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Book review:

Zygmunt BAUMAN 2011

Collateral Damage: social inequalities in a global age

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Book review

Zygmunt BAUMAN (2011)
Collateral Damage: social inequalities in a global age.
Cambridge ; Malden: Polity Press.

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Reviewed by

Ruud KAULINGFREKS

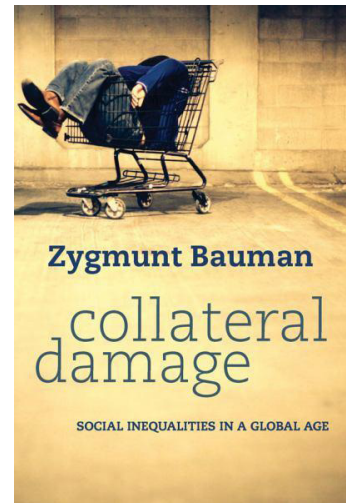
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Liberal society has triumphed on a global scale. Except in some small patches of the world, we witness the widespread dominance of capitalism and liberalism and the corresponding independence of the economy. The market prevails and no one dares to question its power. Policy is made according to the dictates of the market, and governments do all they can to favour the market. The system presents itself as offering freedom and equal opportunities for all citizens. At the same time, it claims to reduce uncertainties by offering a well-organized security scheme. Late capitalism centres on consumption and champions the democratic freedom of rational choice. Our choices are no longer constrained by tradition or power. This ideology of freedom translates into a type of consumerism under which the market is detached from every constraint except economic power itself. We consume and therefore take part in the market. Freedom is buying power.

Although liberal society seems to provide security and a sense of belonging, in fact it continually fails to do so. Uncertainties appear over and over again and no institution is able to find shelter from them any more. Institutions meet with an increasing sense of disbelief and fall short of providing a grounding in the way in which we organize our lives. We cannot rely on existing arrangements or frames of reference in order to organize our lives. Increasingly, we are at a loss as to how to arrange our activities. We can live only fragmentarily, making short-term decisions and adapting to ever changing circumstances. We find it very difficult to predict the future since the anchor points to which we used to refer have lost their guiding power. The grand narratives, as was coined by Lyotard in *The postmodern condition*, have lost their power to bring people together and only a fragmentary life with no central narrative is possible. Modernity has become liquid, as Zygmunt Bauman has brilliantly explained in his *Liquid Modernity*.

Although this liquidity seems to stand in contradiction with the autonomy of the market in which we take part, by consuming we gain a certain sense of stability and belonging. Consumerism cannot fill the void left by solid institutions. We know that we cannot build a life on consumerism. At the very most, consumerism can only support our choices. The iPod, for instance, enables us to be in contact with others but is not communication itself. We still need to relate to others. The choices made by others used to be mediated by institutions, but choices have now disintegrated into liquidity without solid points of reference. The church,



work, political affiliation, etc. no longer show us the way.

At first sight, one could argue that liquidity means a more democratic way of organizing the world. Since there is no predetermined arrangement which we belong to (or are born into) we can choose whatever we want. Everything is open to everyone. But since we live in fragments there is no sense of belonging either. Liquid modernity demands that we abandon commitments and change from group to group, never settling in or developing loyalties. Institutions themselves expect this movement and are liquid as well, and based on instability; even banks prove to be insecure and untruthful. The world is unstable.

Still, the world presents itself as freedom and as the best possible world. Or, as was recently put forth at the World Economic Forum in Davos: 'Capitalism is not the best possible system but all other possible systems are far worse than capitalism.' Despite the obvious drawbacks of the system, such as the economic crises and ecological cost, the world maintains that it is on the right track and we should forge ahead. Leaders and experts tell us over and over again that these problems will be solved in due time.

Still, our world knows of social inequalities and of people who are unable to benefit from the general wealth. The way society is organized means some are to be seen as casualties of society. Illegal immigrants are perhaps the group most frequently talked about as a problem to be solved. That this group should be regarded as a casualty of the globalized world as created by the inequalities of the system is clear. It exists because of the system. According to Zygmunt Bauman, such groups are examples of collateral casualty.

This is the main theme of Bauman's recent book *Collateral Damage, social inequalities in a global age* (2011, Cambridge: Polity Press). In a series of essays – mostly adaptations of previous lectures – the author shows how globalized liberal society produces casualties due to the unequal distribution of wealth.

The term 'collateral damage' was coined by the military "to denote unintended, unplanned – and as some would say, incorrectly, 'unanticipated' – effects, which are all the same harmful, hurtful and damaging" (page 4). Collateral damage means that the possibility of damage has been considered but viewed as a risk worth taking. "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." (page 5). Society accepts a certain amount of casualties due to inequalities without questioning the rightfulness of the social system. "Casualties are dubbed 'collateral' in so far as they are dismissed as not important enough to justify the costs of their prevention, or simply 'unexpected' because the planners did not consider them worthy of inclusion among the objects of preparatory reconnoitring." (page 8).

Liquid modernity thus produces not only disorientation but also casualties. Liberal society closes its eyes to the inequality it produces and presents itself as a wealth-generating system where the pursuit of happiness is open to everyone, but sees "the survival of the fittest as the prime means to implement it" (page 7).

In 11 essays, Bauman reflects on the insecurities of liquid modernity and the inequalities produced by the system. These essays deal with a wide array of subjects.

The emancipation of business interest from social institutions and therefore

the independence of business pursuits from all other values. The downfall of communism as a solid system aimed at gaining control of the fate of people. The emergence of management as liquid power engaged in deregulation and therefore increasing insecurity. The obsession with security and safety in big cities, which increases the fear and therefore the insecurity of those cities' inhabitants. The substitution of moral impulses by consumerism and the resulting transformation of consumption into a moral act. The mingling of private and public realms, achieved by bringing the private sphere into the public domain and therefore depriving it of its autonomy and security: "The present day crisis of privacy is inextricably connected with the weakening and decay of all and any interhuman bonds." (page 90). The reappearance of luck as a concept on an individual level in a world devoted to the reduction of risk. The state's preoccupation with security, leading to an omnipresence of the state of exception. Evil as an effect of technological power instead of the inhumanity of individuals. And, finally, the difficult relationship between sociology and managerial logic.

Zygmunt Bauman is probably one of the most creative sociologists to date and his analyses demonstrate a deep insight into the way in which the world has evolved. He has developed concepts that are widespread in the social sciences since they conceptualize social reality. Collateral damage has the potential to become another much used concept. It articulates a recognizable situation and brings it to the fore. Concepts namely, have the power of concentrating and articulating diffuse observations and putting them in a recognizable frame of reference. Once conceptualized, observations and analysis are led by the conceptual frame and further theorizing is possible. Bauman is one of the social thinkers who have the capacity to conceptualize social reality and open up a new way of looking at society. Collateral damage joins a long list of existing Baumanian concepts, like the moral impulse, rationality and ambivalence, the bureaucratic mentality and, of course, liquid modernity.

Bauman clearly has a critical position towards the globalized world and the rationality of the modern world. Since his early writings he has advocated for what he termed 'the moral party of two', the micro interaction between individuals as the basis for social thinking. Of course, this party of two is modified and becomes more complex when dealing with society as a whole. He is by no means a naive thinker, but his starting point is always what social and political reality means for the concrete existence of individuals shaping their lives. In this sense he remains faithful to his great source of inspiration, Emmanuel Levinas. Inequality and the ambivalence of modernity have a profound and negative impact on the concrete lives of individuals. He criticizes liberal society in defence of the existential needs of individuals. In this sense he is very close to the sociology of Ulrich Beck.

Bauman is a prolific writer. He has published over 60 books: one or more per year since the beginning of the 1960s. A collection of lectures from the past two or three years is bound to duplicate the ideas already published in other books. For Bauman's readers, this book does not present many novel insights. It mostly consists of reflections on his existing work or applications of his insights to specific problems. For those unfamiliar with the author, it may serve as an introduction to his thinking, and in that case I strongly recommend

reading his other books, which delve much deeper than this one. The book reads on the whole as a text written for different occasions. The lectures are written for specific audiences and are understandably constrained by their own timeframes. One's scope is inevitably limited in a lecture, even if it is expanded for publication. This collection of essays is really a series of sketches based on the elaborate paintings of a strong stylist. This is not to say that everything in the book is recycled material; as already mentioned above, the central concept of collateral damage is an inspiring one and deserves further attention.

A strange inconsistency appears in the very first pages of the book. Bauman begins with a discussion of engineering: the fuse is the weakest part of an electrical circuit and is designed to blow when the system is overloaded. It is the weakest link in the system. Similarly, a bridge collapses when the weakest span cannot cope with the load it has to carry. A structure is never carried by its average strength, but by its weakest link. Although the fuse is designed to blow as a safety measure, the idea is that the weakest element is the first to collapse, and with it, the whole system goes down. The metaphor for society and Bauman's concept of collateral damage is clear. In an unequal social system the weakest groups will suffer the consequences, yet "society is measured by the average quality of its parts" (page 2). This means that inequality is hardly considered nor seen as a danger for society. Hence, the damage it produces is collateral... It is highly surprising that the author of liquid modernity compares society to a solid and stable engineering structure. It gives an image of society as a construction where the parts are functionally interrelated and form a stable structure. That has always been the image of society supported by functionalism. Bauman has shown throughout his work that functionalism is a very partial way of studying the social sphere. His concept of liquid modernity contradicts thinking in terms of the functional parts of a construct. Bauman's sociology is the opposite of an engineering-oriented view of society. In fact, the book itself denies this image and in the last essay the author criticizes sociology for focusing too heavily on management and "landing in the role of handmaiden to Managerial Reason" (page 165). A remarkable contradiction that makes a rhetorical point, illustrating collateral damage, but it is not, nevertheless, in step with his thinking.

Still, collateral damage is an interesting book which raises an important point and inspires us to think critically about present-day liberal society and globalization.