THIRD EDITION

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

ZYGMUNT BAUMAN | TIM MAY

WILEY Blackwell

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in memory of
ZYGMUNT BAUMAN
(1925–2017)

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Preface to the Second Edition

Writing the second edition of a book which was originally written by Zygmunt Bauman was a task that I approached with some trepidation. The original, after all, was written in a distinctive style that was attractive to numerous readers in several languages. At the same time, Zygmunt felt that a new, updated edition would benefit from my input. In the face of this, quite how I was to preserve this uniqueness, while adding my own materials, was bound to require some care.

The end result is a totally revised and expanded edition. Original chapters have been altered and we have introduced new ones, whilst materials have been added throughout the entire text: for example, on health and fitness, intimacy, time, space and disorder, risk, globalization, organizations, and new technologies. In the end, both of us believe that we have produced a book that maintains the best parts of the first edition, but adds to it in ways that significantly improve its overall appeal.

We are both concerned that *Thinking Sociologically* is attractive to a wide audience. In terms of those who are studying sociology, we have sought to anticipate the different topics that are taught within the curriculum, while writing in a way that we hope is illuminating to practicing social scientists in general. We are also keen that the book appeals to a wider audience who may wish to learn more of a discipline that is gaining greater attention for the insights it offers into society and social relations. For us, the reasons for this are clear: sociology provides a valuable and often neglected perspective on the issues that face us all in the twenty-first century.

As two sociologists, separated by two generations, we are both devoted to our subject in terms of the understanding it offers for making sense of our experiences within the social environments we inhabit. Thinking sociologically not only helps us in our understanding of each other and ourselves, but also offers important explanations for the dynamics of societies and social relations in general. We hope, therefore, that you will emerge from reading this book and agree with us that sociology is an illuminating, exciting, practical, and challenging discipline.

Preface to the Third Edition

When the publisher first suggested a third edition, I contacted Zygmunt and asked what he thought about the idea. He thought it was a good one, but it was not something he wished to undertake himself. So we agreed I would produce the third edition and he suggested we move the authorship to place me as the first author. I have not done that. The book has sold extensively and been translated into a dozen languages. It is, if not unique, certainly unusual in its format and I believe this is something to be preserved. Zygmunt devoted his life to greater understanding of the human condition and its improvement and the book is dedicated to him.

A great deal of change has happened since the last edition was published. Some of you reading this book will have grown up with and been born into an age of information technology in which assumptions of connectedness across space and time and the use of social media are commonplace. Like all epochs, those who seek to characterize them reach for new descriptions often encapsulated in acronyms. Of course there are contemporary issues requiring novel ways of understanding and these are reflected in the new edition. However, we should not forget history in our fast-paced world, for it acts as a corrective to our characterizations and enables us to learn from the past in order to inform the present and future. As we shall see, communication is enabled in new ways, but it also has the power to reinforce, reinterpret, and reconfigure our relations to each other in older ways.

Issues concerned with climate change, sustainability, advances in technology, inequality, social justice, and inclusion, to name a few, have all gained more prominence. With those and the above changes in mind, the book has been revised with new materials and discussions to reflect these and other transformations in our lives. In the face of these changes, the ability to think sociologically remains a vital component for understanding not only their contours and dynamics, but also their consequences for how we organize our societies, understand ourselves and lead our lives. This book is a route into that way of thinking.

Acknowledgments

I began writing the third edition as I started in a new post at the University of Sheffield in September 2016. The requirements of a new job, along with prior commitments, have made the time productive and intensive.

In this journey I would like to thank Beth Perry for being a supportive colleague, collaborator, and a good friend who also read through the manuscript. My thanks go to those who have been supportive of my endeavors now and in the past, including not only Zygmunt Bauman, but also Davydd Greenwood, Morten Levin, William Outhwaite, Bev Skeggs, Dorothy Smith, Carole Sutton, and Malcolm Williams. Thanks to Ken Parsons for the friendship and our frequent meetings over the years and to the "Kalkan 7" – Jane, Dave, Chris, Audrey, Steve, and Vikki – for sharing experiences, having fun, and the holidays.

My love and gratitude to Vikki, who not only read the manuscript with a keen eye and provided insights on the content, but also provided support and encouragement in the midst of her own busy life. To Cian, Alex, Calum, Nick, and Lewis, my sons and stepsons, my appreciation for their energy, zest for life, and for demonstrating that the world can be a better place through a care and concern for others. Finally, I would like to thank my new colleagues in the Sheffield Methods Institute, and express my gratitude for the support of the Mistra Foundation for Strategic Environmental Research which enables our participation in the Mistra Urban Futures Centre and the Realising Just Cities programme. Thanks also go to the editorial and production teams at Wiley Blackwell.

Introduction

Crafting Sociological Lenses

In this chapter we wish to examine the idea of thinking sociologically and its importance for understanding ourselves, each other, and our relations to the social environments we inhabit. For this purpose we are going to situate the idea of sociology as a disciplined practice with its own set of questions and ways of approaching the study of society and social relations.

Thinking Sociologically: The Distinction

Sociology comprises both ways of framing the social world and methods for understanding and explanation. It has a considerable body of knowledge accumulated over the course of its history. Sociological reflections are evident in the writings of philosophers and theologians over the course of two thousand years. The term was used in the earlier part of the nineteenth century and its development drew upon this extensive history for the purpose of studying social order and change. Now, books and journals in libraries represent the discipline as having a rich tradition of studies. They provide knowledge for the general reader, students, and those seeking to become professional sociologists; all of whom can then expand their understanding of the world in which we live. In the process we find systematic studies on such topics as: culture, economics, crime, organizations, sexuality, politics, identity, fashion, management, state, environment, media, youth, gerontology, health, housing, bio-technology, and rural and urban life. Thus, sociology is a site of continuing activity seeking to understand new phenomena and to test established ideas against experiences and data. In the process, the form and content of the discipline evolves with societal transformations.

To situate sociology there must be some distinguishing features of its practice in terms of setting questions and illuminating the social domain that are different from other disciplines. By discovering these differences we can characterize what it is to think sociologically. At this point we can think of related disciplines: for example, History, Anthropology, Political Science, Law, Social Policy, Psychology, Management and Organization Studies, Economics, Education, Criminology, Information Science, Journalism, Philosophy, Architecture, Social Policy, Archeology, Linguistics, Literature, and Geography. All of these are

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concerned with the human world: that is, the interactions between people and with the environments of which they are a part. So, what sets them apart and why do they justify different names?

There is one simple answer: differences between these disciplines merely reflect divisions in the world that they investigate. It is human actions, or aspects of those, that differ from each other and disciplines take account of this fact. Each narrates its past and the peculiarity of its focus and constitutes its areas of inquiry. History is concerned with actions that took place in the past, whereas sociology concentrates on contemporary society. Anthropology examines human societies at different stages of development; political science focuses on actions and institutions relating to power, state, and government; economics deals with the allocation of scarce resources viewed in terms of persons acting "rationally" to maximize their individual utility, as well as the production and distribution of goods; law and criminology are interested in interpretation and application of the law and the norms that regulate human actions and how norms are articulated, made obligatory, enforced, and with what consequences. Yet, as soon as we begin to justify the boundaries between disciplines in this manner, the issue becomes problematic. After all, we are assuming that the human world itself reflects neat divisions which then become specialist branches of investigation. We now reach an important issue: like most beliefs which appear to be self-evident, they remain obvious insofar as we refrain from examining the *assumptions* that underpin them.

We now have the idea that human interactions may be divided into certain categories which are then represented in clear disciplinary boundaries. A group of "experts" who are knowledgeable and trustworthy then claim exclusive rights to study aspects of the social and material worlds and furnish us with the results of their studies and reflections. However, from the point of view of our experiences, can we divide society into economics, geography, politics, history, or social policy? We do not live separately in the realms distinguished by political science or economics, nor do we move from sociology to anthropology when traveling from parts of the global North to the South, or from history to sociology when we grow a year older!

If we are able to separate these domains of activity in our experiences and so categorize our actions in terms of the political at one moment and the economic at another, is it because we have been taught to make such distinctions in the first place? Therefore, what we know is not the world itself, but what we are doing in the world in terms of how our practices are informed by an image of that world. Our ways of knowing are frames we deploy to comprehend the world and those are forged in the relations between *language* and *experience*. Thus, there is no natural division of the human world that is reflected in different scholarly disciplines. What we discover is a division of labor between the scholars who examine the world which is reinforced by disciplinary boundaries that enable practitioners to know what belongs to their areas of expertise.

In our quest to find the "difference that makes the difference," how do the practices of these branches of study then differ from each other? There is a similarity in the ways in which they select their objects of study. After all, they all claim obedience to the same rules of conduct when dealing with their

respective objects. All seek to collect relevant facts through methods of research and ensure that they are valid and then check and recheck those facts in order that the information about them is reliable. In addition, they all try to put the propositions they make about the facts in a form in which they can be clearly, unambiguously understood and tested against evidence. In so doing they seek to pre-empt or eliminate tensions or contradictions between propositions in order that no two different propositions can be true at the same time. In short, they all try to live up to a particular ideal of systematic discipline and present their findings in a responsible manner.

We can now say that there is no difference in how the task of the scholar and their trademarks – scholarly integrity and responsibility – is understood and practiced. Those claiming to be experts seem to deploy similar strategies to collect and to process their facts: they observe aspects of human actions, or employ historical evidence and seek to interpret them within modes of analysis that make sense of those actions. It seems, therefore, that our last hope of finding our difference is in the kinds of questions that motivate each discipline: that is, those that frame the points of view (cognitive perspectives) from which actions are observed, explored, described, understood, and explained by different disciplines.

Take the frames that inform the work of economists. Consideration would turn to the relationship between the costs and benefits of human action. Human action can be viewed in terms of the management and allocation of scarce resources and how these may be utilized for maximum advantage. The interactions between people would be examined as aspects of the production and exchange of goods and services; all of which is regulated by market relations of supply and demand and the desire of actors to pursue their individual preferences according to a model in which actions are subject to a prior rational calculation of means and ends. The findings would then be arranged into a mathematical model of the process through which resources are created, obtained, and allocated. Political science, on the other hand, is more likely to be interested in those aspects of human actions that change, or are changed by, the actual or anticipated conduct of other actors in terms of power and influence. Actions can then be viewed in terms of the asymmetry between power and influence and so some people emerge with views modified more significantly than other parties to the interaction. In this way its findings can be organized around concepts like power, domination, the state, authority, and psephology (the study of voting behavior).

The concerns of economics and political science are by no means alien to sociology. This is readily apparent from works within sociology that are written by scholars who may self-identify as economists, historians, political scientists, anthropologists, geographers, or who work in management and organization studies. Nevertheless, sociology, like other branches of study, has its own cognitive perspectives which inform sets of questions for interrogating human actions, as well as its own principles of interpretation. From this point of view we can say that sociology is distinguished through viewing human actions as elements of wider figurations: that is, of a non-random assembly of actors locked together in a web of mutual dependency (dependency being a state in which the probability

that the action will be undertaken and the chance of its success change in relation to what other actors are, do, or may do). Sociologists ask what consequences this has for human actors, the relations into which we enter and the societies of which we are a part. In turn, this shapes the object of sociological inquiry and so figurations, webs of mutual dependence, reciprocal conditioning of action and expansion, or confinement of actors' freedom are among the most prominent preoccupations of sociology.

Individual actors come into the view of sociological study in terms of being members or partners in a network of interdependence. Sociology celebrates the individual, but the atomism, or social isolation that is assumed to exist between us that is embodied in the idea of individualism, is another matter; which is not to say that this may not be a symptom of social dislocation. Sociology is primarily concerned with a relational viewpoint: that is, we are born into and are members of a society which pre-exists us. We are forged in those relations and our experiences are influenced by social structures and our ways of seeing by cultural frames of references. We are dependent upon others and our views of ourselves are mediated in those relations. The central questions of sociology thus become: how do the types of social relations and societies we inhabit relate to how we see ourselves and each other, construct our knowledge, view our environments, and with what consequences? It is these kinds of questions –components of the practical realities that inform our everyday lives – that constitute what it is to think sociologically and which define the discipline as a relatively autonomous branch of the social sciences. Thinking sociologically encapsulates a relational way of understanding the world which also opens up the possibility for thinking about the world in different ways.

Sociology and Common Sense

Thinking sociologically has a particular relationship with what is often called "common sense." Because of its subject matter, sociology and common sense are implicated in ways that have consequences for its standing and practice. It is precisely these relations that lead to it being relevant, insightful and, at times, contentious. The physical sciences, after all, do not appear to be concerned with spelling out their relationship to common sense. Whilst there are undoubtedly social components to the practices of the physical sciences – from the ways in which phenomena may be inferred, rather than observed by scientists, to what sort of science is funded and how the findings of science have implications for how we see ourselves and the world around us – there tends to be a separation of the immediate effects of the content of the knowledge from the social contexts in which it is produced. Boundaries thereby exist with a rich yet often disorganized, non-systematic, sometimes inarticulate and ineffable knowledge referred to as common sense.

Common sense appears to have nothing to say of the matters that preoccupy physicists or chemists. The subjects they deal with do not seem to fall within the daily experiences of people. Those without knowledge and skills do not normally consider themselves able to form opinions about such matters unless aided by

the scientists who focus on the domain of the content of their research. After all, the objects explored by the physical sciences appear only under very special circumstances: for example, through observed effects in giant particle accelerators or the lenses of powerful microscopes. The scientists view or infer the phenomena, subject it to experimentation under certain conditions, and then justify their findings within a bounded community of inquirers. Being the owners of the experience, the process, analysis, and interpretations remain within their control. Results have to withstand the critical scrutiny of other scientists trained in the specialist area. Their resulting knowledge does not compete with common sense for the simple reason that there is no commonsensical point of view on their subject matter.

Is the characterization of this separation as simple as the above implies? The production of scientific knowledge contains social factors which inform and shape its practice, while scientific findings can have social, political, and economic implications which, in any democratic society, are not for scientists to determine. Scientific and contextual, or indigenous knowledge, interact with one other: for example, how long people accumulate knowledge to maintain habitats for human survival in relation to plants and animals, or the increasing availability of medical information to the general population with which to question the expertise of medical doctors. We cannot, in other words, easily separate the means of scientific research from the ends to which it may be put, nor practical or local knowledge from scientific knowledge itself. How research is funded and by whom may have a bearing upon the results of that research with these interests potentially distorting results. Public concerns over the quality of the food we eat, digital storage of our personnel usage of the Internet, the protection of the environments upon which we rely and live in, the role of genetic engineering, the patenting of genetic information are just a few of the matters that science alone cannot determine. These concern not just the bounded justifications for scientific knowledge within an expert group, but other forms of justification, as well as its application and consequences for our lives and futures. After all, we are talking about the control we have over our lives and the direction in which our societies are moving.

Such matters are the raw materials for sociological investigation. All of us live in the company of other people and interact with each other. In the process we display an extraordinary amount of *tacit knowledge* that enables us to get on with the business of everyday life. Each of us is a skilled actor. Yet what we obtain and who we are depend on others. After all, most of us have lived through the agonizing experience of a communication breakdown with partners, friends, and strangers and we experience varying degrees of social dislocation, ostracization, togetherness, and belonging. The subject matter of sociology is embedded in our everyday lives and without this fact we would be unable to conduct our lives in the company of others. Yet whilst deeply immersed in our routines, informed by a practical knowledge oriented to the social settings in which we interact, we may not systematically think about the meaning of what we have gone through or the reasons for its occurrence, nor compare our private experiences with the fate of others; with the exception, perhaps, of seeing private responses to public issues paraded for consumption on television and social media. Here, however, the

privatization of social issues is often reinforced thereby relieving us of the burden of understanding the dynamics and consequences of social relations within what is seen as individual reactions, rather than more general cultural expressions.

Sociological thinking takes us into a relational understanding. It sees the individual, but situated within a social milieu. As a mode of investigation, it will then ask questions such as: "how do our individual biographies intertwine with the history we share with other human beings?" Or, "how do our cultures shape what we see and do?" Sociologists themselves are part of that experience and so however hard they may try to stand aside from the objects of their study – life experiences as objects "out there" – they cannot break off completely from the knowledge that they seek to comprehend. Equally, however, this can be an advantage to the extent that they possess both an inside and outside view of the experiences they seek to comprehend through the methods of research that they deploy: from the extensive through general comparisons within and between societies, to intensive experiences of immersion in social groups to understand their dynamics. The result is a rich and insightful body of studies into the human condition whose basis of comprehension, seen from within the frames of practical reason, ranges from the proximate to the distant.

When it comes to studies of the human condition, sociology needs to understand the meanings that are attributed to human actions, artifacts, and environments before they commence their investigations with questionnaires, interviews, visual materials, or observations. Families, organizations, kinship networks, neighborhoods, cities and villages, nations and churches, and any other groupings held together by regular human interaction have already been given meaning and significance by the actors involved. As a result, sociological phenomena are already endowed with meaning and so it is implicated in the realities that make up practical reason. With fluid borders between these forms of knowledge, their boundaries also move. As with the application of the genetic scientists' findings and their implications for social life, the sovereignty of sociology over social knowledge is one of reflection, reinforcement, and even contestation. Whilst this is not peculiar to sociology and is of relevance to the social and physical sciences in general, we can consider the relations between sociology and common sense in the following ways.

In the first place sociology subordinates itself to the rules of responsible communication according to its modes of justification: that is, accepted and institutionalized ways of constituting understanding and explanation based on evidence. This is an attribute of science among a common community of inquirers that distinguishes a discipline from other forms of knowledge and ways of justification. Sociologists are expected to take great care to distinguish between the statements corroborated by available evidence and those propositions whose status is of provisional, untested ideas. The rules of responsible speech require that the procedures which have led to the resulting insights be open to scrutiny. Further, that it should relate to other works on the topic and engage with those in a manner that is argued to advance its understanding. In this way, credibility and applicability will be significantly enhanced. Indeed, the legitimacy of science is based in our belief that its practitioners have followed the rules of responsible speech whilst those scientists, in turn, can refer to the