied status or cultural goods (Tester and Jacobsen. 2005: 66). While the Warsaw youth he saw around him in the 1960s were not displaying the required interests, the position of youth in the social web mean they are fertile ground for critical and radical thought. These insights led Bauman to focus on developing a 'critical counter culture' which would stimulate the youth to this critique. This task brought him a great deal of trouble and ultimately led to his dismissal from his teaching post at the University of Warsaw in 1968. He was also pushed out of the country with his nationality stripped from him for 'being a dangerous influence on Polish youth'. This corruption was particularly evident in his writings which challenged the accepted party line and the official readings of Marxist theory (Smith 40-41). Socrates was executed for corrupting the youth and not believing in the gods of the state, Bauman would no doubt demur at the comparison with Socrates but this it is one that is apt. Like Socrates Bauman challenged the state sanctioned Gods, in his case of Stalinist Marxism. 'Corrupting the youth' into thinking there is an alternative in today's society is perhaps becoming an increasingly difficult prospect with potentially far fewer people trained in thinking critically but it is as vital as ever to cultivate the radical potential of youth.

With all culture seen as equally valuable and people increasingly separated from the kind of training that would enable them to make judgements, we are reduced to an individualistic approach to the judgement of culture. Today cultural artefacts are deemed to be worthy of our attention because they have a 'buzz' or they have 'gone viral'. Rather than looking to the experts to direct our attention to worthy diversions we focus on what has been 'liked' or 're-tweeted'. Under the guise of placing power in the hands of the public, through Bauman's optic we can see this as another form of regulation rather than a freeing from legislation. The panoptic model of domination no longer stands; we are no longer governed and drilled individually as 'marching columns' to produce a cohesive whole. Instead we are seen as 'swarms' and 'Anyone who wishes to keep a swarm of bees on a desirable course is better off tending the flowers in the meadow, not drilling every bee in turn' (Bauman, 2011a: 55). This domination by 'non-engagement and regulation by temptation' (Bauman, 2011a: 55) through culture is different to the Enlightenment derived European, all too European, project of culture as 'cultivating' the people and of building nations, as there is no solid base, or home, and little direct legislation. Consequently we are increasingly uncertain and cut adrift. The voices of the public must be engaged with, Bauman suggests, but not on such a shallow level that all meaning is lost or reduced to purely quantitative measures of how many people have expressed a desire to buy a particular product. The potential denigration of culture is, for Bauman, particularly troubling as he has long emphasised culture's emancipatory power.

The paucity of meaning and instability of cultural attachment in contemporary society is perhaps unexpectedly crystallised in fashion which, as characterised by Bauman, presupposes network relations rather than those of an undifferentiated mass. Fashion, for Bauman, channelling Simmel, 'is a particular form of life, which seeks to compromise between a tendency towards social equality and a tendency towards individual separateness' (Bauman, 2011:a 21). Inhabitants of the modern world, gardeners, Bauman reminds us sought a utopia, a stable end point, the perfect garden in which we could rest, perhaps with a little trimming and weeding to maintain it. The solid modern 'gardeners' are contrasted with those Bauman now calls the 'hunters' for whom the chase is much more interesting and exciting than the goal. As soon as they find their prey they plan the next hunt. These are the aesthetic consumers for whom 'the road itself is the utopia' (Bauman, 2011:

29). Indeed, Bauman suggests, perhaps for 'liquid moderns' 'u-topia' should be 'u-via'. The constantly elusive utopia of liquid modernity, that which can never be reached, as exemplified in the 'hunters' of fashion strikes at the very heart of Bauman's ambivalence towards, or disenchantment with, liquid modernity. Socialism, Bauman has previously told us, should be an 'active utopia', a perpetual critique; always unachievable, always present as an ideal to show us that we are never being 'just' enough. Utopias should exist as ideas against which we can judge our present state. Perhaps most crucially, utopias, Bauman (1976) suggested are vital for helping people to imagine a world different from the present. In liquid modernity the perpetual treadmill of fashion has expanded to an increasing range of contexts and aestheticizes and individualizes the critique in which Bauman saw such potential. Here we can also see the profound debt to Simmel. The analysis of fashion as an example of a certain kind of social relation is, of course, an obvious and explicit reference to Simmel. But it is the raising of fashion to a universal social relation that shows Simmel's true influence:

Since the phenomenon of fashion is intimately and indissolubly bound up with the eternal and universal attributes of human ways in the world and their equally irremovable conflict, its appearance is not confined to one or a few chosen ways of life (Bauman, 2011a: 22).

The networks exemplified by fashion enable and require connections with others and potentially *all* others, and therefore an equalisation with them. The network necessitates individuality, each node in the network can only be occupied by one individual although which individual is almost irrelevant. In this situation 'life's journey [is turned] into a never-ending series of egotistical measures...' (Bauman, 2011a: 30). In fashion, and the network, universal comparison against those in the network, is possible and the perpetual changes mean there is always something, or someone, to be compared against. The response to change is, however, always concentrated on the isolated, egocentric individual. As the end of each hunt results in a new hunt, the speed and complexity of the changes and the awareness of one's place as a node in the network prevents comprehension of life's direction or meaning. We are, Bauman warns us, decreasingly able to comprehend the bigger picture, less able to be sociologists. It is against this danger, this decline of understanding, of being able to join together the dots, that Bauman is battling. His most recent book is perhaps the most effective tool for this task. It is effective precisely because it does not concentrate on one single substantive topic. Indeed, the subject itself is secondary to the analytical and ethical engagement.

The title of Bauman's latest book tells us that '*This is Not a Diary*'. It is clear to anyone who takes anything but the most cursory glance that this is the case. The book is arranged around dated entries which mostly reflect on current events with sociological and philosophical analysis brought to bear on them. The material events which are discussed in the book are relatively random, whatever the author happens to have read about in *The Guardian*, *Le Monde* or *The New York Times* on a given day. The question which may be posed is why choose a diary form at all if there are none of the subjects usual to diaries, such as comments on friends, daily activities, etc? While these trivialities are not present in the content of this book perhaps the most profoundly interesting aspect of any diary is present and to the fore in Bauman's. This is a representation of the world view and personality of the writer. Bauman's diary is, like Magritte's painting *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, in Foucault's (1983) analysis, an unravelled calligram (a visual image made up of words that form its description). It takes the shape of a diary without representing a diary and similarly presents the form of a life without the material contents of the life. In so doing it presents something of the

essence of the writer's being without muddying this with the specifics of their life. We learn about the being of the writer through his ethical engagement with the world in a variety of contexts. In order to 'read' the image of a calligram, Foucault (1983) tells us, the text must say nothing to the reader. The letters must take on the form merely of lines, the gazing subject must become a viewer not a reader. With Bauman's diary the contents of the specific events are significant but ultimately transient. The image we see when we stand back and read it as a calligram is that of the writer himself. Just as Magritte's painting of a pipe is not a pipe, nor are the words stating "This is not a pipe" a pipe, so Bauman's *Diary* is not a diary, nor a representation of a diary but an expression of a life. The *Diary* arranges itself according to a form, the diary, the form of a life. In this context we must consider the writing, the issues, the ethical engagement in relation to a life, not *his* life, but 'life'. This is not a representation of Bauman's life but an expression of it, an expression of his ethical being. It is the generality of this expression, as opposed to the specificity of the events of his life, which make it amenable to appropriation by others in the process of their cultivation.

The three books discussed here follow from much of Bauman's recent work. This has been increasingly fragmented in presentation, in the form of blog postings or 'letters' to the liquid modern world (Bauman, 2010). Despite the presentation these works are remarkably cohesive and consistent in their worldview. Although increasingly Bauman tackles quite specific issues in fragmentary fashion, there are broad commonalities of subject matter which have haunted Bauman's thought for many years and were usefully crystallised in the series of short books he published on *Globalization* (Bauman, 1998), *Community* (Bauman, 2001), *Europe* (Bauman, 2004a) and *Identity* (Bauman, 2004b). Underlying all of these books, however, is a challenge to the professional sociologist and anyone else who strives to achieve understanding of our present condition on a large scale.

The responsibility for enabling understanding on the social level Bauman ultimately lays on sociologists, who must engage the public. This is a task which Bauman has himself embraced in recent years, increasingly seeing his role as a public intellectual rather than an academic. Engagement with the public, however, means more than merely writing populist books. Bauman poses a more fundamental question; have sociologists been compliant in producing in their subjects, human beings, as objects? All too often sociologists have rendered people mute in order to understand them sociologically. Again Bauman turns to Simmel as the only one of his founding ancestors of sociology to put the 'inferior 'conscious motives' of actors on a level with the superior renderings of their intentions by their scientific analysts' (Bauman, 2011b: 165). Sociology must, Bauman tells us, re-engage as a dialogic, or polylogic, discipline and a 'science/technology of freedom'. This may be achieved through '*defamiliarizing the familiar and familiarizing[...] the unfamiliar*' (Bauman, 2011b: 171). The experiences of being an exile and a refugee predispose Bauman to 'dislocation', which encourages defamiliarization. His work encourages this in those who do not share his circumstance. The process of 'becoming dislocated' does not require the traumatic events he experienced but can be achieved through direct engagement with others, by talking people through their malaise. The sociologist must always work in conversation, speaking *with* the public to understand together, multiplying voices and opening up possibilities. The professional skills of the sociologist are still necessary, however, particularly their skills in 'reconnecting and making whole again the notoriously fragmented and disconnected images of the *Lebenswelt*' (Bauman, 2011b: 171). The sociologist's position in that dialogue is to demonstrate the social forces, processes and networks which produce our experience and to demonstrate their peculiarity.

In placing dialogue at the heart of this project the danger, some might suggest, is that many people might, indeed will, disagree. What if people choose unfreedom? In terms of Bauman's notion of freedom, as derived from Weber, many do, they ignore or wish away knowledge of their social context and prefer the freedom of consumption. Herein lies the true greatness and usefulness of Bauman's sociology; if those who do not want his brand of freedom, engage in dialogue with, or even against him, they are already on the road to freedom, a road which has no end. Through dialogue, and disagreement, those that would not wish to see multiplicity and difference produce it anyway. Engagement with others through dialogue enables mutual understanding and a positive dislocation, allowing us to see the world from the perspective of others and to avoid perceiving ourselves as the centre of the world. Bauman demonstrates his ethical engagement with the world not as an example of how to think or to behave but in order to engage us. Giles Fraser writing in *The Guardian* suggests that while reading is an individual action it enables 'self-forgetfulness' as it 'loosens the bonds of [the] all-about-me culture and is a passport to freedom'. By becoming absorbed in another world we can be freed from our individuality and egocentrism. Bauman's writing, more than most, has this effect as his engaging style draws us into his world and has the psychological effect of 'self forgetfulness'. While this quality may be common to all engaging writing the content of Bauman's writing also encourages an ethical concern for the other. This ethics which is 'for the other' is vital and serves two functions. It is both a sociological tool which helps to 'defamiliarize the familiar' and an opposition to an individualistic, neo-liberal world-view. Bauman's ethics is, therefore, at heart of his ontology, methodology and politics; the books discussed here show the integration of these three elements more clearly than ever.

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