

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Bauman, Zygmunt and Raud, Rein. *Practices of Selfhood*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015. 150 pp., 21.95 paper, (978-0-7456-9016-2).

In *Practices of Selfhood*, Zygmunt Bauman and Rein Raud launch a discussion, in dialogue form, regarding the self as a socially embedded entity. They traverse through various practices of daily life intertwined with electronic internet based communications. As they do so, the authors explore issues of ambivalence and belonging via self-production, consumerism, happiness, and power within a neo-liberal milieu. Their shared concern throughout seems to be to recognize that this new “wired environment” may reproduce some not-so-new issues; ones that perpetuate the “conflicts and antagonisms” (84) of “liquid modernity” (10).

In the midst of this conflict laden, historically situated yet ever-changing electronic universe, Bauman and Raud discuss everyday practices as they represent the interpretive tensions that compose the self and from which the self’s compositions springs (95, 119). Bauman and Raud (x) describe their aim this way:

...to move our conversation from topic to topic, from aspect to aspect, and try to see how selfhood is brought together and taken apart in social practices, through language, through efforts of self-presentation, through programmatic attempts of self-realization – as well as... through interaction with other selves.

The two also work within the electronic universe they critique where “... spelling out and trying to unpack the contents of the quandaries listed above have sometimes kept both of us up to the wee hours and checking emails first thing in the morning” (Bauman and Raud, x).

“Starting Out,” the initial chapter, meanders through a variety of topics while relying on the sense that selfhood is an historical and socially embedded phenomenon. This embeddedness is not merely something that they note; it is a key frame or symbolic place from which their discussion begins and often returns. In Raud’s (1) terms, the “history of modernity is also the history of a certain type of self” and this self is one produced under the modern assumption that it can, should and will make itself! This composed and composing self, is always caught in a paradox, namely, “we create our life as it creates us” (104). We

find ourselves in socio-historical locations that demand that we work on ourselves as a future aim as well as on-going present project. Moreover, it is the devastating self-consuming potential of neo-liberalism that suggests that the entrepreneurial self should always become better, stronger, smarter – more individualized.

Bauman (102-103) poignantly expresses the implications of the normative demand that we understand the self as a project, always in need of work, saying:

The crucial point is the intertwining of the influences of fate and character in the course of self-composition... The labour of self-composition never ceases; I would suggest that its story could be visualized as a string of present moments, each caught in the act of recycling the future given to the anticipatory, often not-yet-conscious mind, into the past consisting of the traces left behind by the activities of participatory reason.

Bauman's contribution is not only to suggest that the self has become a project to which every "normal" person must pursue, but also to suggest that whatever self-constituting improvement project we may choose it nonetheless represents a response to interpretive tensions from which there is no escape. The tension between fate and character remains the grounds for the self presently caught in a future that already anticipates its past. This is a provocative way to conceive of selfhood since it does not permit him to be persuaded by any attempt to side with the autonomy of character nor with determinates of fate. Bauman shows that we are always caught in the intertwining influences of both.

The conception of selfhood that Bauman and Raud work with is risky since it can make for a kind of blurriness with common sense stereo-types of "good" character or "bad" fate (such as is found in the epigenetic movement today). Trying to understand the self as situated in and responsive to these tensions is difficult partly because it is easier to pursue one side or the other -- structure versus agency; determinism versus freedom; fate versus character. To choose one side, in Bauman's words, is to become the "forward looking" type who takes pleasure in things that are not actually there (109-110). What is not actually there is a future unified self un-stuck from recycled the past.

Instead of pursuing any (dis)solution of these tensions, Bauman and Raud's discussion offers an important difference in approach to the question of selfhood. The difference is this – they do not believe in an outsider perspective – there is no way out imagined nor on offer. Not even the self that becomes aware of its relation to the contemporary demand that it must produce itself better, stronger, smarter; not even this self, gets outside of the fate/character quandary. There is no dis-embedded self

that can go on to fix others without recycling a history that the composition both anticipates and relies upon. Finding a way to orient our practices to this understanding of self is a way to potentially prevent a social, biological, or scientific essentialism. It is this no-way-out approach that grounds the authors' aim to *understand* contemporary practices of selfhood, where to understand means, via Wittgenstein, "to know how to go on" (26). Still, this approach may strike some readers as devastatingly fatalistic.

The aim to find a way to go on enables this book to strike out with an uninterrupted faith in human dialogue. The two authors demonstrate a kind of unquestioned assurance that "what is" is not all that we, or at least they, can make of it. There is an agentive certainty that the authors maintain, nurturing a meaningful conversation and doing so through the online electronic technologies they critique (recall the early morning emails). Bauman and Raud are engaged in reflective thought, a social engagement producing a mutually co-constituted future as witnessed by this published dialogue.

The book ends with Bauman and Raud each providing single authored afterwords in which they reflect on where their dialogue has taken them. Raud (138) ends with a fundamental unease with any and all that claim to enhance humanity and reiterates a need to recognize self as situated between the given (sometimes referred to as biology) and the agentive capacity to respond. The hope in human creative capacity always faced with its capture in the reproduction of the same, receives attention by Bauman as well. He ends with the suggestion of a project of "excorporation" as a counter-response to the contemporary milieu's constant normative demand to incorporate -- to own, to consume, and lay waste. Guided by Mauro Magatti and Chiara Giaccardi work on excorporation, Bauman (128-129) suggests that it means

To act generatively... to decide the value and to make it flesh... The logic of 'generativity' is at cross-purposes with the logic of consumerism. It is not guided by the will to 'incorporation'... but by... a mode of life whose purpose is assisting others in their being, care of their life and volume of their life resources.

Excorporation might replace the present day neo-liberal expectation to be a self-assertive character and might resist too our siding with fate that makes it seem OK that we are made of a world that owns, consumes, and wastes people. Excorporation, is an open ending to this book, but it does suggest being at cross purposes to consumerism, and doing something other than reproducing the rivalry that is currently pushing humanity to the "level of a zero-sum game" (129).

Practices of Selfhood is a provocative book for those interested in self and subjectivity studies or socialization as well as social psychology or community psychology. This book also contributes to science and technology studies; human/nonhuman interactions and ethical debates regarding human enhancements; it contributes as well to the sociology of everyday life and normalcy studies. It is an important book for any reader who takes something like Sartre's "no exit" as an inescapable starting point and wishes to study how two scholars might orient to this bleakness in a generative fashion.

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