

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Bauman, Zygmunt and Leonidas Donskis, *Moral Blindness: The Loss of Sensitivity in Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, 218 pp., \$24.95 Paperback (9780745669625)

M*oral Blindness: The Loss of Sensitivity in Liquid Modernity* is the most recent addition to Zygmunt Bauman's oeuvre, one of the most prominent sociologists of our time. It is a captivating dialogue between Bauman and Leonidas Donskis, a professor of Politics at Vytautas Magnus University in Lithuania, on the banality of evil in contemporary capitalism. According to the authors, a new, nondemonic, ambivalent form of evil characterizes contemporary society and this is a growing moral insensitivity towards the others around us and their suffering. This moral numbness is not bounded to certain fixed territories or designated groups. Rather, it has become the underlying logic of every aspect of our lives, which explains the urgency the authors feel to account for it and seek for possible alternatives. Bauman and Donskis respond to this challenge of our current epoch with a rich theoretical discussion informed by several key figures of modern Western thought, ranging from Hannah Arendt to George Simmel, from Anthony Giddens to Immanuel Levinas.

Moral Blindness cannot be understood in isolation from Bauman's earlier works, particularly *Liquid Modernity* (2000). The book is a written exchange of ideas between Bauman and Donskis. It is composed of five chapters, plus an introduction. Each chapter opens with a set of questions Donskis poses and it continues with both authors' reflections. The authors ask how we can understand morality in the liquid modern world and their thesis of moral blindness centres on the concept of the "adiaphorization of human behaviour". Simply put, it refers to leaving certain acts and groups of humans "outside the universe of moral obligations" (39), hence freeing oneself from the responsibility of taking a moral stance towards such acts or people. The main dynamic behind the "adiaphorization of human behaviour" is the transplantation of the logic of the market and the consumer-commodity relation into human relations. This logic pervades our lives, from love and friendship, to education and politics. For instance, it turns "old-fashioned" forms of friendships into "liquid friendships" (e.g. Facebook), turns citizens into

consumers, and turns universities into market-oriented, profit-seeking corporations run by an elite of technocrats.

“Moral blindness” has become “a permanent and quasi-universal condition” (151); our identities and relations are reduced to the logic of the market and hence stripped of any criterion of moral evaluation. The authors argue that this has resulted in the erasure the boundary between the private sphere and the public sphere. Echoing Richard Sennett’s thesis of “the fall of public man” (1992 [1977]), they maintain that private feelings and confessions have invaded the public sphere. However, they add that this should be understood as a twofold phenomenon. That is, the vanishing of the public sphere is intertwined with the end of privacy. Intimate feelings are now turned into commodities and a closer look at the politics of memory in Central and Eastern Europe reveals that victimhood and suffering are commodified and turned into entry tickets for public recognition (108-110). Donskis gives examples from Lithuania, his home country, for the devaluation and instrumentalization of memory. For instance, the efforts to equalize the Holocaust and the crimes of communism as “two parallel realities of horror and hatred” has resulted in the “obfuscation and trivialization” of the Holocaust, thus stripping it of all its historical peculiarities (123).

A major conclusion of this twofold loss- the simultaneous decline of the public sphere and of privacy- is “the end of Politics with a capital P” (111). The diminishing trust and participation in parliamentary democracy and the loss of belief in the capacity of nation-state institutions to deliver change creates in masses a “feeling of having been sentenced to loneliness” (60). This, according to Bauman and Donskis, amounts to a “crisis of agency” (86); previously trusted agents and institutions of politics are losing ground and there is a search for alternative agencies of effective action. They pay special attention to new social movements, particularly the Occupy Movement and the uprisings in the Middle East, and their potential to fill that vacant position. “People on the move” (87), as they call it, is the crystallization of a mixture of indignation, a passionate search for an alternative society, and the curiosity to explore new media of communication and solidarity. While these new movements are quite successful in the “ground-clearing phase” (118), that is, in getting rid of traditional authoritarian power structures, Bauman and Donskis note, we should still wait and see whether and to what extent they will triumph in building a just and egalitarian social system.

Moral Blindness is a compelling and invaluable addition to the immense body of work by Zygmunt Bauman. Donskis, a philosopher as well as a member of the European Parliament, integrates contemporary issues in Eastern Europe with Bauman’s theoretical framework. The

major strength of the book comes from the broad spectrum of issues it covers, ranging from recent political mobilizations in the Middle East to the crisis of liberalism in Europe, from the dramatic impacts of the dissolution of the welfare state to media representations of intimacy, and from the commercialization of victimhood to the role and significance of the precariat as a potential new agent of societal change. However, despite its empirical extensiveness, rather than offering a fully original perspective into these issues, the book basically reiterates Bauman's thesis of liquid modernity, with a special emphasis on the question of morality. The book has much to offer to students of sociology, political science and philosophy who are already familiar with Bauman's *oeuvre*. Although its format adds to the peculiarity of the book, especially by revealing how an intense theoretical dialogue between two intellectuals flows throughout the text, it also leads to a limitation. It is not always easy for the reader to follow the arguments; Bauman and Donskis do not always follow up or respond to each other's ideas and as a result, some ideas are repeated, while others are left underdeveloped. Despite this reservation, *Moral Blindness* is an evocative and thought-provoking book that is well worth reading for anyone interested in how two contemporary philosophers engage in a dialogue on the promises and perils of our epoch.

York University

Duygu Gül

REFERENCES

- Sennett, Richard. 1992 [1977]. *The Fall of Public Man*. Reissue edition. WW Norton.
- Zygmunt, Bauman. 2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Duygu Gül is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology at York University.

