

Sociology and happiness: An interview with Zygmunt Bauman

Sosyoloji ve mutluluk: Zygmunt Bauman ile bir mülakat

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Introduction

Polish sociologist and social philosopher Zygmunt Bauman is probably one of the best known contemporary social thinkers – within as well as beyond his own native discipline of sociology. Throughout now more than sixty years – more than forty of which has been spent in Leeds in the UK – he has practiced sociology and prolifically written about the tormented path of the human condition as well as critically reflected upon the vagaries of what he characterizes as contemporary ‘liquid modern’ society. In Bauman’s view, sociology is defined as an ongoing conversation with human experience and, according to him, sociology should concern itself with how human beings continuously seek to make sense of the – indeed diversified and differentiated – social and cultural circumstances in which they must live their lives. Throughout his extended engagement with and contribution to sociology, Zygmunt Bauman has touched upon and analyzed a multitude of sociological themes and topics such as, most prominently, the Holocaust, morality, post-modernity, utopia, critical sociology, liquid modernity, globalization, identity, fear, death, immortality, culture, inequality, ethics, community, love, individualization, education, freedom, consumerism, happiness, etc. In this way, Bauman has contributed to theorizing and inspired research within a variety of disciplines and sub-disciplines (see Jacobsen & Poder 2008). Despite being one of the most recognized and renowned of contemporary sociologists, Bauman’s sociology is in many ways rather different from mainstream sociology in that it can be seen more as a critical social commentary with a certain literary edge than hardcore or orthodox sociology found in most textbooks and recently it was even, however positively, suggested that his work should therefore be characterized as ‘liquid sociology’ (Davis 2013). Besides being a prominent social commentator and cultural diagnostician, Bauman is also an unmistakable utopian of sorts – always on the lookout for pinpointing the suppressed potentials, the hidden opportunities, the neglected paths or the chances missed to make human life better (Jacobsen 2004).

In several published pieces, Zygmunt Bauman has critically examined and dissected what he regards as the ‘miseries of happiness’ in contemporary individualized and consumerized liquid modern society (see, e.g., Bauman 2001, 2008a, 2008b). In what follows, Bauman engages in a conversation about the sociological significance of investigating happiness, discusses the merits and pitfalls of happiness studies and critically diagnoses our contemporary culture of happiness. The conversation took place during December 2013 and January 2014 first as an informal conversation in Zygmunt Bauman’s home in Leeds followed by an e-mail based interview. I wish to extend my gratitude to Zygmunt Bauman for taking the time to participate in this conversation.

Michael H. Jacobsen: *Let us start out by considering if happiness – or the quest for human happiness – can find any justification within the discourse of sociology and does sociology have a fitting or useful vocabulary to capture experiences of happiness? To me it seems as if sociology – regarding itself as a critical discipline – is often suspicious of human happiness. If people express being content, satisfied or feel downright happy, something must be desperately wrong, and soci-*

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ologists would not hesitate to use concepts such as 'false consciousness', 'alienation', 'misrecognition' or 'seduction' to describe the reasons why humans, however falsely, feel happy. C. Wright Mills once even labelled the happy human being a 'cheerful robot' being thoroughly manipulated behind his or her back. Would you agree that sociologists – alongside psychologists, therapists, cultural analysts and other social pathologists – are generally suspicious of human happiness and, if so, why is this the case?

Zygmunt Bauman: 'Happiness' is anything but an exception among the objects of sociological inquiry – or indeed among all cognitive sallies from (to use Heideggerian terminology) the realm of *Zuhanden* to that of *Vorhanden*: from the 'hidden in the light of obviousness and routine', from things taken for granted, to things forcing their way into attention as unfamiliar, confusing – and for that reason baffling. Suspicion stems from the guess/realization/supposition that *things are not as they seem to be* ... Such suspicion has been since René Descartes (his misgivings about the crafty malicious demon conjuring up the 'evidence of senses'), Mercenne, Gassendi, perhaps even since the lofty gesture of 'acatalepsia' by Pyrrhon and Sextus Empiricus, the engine of all and any voyage of discovery called 'science'. For sociology, a late newcomer knocking to the door of scientific establishment, demonstrating the legitimacy of its suspicions was the proof of its scientific credentials: of transcending, upwards or downwards, the level of *hoi polloi* commonplace awareness; in fact, a necessary (even if not sufficient), *sine qua non* condition of its admission. Indeed, if things are indeed as they seem, who needs scientists? And if human things are as they seem to lay, ordinary, rank-and-file humans, who needs sociologists? And what for?

Sociologists, as much as the rest of the people in the scientist category, have vested interests in the ignorance of *hoi polloi* ... The presumption that common sense knowledge is and is bound to remain inferior to the knowledge turned out thanks to, and in the course of, transcending the commonplace experience, was and remains therefore an indispensable ideological gloss over the scientists' aspirations to superior authority. What however puts sociologists in a somewhat peculiar situation when it comes to validation of that presumption, is that scientists focusing on non-human objects can base that presumption on the fact of *hoi polloi* having no access to laboratories and instruments which they, the scientists, deploy – an argument which is not, however, available to sociologists, engrossed by profession in the hermeneutics of the same 'facts of the matter' as are matter-of-factly accessible to the 'ordinary humans'. Hence the need of a different formula of self-legitimation. This is most commonly found in the presumption that beliefs held by untrained and uninitiated humans derive and tend to be embraced for other reasons than the pursuit of truth and curiosity of 'how things *really* are'; that human beliefs tend to be formed under the pressure of a variety of factors, many of which if not most are at cross-purposes with the pursuit of 'truth of the matter'. Such interfering and inevitably misleading factors might be the positive or negative emotions, enforcement or seduction exercised by 'significant others' be it the community of belonging, authorities currently in the limelight or hypes and fashions of the day, care of self-esteem and shame of being in the wrong or the mental inertia induced by the sediments of indoctrination and numerous other factors all contributing to the trained incapacity of reaching and facing up to the truth of one's own opinions and behavioural motives. Note that sociology is one of very few academic disciplines that make of 'research methods' the topic of a separate (as well as one of the essential) lecture course. The main manifest function of the course is the immunization of future sociologists against the morbid influences that are presumed to haunt ordinary everyday cognition (the latent function being raising that presumption to axiomatic status). The declared purpose of the course is to sweep away and bar from returning all those obstacles barring access to the truth of human predispositions, motivations and conduct: all those unwelcome factors that are presumed to interfere with pursuit of truth and conspire to keep the lay hermeneutics of human experience inferior to the 'second hermeneutics', which sociologists claim to be able to deliver having first accomplished the cleaning job ...

That, of course, is the source of ingrained even if contrived suspicion felt to the lay ways of reporting happiness. And of suffering. And of liking or disliking. And of motives behind the decisions. And of decisions behind the acts ... A suspicion supported by vested interest, yet derived from a genuine concern to pierce through appearances to the realms of uncontaminated truth. We are all following Plato's invitation to get out from the darkness of the cave and into light ...

Michael H. Jacobsen: *Looking through most sociology books one will undoubtedly come across the traditional and almost unavoidable topics of 'social stratification', 'socialization', 'roles', 'status', 'class', 'rationalization', just to mention a few. Although all of these time-honoured topics indeed still hold both sociological merit, relevancy and potency, it is however seldom that one comes across 'happiness' as a key concern of sociologists. In most indexes of sociology books, happiness hardly ever figures. Some of the reasons might be given by you in your answer above. However, another reason might be that sociology gains its very raison d'être exactly for the fact that human beings – at least it is presumed – find themselves in some kind of state of unhappiness (i.e. being suppressed, alienated, downtrodden, unfree, powerless, miserable). Might one provocatively suggest that sociology in fact thrives on the fact that people (either factually or in the social science fiction proposed by sociologists) must somehow be unhappy?*

Zygmunt Bauman: 'Happiness' is blatantly unlike 'social inequality', 'roles', 'class' and the rest of the "traditional topics of sociological books" you mention and those numerous other which you don't ... All those 'traditional topics' are *social* facts, set apart more than a century ago by Émile Durkheim but recognized since as the specific, distinct and indeed defining subject-matter of sociology. 'Social facts', let me remind you, quoting from *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895/1964) into which successive generations of the adepts of sociological art were (and for all practical intents and purposes continue to be) indoctrinated, "have a reality outside the individuals"; "the determining cause of a social fact must be sought among antecedents social facts and not among states of individual consciousness". Social facts "are completely detached from the individual facts representing them"; "these facts reside exclusively in the very society itself which produces them, and not in its parts – that is, its members". All that sets sociology apart from psychology. "When the sociologist undertakes the investigation of a given order of social facts, he must endeavour to consider them from an aspect that is isolated from their individual manifestations". 'Being suppressed', 'alienated', 'downtrodden', 'unfree', 'powerless' or 'miserable', which you rightly list as representing what we are entitled to classify as 'states of unhappiness', still fall into the category of '*social* facts'. But not the state of happiness. That notion refers to an individual experience, feeling, state of mind, psyche, emotion. Even experiencing happiness when surrounded by other people going through a similar experience does not make 'happiness' a *social* fact; it remains fully and truly an *individual* phenomenon.

On the other hand, happiness is an ephemeral state, a momentary condition, explosive, elusive, fleeting, eminently unstable ... To quote from Sigmund Freud for a change (from his magnum opus *Civilization and its Discontents*), "what we call happiness in the strictest sense comes from the (preferably sudden) satisfaction of needs which have been dammed up to a high degree, and it is from its nature only possible as an episodic phenomenon. When any situation that is desired by the pleasure principle is prolonged, it only produces a feeling of mild contentment. We are so made that we can derive intense enjoyment only from a contrast and very little from a state of things" (Freud 1929/2002). As you see, happiness is the very opposite of a '*social* fact', that of-choice-and-of-right legitimate subject-matter of sociology, marked by solidity, stability, durability and an overwhelming coercive – indeed, hardly resistible or downright irresistible – power. It is the *pursuit* of happiness, and particularly the selection of objects on which that pursuit is targeted and whose appropriation/consumption is expected to be and consequently experienced/described as the moment of happiness, that deserve to be categorized as social facts calling for and receiving

sociologists' attention. Let me observe, however, that the natural habitat of pursuit of happiness is the state of *un*-happiness, *dis*-satisfaction, *un*-fulfilment – in short the state of pain-generating suffering of deprivation (like being suppressed, alienated, estranged, abandoned, excluded, robbed of dignity and self-esteem, etc., etc.) And so you are right when suggesting that sociology derives its *raison d'être* from the social fact of pursuit of happiness being systematically frustrated.

I would put it this way: in the opposition 'unhappiness vs. happiness' the first member, unhappiness, is (in the terminology of structural linguistics) 'unmarked'. The second, happiness, can be defined solely in negative terms, as overcoming, defying, defeating or putting paid to, and all in all denying, the state of unhappiness ... Happiness is the driving force of life pursuits, but like the rest of guiding, lodestar-type utopias, its 'materiality', indeed its human/social significance, is entirely entailed in stimulating its searching and the durable – though all too often serendipitous (unanticipated, unintended and unplanned) effects of that search.

Michael H. Jacobsen: *You once in Freedom (1988) labelled sociology 'the science of unfreedom' because, as you stated, "the main concern of well-nigh every project of sociology as a separate programme of scientific investigation was to find out why human individuals, being free, act nevertheless in a nearly regular, more or less constant, way". Sociologists have continuously been concerned with solving (or rather explaining or understanding) this paradox of freedom versus unfreedom, most often, as you testified then, by 'de-randomizing' human behaviour in their explanatory frameworks. Moreover, you also suggested that freedom is a relational notion – for one to be free, another needs to be unfree. But what about happiness versus unhappiness? Might the label of sociology as a 'science of unhappiness' seem appropriate, since sociology, as we talked about earlier, appears to be somehow concerned with delineating the various restrictions or obstacles to human happiness? Although you insist that happiness is something pertaining to the inner state of the individual rather than being a Durkheimian 'social fact', is happiness (and unhappiness) – just as much as freedom (and unfreedom) – not also a relational notion, something linking the individual to wider social circles and structural arrangements?*

Zygmunt Bauman: The two cases are anything but identical ... Sociology indeed used to be a 'science of unfreedom' in as far, as Talcott Parsons insisted, its vocation consisted in finding out how come that free choosers, voluntary agents, follow nevertheless strict patterns of behaviour (in other words: how come that anarchic consequences of freedom to choose are avoided) and – consequently – supply knowledge needed to manipulate behavioural probabilities needed to regularize, routinize, uniformize human conduct. I guess however that in the case of unhappiness, it tends to become the focus of sociological investigation for the opposite reason: for the intention to let the constraints go and freedom to expand ...

Michael H. Jacobsen: *In Consuming Life (2007) you stated that "all attempts to compare degrees of happiness experienced by people living in spatially or temporally separate ways of life can only be misconceived and ultimately idle". Despite this, it has apparently become increasingly popular to measure the state, proportion or total amount of happiness in a given country. It so happens that Denmark (my native country), at least in several polls, year after year ends up topping the list of 'happy nations' and is continuously crowned as 'the happiest country in the world'. Since you earlier suggested that happiness is solely "an individual experience, feeling, state of mind, psyche, emotion", where does that leave such collective and statistical measurements – often carried out by trained sociologists – of human happiness? Are these measurements utterly useless?*

Zygmunt Bauman: To answer this question, I'd need to know more, much more about the research that brought up the results you quote ... There is for instance another, quite respected longitudinal research of happiness conducted since 2006; it has been described in Wikipedia in the

following way: “The Happy Planet Index (HPI) is an index of human well-being and environmental impact that was introduced by the *New Economics Foundation* (NEF) in July 2006. The index is weighted to give progressively higher scores to nations with lower ecological footprints. The index is designed to challenge well-established indices of countries’ development, such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and the Human Development Index (HDI), which are seen as not taking sustainability into account. In particular, GDP is seen as inappropriate, as the usual ultimate aim of most people is not to be rich, but to be happy and healthy. Furthermore, it is believed that the notion of sustainable development requires a measure of the environmental costs of pursuing those goals”. Well, in that research, Denmark was allocated the 105th place among the nations ...

Another research, whose conduct by the London based *Legatum Institute* has been reported by Christopher Helman in *Forbes* of 29 October 2013. “Legatum scores the world’s countries on entrepreneurship, personal freedom, health, economy, social capital, education, safety and security, and governance”. On economy, for instance, Denmark has been allocated the 23rd place. Scores are allocated by Forbes’ boffins, and *chapeau bas* for the volume of intricate calculations they must have produced in order to arrive to their results and the volume of energy they had to expend in order to arrive there ... Somewhat caustically, Helman comments (and I am inclined to counter-sign his suggestions ...): “Happiness is subjective, not objective, and what defines it can be debated ad infinitum. Does prosperity equal happiness? Not always, but it sure helps. Are you happy with your life? Perhaps you’ve considered that question while stuck in traffic in your fancy car on your commute to your important job in an impressive office building. You’ve fantasized about jettisoning it all, abandoning the office, the mortgage, the suits, the stress, the 24/7 electronic tether” – and so on and on, as the list expands, potentially ad infinitum, of the ‘subjective’ defying and casting in doubt the ‘objective’ ... The *Legatum Institute*, and many other research bureaus, calculate how much happiness people *ought* to derive from their scores in happiness-producing factors. They don’t derive? Don’t do what they should? Well, their error or their ineptitude to make good their chance. And everything said and done, it is all economy, stupid! Or so do we, much as the Legatum boffins, hear daily from people in the limelight ...

There are as well the findings of longitudinal comparative studies of the frequency of reporting ‘life satisfaction’ and ‘happiness’ in different parts of Europe. As summarized by Aleksandra Jasińska-Kania, one of the leading members of the research team, “the level of life satisfaction in the member states and regions of Europe remains differentiated, even if the differences diminished in the course of the last decade. Differentiation is pronounced on both the East-West and South-North axes. Levels of socio-economic development are higher on the West and North than on the East and south. Western Europe, and particularly its northern and central parts, has a longer historical experience of stable democracy in comparison with the South (Spain and Portugal) and the East (especially Russia and Ukraine). In the second decade of democratic transformations in Eastern Europe the rise of life satisfaction was salient – in Poland more than elsewhere. In the western parts of Europe the level of satisfaction stayed put and even went down in places, though it remains higher on average than in the East”. One of the most interesting results of that study is high correlation between the reports of life-satisfaction and those of ‘having control over one’s own life’ as well as of ‘interpersonal trust’: “Interpersonal trust is also geographically differentiated, and it is highest in the northern lands of Western Europe – a phenomenon explained by greater stability of democracy and the protestant influence; in the rest of western countries trust is only slightly higher than in the East of Europe, where the rise of life satisfaction has been in the last decade more noticeable”. Jasińska-Kania concludes: “Predictions based on sociological theories (comp. Anheier, Stares, Grenier 2004), assuming the dependence of life satisfaction on possession of various capital resources – economic (i.e., income), cultural (i.e., education) and social (i.e., inter-human bonds and trust) gained only partial, chequered and ambiguous confirmation. Such resources are differentiated and differently deployed in various parts of Europe. Only interpersonal

trust is everywhere an important part of social capital that renders increase in life satisfaction feasible. Stronger corroboration in our research has been received by hypotheses derived from psychological theories, pointing to the impact of the confidence in the ability to control own life. Such confidence has the strongest influence on the level of life satisfaction and in all regions of Europe mediates the link between life satisfaction and inter-human trust”.

So what do the measurements measure? You tell me ... But before you find an answer, let's look into the heart of the problem. If we trust Sigmund Freud and accept that 'happiness' is either a momentary feeling or whether planned or dreamed but as-yet-un-reached sight of a bliss spurring into action, but not a steady state, then what information the respondents would be likely to convey to the pollsters if prompted to answer a misleadingly straightforward question 'are you happy' or a similar? We are by now used to the ubiquitous presence of pollsters prodding to answer their questions as well as to learning from them how many of our co-humans prefer A to B, would do X rather than Y, believe Z to be most important in the alphabet of things important in job, in marriage, in gadget we intend to buy or a person we intend to elect into office, are inclined to buy this rather than that canned food for their cat ... Being used to that, we accept the polls' and the pollsters' presence as self-evident hardly ever feeling need to explore wisdom of the alternatives they set for our choices and/or the premises on which our trust in the statistics of choices is expected to rest. All too often, that circumstance renders virtually impossible to judge whether the alternative as posited by the pollsters' question is such as the addressed respondents truly consider and weigh in their daily pursuits and daily choices. We can be pretty sure however that most of the respondents in most cases will nevertheless express some opinion on the things they are asked by pollsters to opine. We may, as it were, safely assume that all and any question, however artificially contrived, unfamiliar and alien to the respondents' experience and practices, will be duly answered, and so a questionnaire, however viciously designed, will be answered.

Michael H. Jacobsen: *During large parts of the 20th century, social scientists and literary writers were quite often concerned – with either positive or negative connotations – with describing collective states of being or living with colourful book titles including famous references to the 'contented majority' (John Kenneth Galbraith), the 'lonely crowd' (David Riesman) or the 'age of anxiety' (W. H. Auden). However, as you have insisted in several of your writings on happiness, human happiness – together with everything else – has now become a thoroughly individualized, privatized and consumerized experience. Moreover, the 'utopia of happiness' is nowadays not a 'state' to be obtained or arrived at, but – as Sigmund Freud insisted – a brief majestic moment of satisfying a vexing need and a never-ending and insatiable hunt for satisfaction, which immediately after its consummation results in boredom. What has been the primary engine behind this transformation of happiness from a collective notion (or what Polish philosopher Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz might perhaps have termed an 'objective' definition of happiness) to an individualized experience, from a 'state' to be finally arrived at to an endless and tormenting search without a definitive or reachable goal-line?*

Zygmunt Bauman: What you call “transformation of happiness” is but one of the numerous yet tightly interconnected facets of the multi-faceted process of individualization, coupled with rendering inter-human bonds frail, under-determined and perpetually re-negotiable and 'until further notice'. One of the two consequences most relevant to our issue is dissipation, fragmentation, pulverisation – indeed a veritable atomisation of Benedict Anderson's vision of 'imagined totality' – at any rate in its application to the population resided within the boundaries of a territorially sovereign political state: an entity traditionally baptised by sociologists with the name of 'society'. The other consequence is wilting of grounds of social solidarity and the ensuing devaluation of collective action: the spreading disbelief in plausibility as well as practical utility of joining and closing ranks and surrendering momentary individual interests to a long-term common cause. The

joint outcome of both consequences is breaking the link between individual happiness and the happiness of the 'polis' on whose intimacy Aristotle famously insisted and which the era of nation-building and modern-state building zealously promoted throughout, up to the idea of collective insurance against individually suffered misfortune embodied in the institution of a 'social (or welfare) state'. The breakage was implemented in the years of neo-liberal rule, the years of deregulation, privatisation, contracting-out, hiving-off, out-sourcing – all that pithily summed up in Peter Drucker's adage "no more salvation by society" and sadly acknowledged in Ulrich Beck's observation that nowadays each individual is expected to find and deploy individual solution to socially generated problems ... Personally, I would classify the "transformation of happiness" you talk about among the aspects of the passage from the gardener's to the hunter's utopia.

Michael H. Jacobsen: *In recent years, the so-called 'sociology of emotions' has increasingly gained foothold as a promising sub-disciplinary preoccupation within the field of sociology. In your own work, one will find relatively frequent references to emotions such as solidarity, compassion, love, fear, freedom and indeed also increasingly happiness. Why do you think that sociology – but also your own work – has gradually begun to recognize and reflect on the social importance of emotions, something that were if not downright banned then at least largely overlooked, unrecognized and regarded with some suspicion earlier?*

Zygmunt Bauman: We are descendants of apes and hominids who lived in herds. Thousands years of homini sapiens did not quite manage to stifle and suppress the inherited herd instinct. Belonging as we aver to the homo sapiens genus, we sociologists are not an exception. The departure you have just recalled was one case of herd changing direction, and tendency to do so time and again is also a legacy of our shared past – in this case nomadic ... Well, this is the simplest answer to your question 'why' – why such a sharp U-turn, a switch from one extreme to the opposite extreme? As to why in this particular case the U-turn was from a ban on emotions to their enthusiastic embrace, sociologists have followed, as they have been doing throughout their history, the meanders of the so called 'public mood' (though who in this coincidence performed the role of chicken and who played the egg is bound to remain a moot question). What G. W. F. Hegel said about philosophers applies in equal measure to sociologists: we try to catch our time in thought (though, like Hegel's Owl of Minerva, we are in a habit of spreading our wings at dusk).

So let us have a look at that change in public mood that accompanied the change in their agenda ... The liquid phase of modernity brought in its wake a *sui generis* 'return of the depressed'. In the preceding 'solid' or 'hard' phase the managers used to record individual idiosyncrasies of the managed on the side of *liabilities*. With a huge investment of mental and physical energy, money expenditure and sheer ingenuity, managers tried (with but a mixed success, to be sure) to repress those liabilities and better still to extirpate them altogether, as factors throwing out of balance routine and uniformity, the two pillars of an instrumentally-rational performance and so also of a smooth and unswerving goal-pursuit. The same individual and personal, resenting routine and resisting uniformity singularities and peculiarities of the managed, their likes and dislikes, sympathies and animosities, private emotions and passions are now transferred onto the *assets* pages of accountancy books. Rather than to be suffered and reluctantly endured as no less inescapable than undesirable facts of life taxing and sapping the potential profitability of the enterprise, they are now welcome as ushering into as yet unexplored expanses of opportunity and so an augury and possibly a warrant of unprecedented gains. The side effect of that new managerial strategy is the shifting of responsibility *for the results* onto the shoulders of the managed, simultaneously reducing the responsibilities of the managers to the selection of the managed according to the promise of profitability they hold for the enterprise - and to the evaluation of quality (measured first and foremost in financial terms) of what they deliver.

That seminal shift in the practice of management could not be accomplished nor would have been conceivably designed were it not for the thorough deregulation of the labour market and conditions of employment and a retreat from the practice of collective bargaining and collectively negotiated salaries, wages and terms of employment: in other words, the thorough and well-nigh comprehensive *individualization* of the employer-employee relations.

So here you are: dear emotions, please return from the exile, all is forgiven and forgotten, all the more so as it would be downright stupid to continue the morbid habit of wasting the inexhaustible opportunities of profit hidden in the heretofore unwisely untapped emotions ...

In his *Liberty Before Liberalism* (1998), Quentin Skinner presents the rather unwholesome practices in which the urge of “catching the time in thought” is inclined to manifest itself. He points out that practitioners of such catchments are all too often “bewitched” into believing that the mainstream way of thinking “must be *the* way of thinking”. Skinner is, and rightly so, non-plussed. Skinner insists: “The history of philosophy, and perhaps especially of moral, social and political philosophy, is there to prevent us from becoming too readily bewitched. The intellectual historian can help us to appreciate how far the values embodied in our present way of life, and our present way of thinking about those values, reflect a series of choices made at different times between different possible worlds” (Skinner 1998:116-117). Fellow sociologists, please take a note!!!

Michael H. Jacobsen: *Erving Goffman (in an insightful footnote in the extended essay “Where the Action Is” in Interaction Ritual from 1967) once described people as inherently happy-go-lucky and stated: “If an individual compares the very considerable time he is slated to spend dead with the relatively brief time allowed him to strut and fret in this world, he might find reason for viewing all of his life as a very fateful play of very short span, every second of which should fill him with anxiety about what is being used up. And in truth, our rather brief time is ticking away, but we seem only to hold our breath for seconds and minutes of it”. Is this anxiety associated with death, as Goffman seems to suggest, and perhaps also our increasing realization of the brevity of life, the main reason why we apparently and incessantly become happiness-seekers?*

Zygmunt Bauman: I keep repeating for many years now that were it not for the awareness of inescapable and irreparable mortality, there wouldn't be culture ... Culture is a contraption allowing to insert purpose into the brief visit to existence; to render the meaningless meaningful, to deconstruct the irrelevant lifespan (purposeless, inconsequential) into a string of thoroughly relevant (purposeful, consequential) tasks and projects – all in all, to dissolve the unhappiness of human condition in the flow of happy moments. Culture is what makes life with awareness of death's inevitability bearable, endurable, liveable.

Michael H. Jacobsen: *In the posthumously published collection of essays Power, Politics and People from 1963 and edited by Irving L. Horowitz, C. Wright Mills once poignantly characterized sociologists as ‘social pathologists’ constantly looking for social problems as well as searching for and proposing solutions. In contemporary sociology, the notion of ‘social pathologies’ still seems to inspire many practitioners of the discipline. Much of what is published under the heading of ‘sociology’ (and perhaps particularly ‘critical sociology’) is indeed concerned with pinpointing the many ailments, illnesses and evils confronted by society. American sociologist Robert Stebbins (2008) recently suggested an agenda for a so-called ‘positive sociology’ which instead on focusing on everything that seems to be wrong in society is rather preoccupied with the study of what people do to organize their lives such that those lives become substantially rewarding, satisfying, fulfilling and happy. What is your assessment of this – does sociology need such a change of tracks leading towards a ‘positive sociology’?*

Zygmunt Bauman: This is the legacy of the early twentieth-century American sociology, and of the (partial, yet intense) Americanization of European sociology in the post-war period. Pioneers of American Sociology, the likes of Lester Frank Ward, Edward Alsworth Ross or Robert Ezra Park, took off from concerns quite different from European (except the British) pioneers who came to social sciences mostly branching off from philosophy, and the *les philosophes* and their ‘enlightenment project’ in particular. Their, the Americans’ concerns, arose chiefly in the Midwest, the site of massive and chaotic immigration and a massive and similarly chaotic urbanization, with all their attendant problems which emergent and still inchoate as well as sorely inexperienced organs of law and order had to tackle. Most of the local pioneers of social studies were priests and preachers, guided predominantly by ethical and charity motives and deeply worried by the appalling moral levity of spiritually homeless, masterless and disoriented newcomers and by spectacular explosion of social ills as alcoholism, prostitution or juvenile delinquency. ‘Social pathology’ gave therefore American sociology its initial spur – but also heavily influenced its research profile and methodological susceptibility and demand (Otto Neurath’s and Paul Lazarsfeld’s programme of quantitative sociology found in America, the country of their arrival, incomparably more enthusiasts than in Europe wherefrom they emigrated; that programme caught imagination of European sociologists only once returning from overseas added lustre by the shining authority of American headmost pre-eminence). American sociology was thereby made to the measure of the managerial reason, ready to assist the managers in their efforts to prevent undisciplined, rule-and-routine-violating behaviour of factory-floor workers, barrack or battlefield soldiers, prison inmates, truancy-prone schoolchildren or potential social rebels and guerrilla-fighters. You and I discussed that turn in our conversations on the uses of sociology published in *What Use Is Sociology?* (2013)...

As to Robert Stebbins’s postulate of a sociology studying “what people do to organize their lives such that those lives become substantially rewarding, satisfying, fulfilling and happy” it is a slightly updated (and modified by his unilateral emphasis on happiness) version of Harold Garfinkel’s programme of ‘ethnomethodology’: of sociology as a study of how the knowledgeable actors construe the world they inhabit and find their way in it. Though no longer a separate school in sociology, ethnomethodology left a durable trace in the form of rising interest in the home-made, cottage-industry production and re-production of a world (for all practical intents and purposes a world free of managers or at any rate managers left out of the picture) by individuals using their own common sense, skills, ingenuity and available resources. In the era of the managers opting out from the chores of management and the responsibility for its effects, rebinding as forceful ‘individualization’, one could and should expect the resurrection of ethnomethodologist (somewhat before-its-time at their first coming) programme under a new logo like ‘positive sociology’ ...

Michael H. Jacobsen: *Last but not least, can sociology help people – and indeed also sociologists themselves – to achieve happiness? Once in interview with Keith Tester, Sophia Marshman and myself (published in Bauman Beyond Postmodernity from 2007) we, by way of insights from Walter Benjamin, asked you if your own thought had achieved a state of happiness. You then answered that providing a resolute and definitive answer to that question would amount to nothing less than dishonesty – would that still be your answer today?*

Zygmunt Bauman: I was asked this and similar questions on oodles of occasions. I never found a better response than to repeat the answer given by Johann Wolfgang Goethe to the question whether he had ‘a happy life’. As you must know by now, he replied that he had a happy life, though he couldn’t recall a single happy week. The message in that statement is as easy to read out as it is crucial for our understanding of the nature of happiness: namely, that happiness does not consist in freedom from trouble, but in confronting troubles, fighting them and conquering...

Michael H. Jacobsen: *Thank you ...*

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About Zygmunt Bauman

Zygmunt Bauman is a world-renowned and award-winning sociologist who for more than half a century has critically contributed to the development of sociology. He is Professor Emeritus at the universities of Leeds and Warsaw. His writings comprise more than 40 books and he is still publishing extensively. Some of his most important contributions to social theory are: *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), *Intimations of Postmodernity* (1990), *Postmodern Ethics* (1993), *Liquid Modernity* (2000), *Society Under Siege* (2002) and more recently titles such as *44 Letters from a Liquid Modern World* (2010) and *Collateral Damage* (2011). A recent interview book *What Use Is Sociology?* (with Michael Hviid Jacobsen & Keith Tester, 2013) summarizes Zygmunt Bauman's vision of sociology.