

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life*. Oxford: Polity Press, 2007, 168 pp., \$US 19.95 paper (978-0-7456-4002-0), \$US 64.95 hardcover (978-0-7456-3979-6).

What do online networking sites like Facebook and MySpace have in common with point-based immigration systems? According to Zygmunt Bauman's latest work, *Consuming Life*, both of these phenomena demonstrate how individuals are becoming more and more like commodities to be bought, sold, and marketed in ways that increase their demand. Those who are in high demand reap the rewards, and those who are not face bitter isolation. So, be it constructing an attractive MySpace page or putting together a competitive immigration application, we all need to attain the status of a hot commodity. And how do we attain this status? We go shopping, of course. Thus, while we are becoming commodities ourselves, we rely on consumerism to assist us in this task. We consume to be consumed, and are consumed so that we can consume. This is the "secret" of consumer society and the central thesis of *Consuming Life*.

Consuming Life builds on Bauman's recent body of work on consumerism and liquid modernity. In this latest entry, Bauman contributes to his *oeuvre* with three ideal types: *consumerism*, the *society of consumers*, and *consumer culture*. In the Weberian tradition, Bauman offers these concepts as heuristics for understanding the subjectivity of consumers, how consumers fit into society as a whole, and how they interact with each other.

The first ideal type, *consumerism*, is described as a

type of social arrangement that results from recycling mundane, permanent and so to speak 'regime-neutral' human wants, desires, and longings into the *principal propelling and operating force* of society, a force that coordinates systemic reproduction, social integration, social stratification, and the formation of human individuals, as well as playing a major role in the processes of individual and group self-identification and in the selection and pursuit of individual life policies. (p. 28; emphasis in original)

Bauman's discussion of consumerism addresses the subjectivity of the individual consumers: how they understand time and progress, their ability (or inability) to achieve happiness, and the role of unfulfilled desire as form of motivation.

Introducing his second ideal type, the *society of consumers*, Bauman moves from an individual-level analysis to a consideration of society as a whole. Reiterating his central thesis, he argues that individuals are connected to the social whole primarily in their capacity as consumers.

To consume ... means to invest in one's own social membership, which in a society of consumers translates as 'saleability': obtaining qualities for which there is already a market demand. (p. 56)

Tracing the macro-level implications of this statement, Bauman covers a diverse array of topics including the decline of state sovereignty and the role of festivals and spectacles as a means of togetherness — which he argues amounts to a swarm of self-propelled units rather than a cohesive, cooperating whole.

The third and final ideal type, *consumer culture*, moves to a meso-level discussion of the social networks and interactions that exist within liquid modernity. Here Bauman discusses the maddening process of “serial births” whereby consumers continually build identities and then throw them away (p. 101). Associated with these increasingly fluid and temporary identities are the weakening of social ties and networks, which consumers can quickly enter and then leave once they become inconvenient or unstylish. The commodity market is, of course, always there to help individuals start again once they have cut ties.

With the three ideal types established, Bauman concludes with the final and most politically charged chapter in *Consuming Life*: “the collateral casualties of consumerism.” The consequence of this new social landscape, he argues, has been the production of a sizable underclass with little or no ability to consume or be consumed. Whereas a society of producers might attempt to rehabilitate the disadvantaged so as to make them productive, the underclass of consumer society are simply isolated and ignored. Despite this bleak image, however, Bauman's final argument is one of optimism. The social state is not obsolete or fundamentally opposed to consumer choice as the political right has often argued.

The meaning of the social state in the society of consumers, just as it was in the society of producers, is ... to protect society against multiplying the ranks of the ‘collateral victims’ of consumerism: the excluded, the outcasts, the underclass. Its task is to salvage human solidarity from erosion and the sentiments of ethical responsibility from fading. (p.143)

Consuming Life shows why its author has become one of sociology's most respected thinkers. Bauman's prose is engaging and readable. His arguments, though complex, are made more accessible by addressing popular issues in contemporary culture. Therefore, *Consuming Life*

should make an enlightening read for undergraduates and many non-academics. For established sociologists, however, particularly those who specialize in the area of consumer culture, the sheer scope of Bauman's ideal types provide their own appeal. His ability to thread a diverse array of sociocultural, economic, and political trends into a larger theory of consumerism is a welcome contribution at a time when interdisciplinary scholarship is increasingly valued.

On the downside, those already familiar with Bauman's recent work may not find enough new ideas to make *Consuming Life* a valuable read. Many old concepts and familiar trends are addressed: liquidity in networks and identity, weakening social ties, the emergence of an underclass. At the same time, Bauman misses the opportunity to consider some of the more recent developments in consumer culture studies. Ethical consumerism and consumer citizenship, for instance, are some of the most debated topics within current consumer culture literature (the *Journal of Consumer Culture* dedicated an entire issue to consumer citizenship last year). Yet those looking for any resolution to these debates within *Consuming Life* will be disappointed. Bauman only briefly addresses the topic — dismissing it in the final pages of the book.

Among sociologists, perhaps the best way to evaluate Bauman's contribution in *Consuming Life* is to look at the kinds of empirical questions that it might generate. Ideal types are, after all, useful only to the extent that they help us make sense of the empirical reality we face in society. In this case, the book is rich with potential research hypotheses. Bauman claims, for instance, that consumers understand time in terms of "punctuated" presents, rather than thinking in terms of gradual progress and stability. Whether this statement is correct, and whether it is characteristic of contemporary society exclusively is open for empirical investigation. Indeed many comparative-historical sociologists will find plenty of dichotomous statements about the "society of producers" versus the "society of consumers" that are waiting for empirical investigation.

To conclude, whether one prefers to evaluate this book as a work of public sociology — appealing to a wide audience and addressing the pressing political issues of the day — or as something more academic, *Consuming Life* puts forth important theoretical considerations that can, at the very least, serve as the basis for further debate and research.

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

MATT PATTERSON

Matt Patterson is a PhD student in sociology at the University of Toronto. His current work pertains to sociological theory and consumer culture.

matt.patterson@utoronto.ca