

Book Review: What Use is Sociology? Conversations with Zygmunt Bauman, Michael-Hviid Jacobsen and Keith Tester

*This conversational book with **Zygmunt Bauman** looks at the usefulness of sociology with an aim to inspire future conversations about the discipline. **Olivia Mena** found this book to be a sounding board of the timeless but central questions which social theorists and practitioners must revisit regularly in the everyday practice of the 'scientific sorcery' that is sociology.*

What Use is Sociology? Zygmunt Bauman, Michael-Hviid Jacobsen and Keith Tester. Polity Press. March 2014.

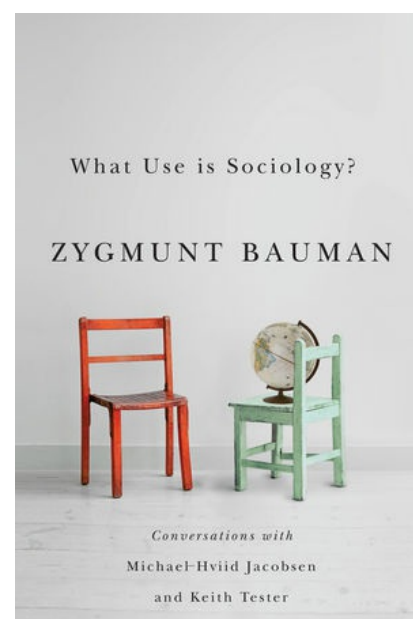
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Sociology is a part of the social world that it seeks to explore and explain. It is constantly evolving inside its duty to provide orientation in a changing world, and as such, it is usually in a perpetual state of crisis, as it must defend and legitimate its ongoing existence at every turn. It is a quality of thinking that can be used for different ends, but when used at its best, like [Zygmunt Bauman](#) does, it is when it is taken up as a tool to where people can make sense of their lives and the world around them and aspire to better possibilities and futurities (p. 6).

Bauman has authored many different works on the subject during his long and illustrious career, from introductory classroom texts like [Thinking Sociologically](#) (1990) to insightful histories and insights into the discipline in [Towards a Critical Sociology: An Essay on Commonsense and Emancipation](#) (1976) and [Collateral Damage](#) (2011), and this latest collaboration is a timely follow-up on his earlier book of conversations with Keith Tester, [Conversations with Zygmunt Bauman](#) (2001).

What Use is Sociology? is a series of intimate conversations, which mine Bauman's more than half a century of experience in the discipline—discussions which revisit truisms of the “sociological imagination” and which are littered with interesting anecdotes and asides particular to Bauman's own intellectual journey. Its chapters are loosely structured around four core questions: What is sociology? Why do sociology? How to do sociology? What does sociology achieve?

Bauman's answers reveal the depth of his moral commitments and breadth of his critical engagement. His insights move beyond the terrains of sociology proper, and cut across philosophy, social sciences, art and literature, and serve as reminders that some of the best “sociological craftsmanship” can happen outside the confines of a discipline or even academia.



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The last chapter revisits the title question by staking out the challenges of working in the landscapes of “liquid modernity” where increasingly the “[s]ignposts move faster than it takes to reach the destinations to which they point” (p. 108). A contemporary social thinker’s best tools when facing these shifting terrains are to embrace uncertainty, provisional claims-making, irony and distance (p. 108).

Bauman advocates for social research that is directly engaged with human struggle, the everyday, the common and mundane, and he warns of the allure of methodology, which can configure academic work in service of ‘managerial reason’. There are no fixed conclusions about the future direction of academic sociology, according to Bauman.

As an academic who has worked largely on his own without funding from research agencies, Bauman does not find research funding to be a necessary feature of doing excellent sociology, on the contrary it helps to keep social research in close contact with the ‘common’ sense world. In a world where sociology is ‘another product in the marketplace’—keeping sociology relevant, according to Bauman, means maintaining the unending dialectical back and forth in the construction of ‘common’ sense by focusing on ‘everyday practitioners’ not the spokespeople of different professions (p. 131).

This book’s short reflection is the kind of necessary pause that all sociologists must take from time to time to remind ourselves why we do what we do, and why that matters. Luckily, someone with more than forty years of perspective and a keen sociological eye for the future finds that all these years later, his urgent feelings about the imperative of the discipline have not changed much from when he was a young sociologist at Leeds and said that: “our vocation, after all these unromantic years, may become again a testfield of courage, consistency and loyalty to human values” (p. 37).

Olivia Mena is a PhD candidate in the Sociology Department at the London School of Economics. Her work looks at global border walls in the context of contemporary immigration and securitization initiatives. She holds a master’s degree in Bilingual and Bicultural Studies from the University of Texas at San Antonio and a master’s in Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies from the London School of Economics. You can follow her on twitter [@borderwalls](#). Read more reviews by Olivia.

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