Review: Bauman, A Biography

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Published in:
Visual Studies

DOI (link to publication from Publisher):
10.1080/1472586X.2021.1876528

Publication date:
2021

Document Version
Accepted author manuscript, peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (APA):
Awad, S. H. (2021). Review: Bauman, A Biography. *Visual Studies*, *38*(3-4), 736-738. https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2021.1876528

Visual Studies, 2021
Vol. 00, No. 00, 1–2

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Review

Bauman: A biography
by Izabela Wagner
Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020, 500
pages
ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-2686-4 (Hardcover) Price £25.00
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Izabela Wagner's biography of Bauman's life offers a rich and extensive trajectory of how a young Jewish pole became an influential global thinker. The book invites one to reflect upon how Bauman's rich personal life story has drove his sociological analysis of our contemporary society. Wagner illustrates how his repeated exile and life ruptures have provided him with an intersubjective and critical eye onto the social struggles and injustices he tackled eloquently in his work. Though Bauman repeatedly argued; 'there was nothing unusual about my case' (40) 'many people went through all those turbulences. I am just a typical product of my times' (401), his biography narrates a life that is far from 'usual.'

Bauman's biography captures what it means to be categorised in a stigmatised social group, and to live continuously as a stranger, an outsider. But more broadly, the book is also about how as humans we are not in absolute control of our lives, our life trajectories in big part are shaped by the time and space we live in, the people that surround us, and the 'powerful role of the uncontrolled element that can suddenly change a trajectory in a significant way' (322). In his early childhood in Poland, Bauman was segregated and confined to a ghetto area, where he witnessed the passivity of others who treated the segregation as a 'natural fact of life' (32). He became a war refugee at the age of fourteen, fleeing home with his family to the Soviet Union, where he later joined the Red Army. After the war Bauman returned to Poland with a vision to 'build socialism' (111), which in his view would bring the social justice Poland needed. He joined KBW and their secret services, seeing them at the time to be the system through which his vision could be achieved. As events unfolded, he later questioned this view and his role in 'building a murderous system' (194).

He started his academic career in Poland under Stalinism and was committed to living in Poland. However, nationalist and anti-Semitic policies impacted his life again, and led to his dismissal from the army and from Warsaw university. Due to his political and scholarly activities, he was seen as a 'public enemy of the state' (254). This forced Bauman and his family to renounce their Polish citizenship, move to Israel for three years, and then finally settle in Leeds for the rest of his life.

The powerful message the book leaves one with is how he made meaning out of his life trajectories. His experiences left him with a conviction that 'the world could be better, and that one ought to help it to be such' (42). And despite experiencing disempowering human conditions, he held the conviction that 'not all inhuman conditions de-humanize. Some disclose humanity in man' (63). He strived to belong to a group and an ideology, yet paradoxically opposed the dividing mechanisms of belonging; 'belonging cannot mean but dividing and setting double standards. Where standards divide, morality ends. Drawing the line between us and them, we efface the line between good and evil' (64). His position against division and what he labelled as 'tribalism' (65) continued to be a consistent principle throughout his life.

He opposed divisions in relation to his Jewish identity and was against the Israeli state's militarist policies and mistreatment of the Palestinians. He was concerned that the Israeli society could not dispense with tribalism; 'Our (Jews') history has been a never ending lesson in what happens once the human race crumbles into tribes … being truly Jewish means to strive for a world without tribes. A world which does not divide into mine and foreign people (402). As such, he refused to find the belonging he missed in Poland in Israel; 'I was not looking for compensation for being expelled by Polish nationalism in the hospitality of Israeli nationalism' (323), 'selection means rejection, division, antagonism – precisely the things I suffered from and found most repelling' (64).

Academically, he opposed tribalism in his ideological opposition to orthodox Marxist positions and the suppression of freedom and plurality of thought. He published those views in his revisionist work in Stalinist times, where he was advised: ' … do not think. If you cannot stop thinking, then do not talk! If you cannot stop talking, do not write. If you cannot stop writing,

never, ever publish!' (203). Later on in his academic career at Leeds, he refused the 'monopolist approach in the sciences' (202) and argued that he did not 'truly belong' to any school (377). He worked to 'formulate an independent and critical science' (301) and was keen on writing and publishing his ideas. He found the heavy administrative work within academia as very time consuming, and not 'conductive to creativity' (327). He saw the academic system as one that simply reproduces rather than innovates and one that cuts off any possibilities for deviation, 'putting everything at the same mediocre level' (328).

Going back to the question concerning the influence of Bauman's biography on his analysis of contemporary society, Bauman, as Wagner shows, would disagree about relating an intellectual work to the life story of its author. Arguing that if his work was only a product of his biography, he would have been only able to write on topics relating to his own experiences. Wagner argues, on the other hand, that Bauman's most successful works were in realms related to his identity and experiences (401). Despite how far we can relate an academic work to its author's life, reading Bauman's ideas on topics such as othering, dehumanisation and nationalism after reading his biography definitely gives his work another profound dimension.

The rich material Wagner provides leaves the reader to make their own reflections and connections. She offers a detailed account -in parts far too detailed- of Bauman's life, work, and education using multiple rich sources such as archives, unpublished manuscripts and interviews with Bauman and his family and colleagues. The book is grounded in extensive research work that has been made possible by Izabela Wagner's experience as a sociologist, intellectual historian, and Polish speaker. As such, other than being a biography, the book offers a historical account of certain aspects of life in East-Europe in the 20th century under two totalitarian systems of Hitler and Stalin. The documents used in this book, especially from the secret police archival records from communist Poland, provides a fascinating account of how surveillance state operates and prevails.

The book's purpose, as Wagner explains, is 'to clarify Bauman's past and to defend him from misunderstanding and erroneous accusations, and to expose the impact of xenophobia, nationalism and anti-Semitism' (404). This is clear throughout the book in her detailed account of the social and political circumstances that show how Bauman's choices were 'within a restricted range of possibilities' (409). Bauman's positions within the communist system, are complicated to unravel morally and historically. The consequences of those positions followed him later in life as he became a famous figure within the field of sociology and his files from the archival records of the communist-era secret police were published to denounce him. In spite of Wagner's purpose with the book to defend Bauman, her rich and varied data sources leave the readers to form their own views.

Bauman's life story does not cease to be relevant today, in a world that -as he described in his last book *Retrotopia*- shifts its focus to the past and clings to dangerous tribalism and fascism. His personal life, as well as his sociological analysis, show the dangers of dehumanisation, hate speech, and the construction of 'otherness.' His continued experience of being an alienated stranger, whether in Poland, Russia, Israel, or England, sets his biography as an important experience to understand in such times. As he himself eloquently said; 'who is more obliged to challenge the principle of tribalism and hatred, than I – a Jew and a Pole?' (402).

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https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2021.1876528