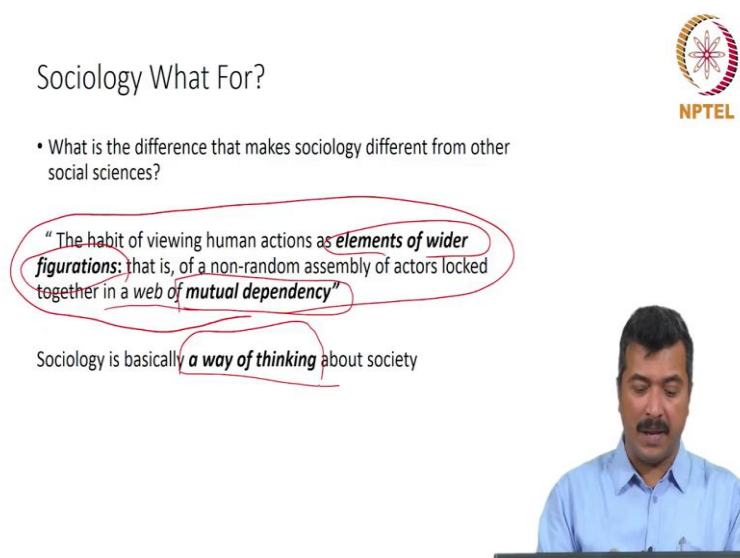



Thinking Sociologically - Zygmunt Bauman.
Professor R. Santhosh.
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras.
Lecture 4

Welcome back to this session. In this class, I will be talking about the arguments of Zygmunt Bauman, a very important sociologist, based on his chapter titled, 'Sociology, What for?'. It is the introduction chapter of his book titled 'Thinking Sociologically'. This book has been widely used across the globe to introduce the discipline of sociology. It provides a very fascinating introduction to the subject and I personally found it very interesting.

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Sociology What For?

- What is the difference that makes sociology different from other social sciences?

*"The habit of 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**"*

Sociology is basically *a way of thinking* about society



The title of the chapter is 'Sociology What For?' It very precisely tells us about the uniqueness of sociological perspective. It is an extremely lucid chapter compared to the writings of C Wright Mills or Peter Berger. Bauman basically starts off with the question; what is the difference that makes sociology different from other social sciences? We know that social sciences in general deal with the social aspect or society and then how sociology does in particular is looking at the society as a separate entity?

The question is, what is that makes sociology different from other social sciences like economics or political science or other similar kind of social science disciplines?. Bauman argues that the sociology is the habit of viewing human actions as elements of wider figurations that is of non- random assembly of actors locked together in a web of mutual dependency. This is an extremely important point this is the crux of our sociological perspective.

The ability to or the habit of viewing human action as elements of wider figurations, that is, of a non-random assembly of actors locked together in a web of mutual dependency. There are two key terms in this section. One is elements of wider figuration. Second one is mutual dependency. What does it mean when we say that we have to view human actions as elements of wider figurations?

It simply means that a person's action cannot be understood by looking at that those actions alone. They make sense only when you understand those actions in the larger context. Most often, even while people attribute their own motifs into their own actions, even while when we all would like to say that somebody has done that and alone is responsible, (of course, he would be responsible to a large extent), but a sociological perspective would really would compel you to look at his action, not as an isolated and individual act, but as an element of wider figuration.

That is of a non-random assembly of actors locked together in a web of mutual dependency. This web of mutual dependency is something that is a defining character of a society. We are all entangled in this web of mutual dependency. We are able to act in a particular manner only because there is a thick layers of social interactions, which provide us a kind of mutual dependence. Our actions make sense only when others reciprocate with that.

We are able to act in a society only when it is understood and reciprocated by others. Otherwise, we will be acting in isolation without it being indeed intelligible to others. Therefore, this particular capacity of looking at human interaction, its patterns, it's very specific forms of mutual dependency is what Bauman argues as the essential feature of sociological thinking. He suggests that sociology is basically is this particular way of thinking about society.

We have come across this point earlier as well. C Wright Mills also suggests that the kind of sociological perspective that we are trying to develop is not something that is not been studied by others. It is not an exclusive property of social scientists. But it is a unique way of looking at it and developing a particular type of consciousness about society. It is a particular ability to look at things from a very specific disciplinary vantage point.

It is a very unique way of thinking about society. Sociology as a discipline helps you to develop this particular way of thinking so that you understand what a sociological perspective is. The theoretical foundations and the methodological orientations of the discipline helps you

to develop this particular way of thinking about society, about our own life, about the life of the people around us. Let us see how Bauman explains this.

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Sociology and commonsense

Peculiar relationship of sociology with commonsense

Four points of differences between sociology and commonsense

1. Rules of responsible speech
2. The size of the field from which materials for judgement are drawn

5.8

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Very interestingly, Bauman begins with the essay by making a distinction between sociology and commonsense. It is a very interesting take, because sociology has a peculiar relationship with this term common sense. Now, what is common sense? Common sense has different meanings in different contexts, we would usually say that somebody does not have common sense in a very generic sense.

With that usage, we mean to say that that person does not act, behave or understand things properly. But in sociology or in anthropology, common sense is usually defined as the sum total of knowledge that people acquire and the kind of knowledge that people acquire which enable them to live in a society in a normal manner in their everyday life. This living is possible because that person has acquired quite a lot of knowledge about how live normally in a society.

Living normally includes, how to act, how to dress, how to behave, how to speak, how to eat, what to eat, what not to eat, or how to behave in specific situations. A person's normal life becomes possible only when they acquire this set of knowledge, which in other ways, we understand as common sense. Sociologist will tell you that the process of socialization plays a very important role in instilling this common sense into the minds of the people. Generally, every person of sound mind must be having a huge amount of common sense which allows him to live normally in the society.

A normal individual knows about his life, his society, the major institutions, the important customs, the rituals, about religion, about family, about everything around him. Then why is that it has a peculiar relationship with sociology? Sociologists would argue that the subject matter of sociology is also something very similar to the subject matter of common sense. In other words, sociology studies a host of themes and subjects that are already in the realm of common sense of the people and this is a very peculiar situation.

Now, compare this situation with that of an astronomer or a physicist or a microbiologists. Their subject matter and scientific terms used in microbiology or physics or nanotechnology or nuclear physics are not a part of the common sense of ordinary people. They are in a completely separate and limited scientific realm. On the other hand, the subject matter of sociology is something that is very much present in the common sense of ordinary people.

What is the subject matter of sociology? Sociology studies the society, it studies the social institutions and social organization. It studies institutions like family, marriage, kinship, religion. It studies development, it studies culture. It studies society in which an ordinary person lives. In other words, every ordinary human beings already possess quite a lot of knowledge about the subject matter of sociology.

To large extent, people have a certain amount of knowledge about the society in which they live, otherwise, their life becomes impossible and they will not be able to live properly. Sociology is entering into this field which has already been understood and there is already a body of knowledge amongst the ordinary people. Ordinary people know a lot of things about their society and in that context, sociologists have to give better and informed explanations about the existing knowledge that is already present in common sense.

That is slightly a challenging task. It is a very interesting challenge. It is very fascinating to tell people that of course, you understand about your own society, but we have better explanations for that. That is the promise of sociology and that is what sociological consciousness mean. It is about offering something more insightful than what is usually understood by the ordinary people though their common sense.

Bauman talks about four very important points that distinguish sociology from that of common sense. These four points are very important. Firstly, he says that sociology compels that you speak irresponsibly and it insists on the rule of responsible speech and this is very interesting. In our ordinary conversations, we make a lot of sweeping statements about

incidents, about particular communities, about particular group of people, about lots of events.

In other words, we tend to speak in a very loose language. Bauman says that while you are living as a member of a society, that is fine, but you cannot do that within sociology where you have to speak responsibly. You must be able to stand by your statement, you must be able to substantiate your statement, and it has to be very careful. He says that it is very easy to make very sweeping, generalized and stereotypical statements.

We quite often hear generalized statements about communities, about other religions, about other caste, about other gender, about other countries. Bauman says that that is not possible to make such statements if you are a professional sociologist. If you are acting and behaving as a professional, you must speak responsibly. And where does this responsibility come from?

It comes from your peer review. If you are arguing something as a product of sociological research, then you must submit it to be scrutinized by your fellow sociologists, which is called as peer review. This is a very essential aspects of every science. You must not say that nobody should question your arguments or theories. Or you cannot say that I have an argument or I have a point about this particular incident and none of you are allowed to question that. That is not the spirit of sociology.

A sociologist will be always ready to present herself or her argument for wider scrutiny, from her professional community. Only through such kind of a critical appraisal, an argument about society becomes accepted. This is one of the first points that Bauman talks about. Second one is the size of the field from which materials for judgments are drawn.

This is again a very fascinating area and very closely connected with how common sense is made and how people speak from their common sense. If you ask people, why are you saying so about a particular incident or about a particular community or about a particular group of people? One of their very often response would be that 'it happened to me' or 'I experienced that' or my father told me or my brother experienced that or somebody sent me this.

Of course, all these ideas are true and all these arguments are valid, their experience could be true, they must have experienced that, their father must have told their uncle must have told or somebody else in their community must have told, but for a sociological argument, this is not sufficient.

While your own personal experience is valid, it is not sufficient. You need to have a much larger size of the field. If you are doing research on certain things, you have to have a larger field from where you draw your conclusions. You find your materials and analyze them properly. Only after that you come to a certain kind of a conclusion.

Your hearsay, your family's experience, your individual experience, the kind of incident that you witnessed, or read about, all these things could be valid, but only up to a point. And unless these experience are subjected to scientific scrutiny, those aren't sociologically valid. You need to have a rigorous methodology in order to present your argument.

Your argument cannot be based merely on your own experience. However, off late, this particular point has been criticized very strongly on in the light of a lot of new theoretical developments about how autobiographies are important, how the narration of a particular person is important, but I am not going into that now.

In general sociology which emerged as a modern social science, insist that its scientific methodology is very important and sociology cannot be reduced to the story of individual experience or hearsay and any stories you hear about.

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- 3. Way of making sense of the world

"To see the individual in the social and the general in the particular"

"How our individual biographies intertwine with the history that we share with our fellow human beings"

- 4. Sociology defamiliarize the familiar

make more sensitive,



The third point by Bauman is the most fascinating one. It is about how you make sense of this particular world. Bauman very brilliantly put it as ‘to see the social in the individual and the general in the particular’. What does it mean, how do you see the ‘social in the individual and general in the particular’.

A sociologist would argue that an individual quite often represents the social. How much ever an individual try to be unique, separate, quite independent, quite different, he mirrors or he reflects quite a lot of very important aspects of the society. It is true for all Individuals for that matter.

You can take your own example. For example, myself, while I am an individual, I represent the society. In my look, I represent the society, I dress up like a man, and my haircut is that of a man, I behave quite often accordingly in terms of how a man should behave. Therefore, an individual quite often represents various aspects of the social. Understanding that aspect something very important. That is why again it brings back to the point that why people behave in certain manner.

Instead of accusing them or instead of finding fault in an Individual alone for his actions or , instead of putting all responsibility and agency to that particular person, it would be more insightful if you say that he represents a larger trend. He represents a larger, broader pattern of the society. That perspective offers very interesting insights. I can give you quite a lot of examples.

You all must be knowing that the teachers, especially the school teachers of the previous years have very strongly believed that physical punishment or beating up the children, or corporal punishment is a very essential aspects of teaching method. I have quite a lot of memories about some of the teachers who used to beat up students very harshly. On the one hand, you can say that they were very cruel people and you can say that these people have to be blamed.

On the other hand, the teachers of that generation really believed that a teacher has to be feared by the children and children have to be physically punished, or only through this feeling physical punishment that the children will learn certain things. That was the kind of a common understanding that made them to beat up small children with the sticks, and then resort to all other kinds of punishment. Here, we are understanding why certain people behave in certain manner rather than isolating an individual action.

Keep in mind that I am not attaching any moral meanings with that or I am not saying it is good or bad, but I am only saying that why certain people behave in certain way or certain manner, has to be understood in a larger context. Because quite often, they are the person representing certain streaks or certain aspects of the society.

It is the case with the general and the particular. An incident, a communal right, or a caste conflict or an honor killing or a dowry death and n number of examples reflect the kind of a larger trends and larger processes taking place.


This is an extremely important insight that Bauman wants us to develop as a part of developing sociological perspective. He also says, it is about how our individual biographies intertwine with the history that we share with our fellow human beings. I hope by now, this point is very clear, that if you have to understand your own biography, your own life so far, the story of your own community, you have to look at it with the history that we share with our fellow human beings.

These fellow human beings could be the people immediately around you, it could be your community, it could be the people who speak your language, your state, your country, and maybe the civilization in a given point in time. It will be a very fascinating experience for you to write a biography of your own, and trying to see how social aspects like your caste or your class or your gender and other social factors really shaped your life so far.


Definitely, this particular attempt will discount your individual effort and that is what the crux of the sociological argument. Of course, your individual effort, your individual intelligence, your individual motivation are important. Sociologists are not discounting that. But they have to be placed in the larger context. Then you will realize that, why we are thinking in a particular way and the way in which we are thinking is often the product of our own society.

How much ever we try to be distinct, or even our notion of what constitutes difference or how we can be different, how we can look and act differently and even this thinking is shaped and constraint by the society. It actually provides a very fascinating idea about how people live, in their own society. Then the fourth point and a very important point is that sociology defamiliarizes the familiar. It very consciously make you to defamiliarize the familiar and it makes you more sensitive.

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- Has anti-fixating power
- "familiarity is the staunchest enemy of inquisitiveness and criticism"
- It has a destabilizing effect on the existing power relations.
- freedom and dependence



What is defamiliarization? Bauman again gives a very interesting statement. 'Familiarity is the staunchest enemy of inquisitiveness and criticism'. It is a very important statement. 'Familiarity is the staunchest enemy of inquisitiveness and criticism'. When you get habituated to or get familiar to things, then you will lose the ability to critically analyze how it works. We become so accustomed to that, we will not find anything interesting in that.

Take the case of our own family. We are born into a family, we grew up in that particular family, and we live our everyday life in that particular family. Each and every aspect of that family life is so familiar to us. That to a large extent, will prevent you from developing a

critical viewpoint about how this particular family functions. The best example could be about gender roles practiced in the family. Who does what kind of work and how gender plays out in this family sphere?

We all think that the very act that your mother gets up early morning and prepares breakfast and serves it to your father and other members of the family is a natural thing to happen.. Father goes to work, mother stays back at home and we consider it as quiet natural and quite normal. We consider it as natural and this term is very problematic. We fail to understand that there is nothing natural about it, there is nothing normal about it.

You can live differently. There is nothing wrong if father gets up in the early morning and does all the household work and if mother goes out for work and then come back in the evening. There is nothing wrong if father takes care of the children. People can live in the way they like. However, we are not able to think about these possibilities, because we are so familiar. We are so habituated with the way we live.

Sociology, very consciously asks you to defamiliarize from the familiar. So that inquisitiveness and criticism can develop about even some of the most intimate places. That is why Bauman says sociology has an anti-fixating power. Once you understand sociology properly, you will try hard or it will naturally come to you not to get fixated with a particular idea or fixated with or get convinced very easily with a particular argument or a particular ideology.

You will imbibe a strong element of skepticism. We will develop, as many scholars whom we discussed earlier have mentioned, a tendency to look beyond the facade of social structure. It will keep coming back, so that you will not be convinced about that what constitute 'normal' or 'preferable' or 'legitimate'. It becomes your personal choice to agree with that or not to agree with social norms. That is why Bauman says it has a very destabilizing effect on the existing power relations.

It has a very strong destabilizing effect. The moment you think about family in this manner that I just explained, by critically looking at the gender division of labour within family and how feminine and masculine duties are divided, then it will start destabilizing the existing understanding. If you begin to question all of them, then what is essentially would be happening is that, we are destabilizing the kind of a conventional family structure. Whether one needs to do that or not becomes an individual choice.

However realize the existence of different possibilities of social organizations. Take the example of a classroom. If the teacher comes, speak in a dictatorial manner, gives a monologue and goes back and if you think that is the normal way of functioning in a classroom, you are very badly mistaken. That is one particular way of doing that, there is nothing natural about it, there is nothing normal about it.

Other possibility is that you can really work closely with the teacher if he or she is willing to make that classroom situation much livelier, much more interactive and much more engaging. This opens up quite a lot of possibilities. Bauman says that this destabilizing effect makes people almost a kind of a perpetual skeptic. A person with this sociological perspective will be very difficult to get convinced off by certain thing, whether it is the arguments of religion or about nationalism, ideologies and so on. If people say this should be the only way in which you have to understand nationalism, you might agree with that.

If people say that his is how you are supposed to express your religiosity or this is what spirituality means, you might not agree. Therefore, this has a very strong destabilizing effect on the existing power relations and quite often you can find yourself in difficult situation because if you earnestly follow this sociological perspective, you can get into difficult situations.

Finally, Bauman has a very beautiful chapter about this freedom and dependence. He examines how people experience freedom and how people are dependent. Sociological perspective, in general, provides you with very interesting and fascinating insights about our notion of freedom, how we are living and what the boundaries of our life are. Sociology help us to understand the possibility of alternatives ways in which we can live our life and make us aware of how independent we are, how dependent we are, how unfree we are and explore the question that can we think of living life in a more meaningful manner without worrying about the society.

Once we understand society as a construct, which evolved over a period of time in a given context, then it also enables you to think whether you can live differently in a more meaningful manner, in whichever way you define it. That provides very interesting and fascinating ideas about your notion of freedom and dependence.

While sociology ask emphasizes that you are dependent on others, it does not mean that you are all the time have to live according to the diktats of the society, whether it is by the

tradition, by the religion, or by various other institutional aspects. It provides you quite a bit of opportunities to explore your own life, with the kind of meanings and ideology that you value that you attach yourself.

Therefore, Sociology opens up huge possibilities for exploring ideas of freedom and to think about dependence and independence in a different way. We are summing up the discussions about sociological perspective here. We touched upon three important scholars such as Zygmunt Bauman, whom we discussed today and Peter Berger and C Wright Mills. As I told you, these three are widely considered as important scholars of sociology across the globe.

These thinkers essentially tell you that sociology is a form of a consciousness and a particular ability to think about society and the ability to understand our own life in the larger canvas of human history. I hope that this discussion helped you to develop a deeper understanding about sociological perspective, which will definitely help you to appreciate the discipline, its theory and the subsequent sections of this course. Let us wind up. Thank you.