

Zygmunt Bauman – Recipient of the VIZE 97 Prize for 2006

The world-renowned sociologist Zygmunt Bauman was named the recipient of the Dagmar and Václav Havel Foundation VIZE 97 prize for 2006. He was awarded the prize personally by Dagmar and Václav Havel at a gala event on 5 October 2006 at 'Prague Crossroads', an intellectual and multi-cultural centre located in the former Church of St. Anne in Prague.



photo © Alan Pajer

Janina Bauman, Zygmunt Bauman, Dagmar Havlová, Václav Havel,
Miloslav Petrusek, Taňa Fischerová

Introductory Speech by Miloslav Petrusek

The life story of Zygmunt Bauman, a sociologist, philosopher and ethicist of Polish origin, at present living in Great Britain, and of his wife, Janina, would alone take up a separate book that would not only be testimony of the tragedies, peripeteias, and hopes of the 20th century, but also a deep intellectual reflection thereon. For that matter, his wife Janina described her story in a book full of bitterness, disappointment, hope, and belief in humans – a book about which Zygmunt said that,

thanks to it, he came to realise why he has been dealing with all the major topics of our time and what their intellectual and moral keystone is. Bauman's key book *Modernity and the Holocaust* demonstrated for the first time, using consistent sociological means and in a very convincing literary form, the ambivalence of modernity, its intrinsic inconsistency, that is to say, that the holocaust was the result of a unique combination of circumstances, which alone would be ordinary and common, but their effect in conjunction with other factors was historically unprecedented.

Bauman is extremely versatile in his intellectual interests; however, the shock of the 20th century's tragedies is often tacitly present in all his texts. Bauman is a moralist in the best sense of the word, though he would not identify himself as such, if we understand a moralist as not a man with a reproachful pointing finger. He is, however, a thinker for whom the subject of personal moral responsibility has been the central topic, both in theory and life. Consequently, not only Bauman's *Post-modern Ethics*, but also his works devoted to freedom, individualised society, death, and immortality, and even globalisation have followed the same or a similar ethos. In his book on globalisation, which others fill with figures and hopeful forecasts of a happily networked world, Bauman remembers a similar academic globetrotter (while considering himself as one of them after his expulsion from Poland in 1968), Agnes Heller who once wrote, with a sad allusion, 'my home is where my cat lives'. Bauman knows that a globalised world is as equally ambivalent as everything surrounding us; from highways and hypermarkets to body care and so-called ethnomusic, but he knows more: the era of globalisation is also an era in which communication between educated elites and the masses has broken down. Elites have nothing to say to the masses: they have nothing that would echo their own experience and their possible future.

Zygmunt Bauman never ranked among this type of elite; his ability to communicate with others has never faltered. Absolutely indirect but convincing evidence is the fact that Bauman has not only been published in the Czech Republic, but also read – and read and commented on, both read and criticised. He doesn't leave any of his readers indifferent, which is the result of at least two things: what he communicates and how he communicates it. Bauman doesn't convey banalities, because he can present even the most trivial aspects of our lives from an unusual angle, and chooses a literary form that follows in the tradition of the best sociological and philosophical essay writings – of course, he has been influenced by Simmel, but also by the great literature of the 20th century, namely, Kafka, Borges, and Musil; he has made many references to Kundera, he knows Švejk and understands him, and he references Huxley and Orwell, as well as Rabelais and Broch. This may be why he has had little attraction for philosophers that were too eccentric. Bauman has never been interested in academic disputes on how many paradigms dance on the needle point of a single sociology; empty skirmishes dealing with only science itself and not the world, which it was to bear witness to, went past him. To be honest, he went through this stage while still in Poland at the end of the 1950s and nev-

er went back to it. The malicious question as to whether what Bauman writes is not in reality eclecticism that is fed by sources too heterogeneous (e.g. from Lévinas to Senett, and from another point of view from Corbusier to Chagall) is a question irrelevant to Bauman – and by right. His sociology is a sociology of responsibility and election, i.e. a sociology of freedom. Bauman knows better than any other person what limited possibilities sociology has in the current complicated world. That is, he knows that sociology will not clarify for us how life will further develop. It will not assure us of how our efforts to create life knowingly will come out. It doesn't provide us with certainty about how everything is going to turn out. Sociology may, however, facilitate choice, it may show us what we cannot see from our everyday perspective, and thus simplify the decision-making between choices – in other words it offers the possibility of how in the best possible way, though not infallibly, to use the possibilities of freedom, which the future doesn't necessarily have to offer to us.

Let's look at this carefully: it is a freedom that we have and that we must value because it may no longer be in store for us in the future. Zygmunt Bauman, the great philosopher and sociologist of our time, is, however, neither a relativist nor a pessimist. He is a wise thinker tried by life and enlightened by modern science, who offers to us unusual and therefore not always pleasant perspectives on our possible futures. That is to say that he knows better than anybody else that to believe in the possibility of living in the best of all possible worlds, unless we already live in such a world, a big price has to be paid – from the loss of illusions to the loss of human lives. Nevertheless, Bauman's creed is optimistic because it has been based on the belief in man's ability to take responsibility for his own fate and the fates of his relatives into his own hands.

Bauman, the great admirer of the theoretician of post-modern irony Rorty, but also of the great ironists Kundera and Musil, has himself treated with irony the position of a poor or only medium-rich consumer in the post-modern society, who cannot turn from a vagrant into a tourist, because he simply doesn't have the means – it is however a kind, informed, and therefore cautioning irony: 'These defective consumers spoil the fun because they do not lubricate the wheels of the consumer economy and are of no use in this single sense. And because of they are of no use, they are also undesirable and because they are undesirable, they are the natural subjects of stigmatisation and convenient scapegoats.'

The great humanist of our time, a professor and *doctor honoris causa* of Charles University in Prague, Zygmunt Bauman knows that in the 20th century mankind had the worst experience ever with stigmatisation and scapegoats. His analyses of the present are therefore not only extraordinarily valuable from an analytical point of view, but also a warning. Indeed, the voice of Zygmunt Bauman must be heard. The Dagmar and Václav Havel Foundation Vision 97 wants to help make his voice heard by honouring Professor Bauman with the annual award for individuals having contributed in an outstanding manner to the development of mankind and humanistic cognisance.