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Commentary

(Commentary to Zygmunt Bauman: Freudian civilization revisited)

On February 6 of this year, I listened to a radio talk by Steve Reeves, a well-known travel reporter, who had recently made a film about Iran to be broadcast on public television in America. He spoke at the Commonwealth Club in California and tried to explain why we Americans must put a human face on other people if we want to create peace in the world. He argued that we tend to dehumanize or deface others, especially people from the Middle East, so that we will not feel guilty when we declare them to be our enemy and bomb and kill them. We tend to view our enemies as the enemies of freedom and democracy and ourselves as the defenders of such putative freedom and democracy. In the discussion after his talk, Reeves remarked that, in conversations and interviews during his visit to Iran, he had learned that Iranians were willing to accept certain limitations on their freedom and settle for a theocracy rather than a democracy because they were afraid of cultural encroachments from the West. They fear for their children, he said, and do not want them to be raised like Britney Spears and become drug addicts and crass materialists. In other words, Iranians would rather be constrained than to be free and would rather restrain their children than allow them to pursue the pleasure principle that appears to have gone berserk in western culture, especially in America.

Zygmunt Bauman's lucid essay, "Freudian civilization revisited – or whatever happened to the reality principle?" would only heighten the fears of Iranians and people from cultures that still believe in the reality principles of their particular civilizing processes. As Bauman notes, there are unprecedented freedoms in most western societies that have been granted at the expense of community bonds and security. To put it crassly – and I want to focus largely on conditions in America with which I am most familiar – we are more free today to love, enjoy, compete, exploit, destroy, damage, and live life excessively than ever before, and if other people must suffer because of our actions, tant pis! As Bauman has pointed out in his book, *Liquid Society*, excess – now even in times of an economic crisis – is the measure of success, notoriety, and distinction. There are barely any regulations or ethics that are

solid enough in our globalized society that can restrain the pleasure principle, for we have "liquidified" communal, economic, and religious standards at a frantic pace. Bauman attributes the demise of morals and scruples to the rise of the consumer society and the slackening of parental control. "Whatever remnants of moral scruples may linger after the retreat from the parents' watchful presence and the abandonment of functions once considered the sine qua non ingredients of parental love, consumer markets propose to defuse, stifle and chase away through transforming every family feast or religious and national holiday in an occasion to lavish dream gifts, and through day-by-day pandering to the budding one-upmanship of children engaged in a fierce competition with their peers in displaying the shop-supplied tokens of social distinction" (p. 6*).

Numerous critics in America (and elsewhere) agree with Bauman and have articulated their critical views and apprehension. Ever since the 1980s there has been a growing wave of books, critical of consumerism and especially of how children have become commodified and treated instrumentally as consumers by American corporations, not to mention numerous books on how America has become the consumer society par excellence. The titles of the books indicate the authors' concerns: Viviana Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (1985), David Walsh, *Selling Out America's Children: How America Puts Profits Before Values and What Parents Can Do* (1995), Daniel Thomas Cook, *The Commodification of Childhood: The Children's Clothing Industry and the Rise of the Child Consumer* (2004), Jyotsna Kapur, *Coining for Capital: Movies, Marketing, and the Transformation of Childhood* (2005), Susan Linn, *Consuming Kids: Protecting Our Children from the Onslaught of Marketing and Advertising* (2004), Daniel Acuff and Robert Reiher, *Kidnapped: How Irresponsible Marketers Are Stealing the Minds of Your Children* (2005). All of these studies – and there are many more – show great moral and social concern based on exhaustive empirical and historical research, but they often miss the mark because they do not explore the psychological effects on children and how they are being reconfigured in the

civilizing process and how childhood has become a commodity. As Daniel Cook has recently pointed out, "Acknowledging how human beings are now implicated in and encompassed by regimes of commercial articulation from the very first imaginings of their existence is indispensable for any theory of consumption, consumer society or consumer culture. Without it, we are left with the analytic placeholder of 'consumer socialization' to account for the child consumer and subsequent adult consumer. Consumer socialization is a paradigm that carries the embedded assumption that there is more or less a single trajectory along which a child 'becomes' a consumer and 'enters' consumer life from a place of time 'outside' of it and that there is a known endpoint to the development of the consumer – usually phrased in terms of implied adult 'competence'." (Cook 2008, 233).

In his present essay, Bauman points to the social and psychological conditioning of consumer socialization and the great paradox that plagues America – and not only America: the more we invest in our children and empower them to be whatever they want on the market, feeding on the myth of choice in the marketplace, the more we divest them of their integrity and ability to establish a secure sense of self. As Bauman comments, "What matters most for the young is therefore not so much the 'shaping up of identity', as the retention (in perpetuity!) of the ability to re-shape it whenever a need to reshape arrives or is suspected to have arrived. ... Identities must be disposable; an unsatisfying or not self-sufficiently-satisfying identity, or an identity betraying its advanced age whenever compared to 'new and improved' identities currently on offer, needs to be easy to abandon; perhaps biodegradability would be the ideal attribute of the identity most strongly desired" (p. 97*).

The consequences of consumerism are grave for young people, and not only for the young. Though multi-talented and well-educated, they are trained to comply with market conditions that transform them into commodities. They learn early on to barter themselves and shape-shift so they can adapt to the supply and demand of the economy and the changing socialization in homes and schools. They are taught to be positive and positivist, believe in all sorts of religions and scientific evolution, destroy others in competition and play fair and cooperate, criticize the greed of corporate America and strengthen the moral fiber of American imperialism by being good patriots. Bauman, however, is not pessimistic in his analysis of the contemporary civilizing process in America or in the West. He believes that the conflict between the reality and pleasure principles may be shifting once more and that the instability caused by the global economic system and global

system of exploitation of planetary resources may lead people to seek more security by re-establishing stronger ethical and moral values and communal bonds and to abandon the quest of limitless gratification.

I am not as optimistic as Bauman, and I fear that his metaphorical use of the "perpetual pendulum between the desire of more freedom and the want of more security" (p. 9*) may be somewhat of a mistaken notion. I prefer to regard the perpetual conflict between the reality and pleasure principles as part of an ongoing ingrained process, what I call the reconfiguration of the young as consumers and commodities that has become second nature to the young and old alike in a perpetual "de-civilizing" process in the need of radical transformation. This reconfiguration has profound psychological implications for the way we view ourselves and our children, and it is manifested in all social, religious, cultural, economic, and political institutions. What is needed in America is not a swing of the pendulum but a full reform or reformation of the civilizing process that has become "de-civilizing" and destructive. But is this possible?

As Stephen Mennell has remarked in his recent important study *The American Civilizing Process*, "American Society has remained more like a social and cultural marketplace, and indeed, the market has in many respects been the central institution imprinting itself on American people in a less regulated and qualified way than was often the case in Europe. Yet markets, including labour markets, are also structures of power. Markets and large-scale organization, while on the one hand generating inequality, at the same time exert very considerable pressure towards standardization, conformity and adherence to rules." (Mennell, 2008: 121). The problem of the market is, however, not only limited to American society. The rapid changes of the market have wreaked havoc throughout the world, and there is little time and space for people to consider the ethical consequences of such changes for a globalized world steeped in conflicts of every kind, much less to take substantial action for ethical reform. Bauman, himself, has made this clear in his books about globalization and the liquid society.

On a psychological level, the reconfiguration of the young has led, in my opinion, to a kind of *Selbstentfremdung*, or alienation from the self, which Bauman incisively describes, but I would argue that, in keeping with Mennell's analysis of the particular American civilizing process, this process of self-alienation has deep roots in American culture and history. It cannot easily be reformed. Its most recent manifestation, molding children to become savvy consumers with salamander identities, is the outcome of major technological and

economic transformations that bring about more efficient and exploitative use of human capital. In America, this process is aided and abetted by hundreds of churches, synagogues, and mosques that have become business organizations and prey upon the deep needs of people for some kind of security and belief in some higher power that provides spiritual guidance. Even religion in America has become a commodity and is sold on television, the Internet, and in mega churches that resemble more entertainment centers than places of worship. There is no center of gravity that enables young and old people to establish communal bonds and to ground themselves in a recognizable and consistent identity. What you see is not what you get, because what you see tends to be formed through the illusions of spectacle.

But can one generalize, or should one generalize about the human condition in America and other western societies? Isn't Bauman's critique, for instance, aimed more at the condition and behavior of the upper classes, or what he often calls, the knowledge classes, in western societies? In America where approximately 22% of young people live in poverty, is it possible for the poor and lower classes to become appropriate consumers in the civilizing process? Have they received their share of pleasure as the reality principle has diminished? What is the difference between pleasure and divertissement provided by the culture industry in America? Certainly, if one were to do a sociological and/or anthropological study of American society today, one would find vast differences in our population, and many of these would be attributable to social class and ethnic differences, even though Americans dislike viewing themselves as bound to a particular class because identities can be changed so quickly and seem to have become social constructs. Yet, as we know, this notion that one can easily change one's class in a mobile society and take advantage of a multitude of opportunities regardless of class and race is a myth. America is class-bound and racist. As Pierre Bourdieu has clearly demonstrated, we must all contend with a certain habitus from birth. Of course, differences determined by a habitus do not necessarily call for discrimination, but can provide rich diversity. Yet, with all the differences, the new technologies foster similar myths that have a common denominator: the "free" market. A major problem in America is that Americans have never learned Friedrich Engels' dictum that to be free, one must learn just how unfree one is. Or, to return to Bauman, we need to know the principles of reality. We need critical reflection that can produce another kind of pleasure.

The unregulated free market has in some respects become the defining moment in the American civilizing

process. There is a commercial that Nike has run hundreds of times in America, and probably has run in all parts of the world, that is very revealing about how all Americans want to define themselves or are seduced to define themselves. The commercial takes different forms, but it generally pictures some star athlete flying through the air and performing a superhuman feat. Afterward, there is simply a line that reads: be all that you can. Obviously, however, you will need to darn a pair of Nike shoes, like the fairy-tale seven-mile-boots, to be all that you can, and it also implies that you can, in reality, be all that you can, unrestrained, unregulated, flying off to happiness. This notion, or perhaps we should call it a pleasure principle, is ingrained in Americans who are induced to buy into this myth, a myth that Barak Obama has exploited in his path to the presidency. No doubt that if a young person buys into the principles of the consumer society with devotion, one can become all one can become, but this involves playing by rules that call for individualistic and opportunistic behavior. It involves constant shape-shifting and conforming pro forma to ethical and moral principles of the Judeo-Christian tradition without questioning whether they are valid or solid in our liquid society. One must buy into the system to become part of it and to lead it.

In a recent highly perceptive essay, "Meat, Mask, Burden": Probing the Contours of the Branded 'Self', Alison Hearn discusses the manner in which young people in North America are now being prompted by numerous branches of the culture industry to learn how to brand themselves. To a certain degree, they are being raised to brand themselves as commodities. "Self-branding involves the self-conscious construction of a meta-narrative and meta-image of self through the use of cultural meanings and images drawn from the narrative of visual codes of the mainstream culture industries." (Cook 2008: 198). Hearn studies the interconnections between advertising, television reality shows, books on self-improvement and self-branding to discuss the hollow nature of gratification in America that is connected to Bauman's notions of excess. In her conclusion, she states, "The branded self is one of the more cynical products of the era of the flexible personality: a form of self-presentation singularly focused on attracting attention and acquiring cultural and monetary value. The flexible, visible, culturally meaningful branded self trades on the very stuff of lived experience in the service of promotion and possible profit. Even when it might be argued that Facebookers and parties on 2night.com are not consciously self-branding, they remain (as we all do) global value subjects. They are product, producer, and consumer, but they do not control the means of their own distribution. They remain

captive to and conditioned by the controlling interests of global flexible capital."(Cook 2008, 213)

It is not clear whether what has been occurring in America – the reconfiguration of the young primarily as consumers and self-branders – is occurring at the same rate and speed in other western countries. It is also unclear as to whether the reconfiguration is taking the same form in the West. More than most social critics today, Bauman has anticipated and analyzed the potential harm that this change in the civilizing process has brought about and is still hopeful that people in the West will come to their senses. In Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan and other parts of the world, the response to the reconfiguration in the West has been distrust, disdain, and violent rejection often in the form of religious fundamentalism. These responses are not a remedy or solution to the conflict between the pleasure and reality principles of the West. But they are an indication of why the pendulum is not swinging anymore and may never swing again.

References

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