

Zygmunt Bauman

Critique – Privatized and Disarmed

What is wrong with the society we live in – said Cornelius Castoriadis – is that it stopped questioning itself. This is a kind of society which no more recognizes any alternative to itself and thereby feels absolved from the duty to examine, demonstrate, justify (let alone prove) the validity of its outspoken and tacit assumptions. This society did not suppress critical thought as such, neither did it make its members afraid of voicing it. The opposite is the case: it made critique of reality, the disaffection with ›what is‹, both an unavoidable and obligatory part of every member's life-business. We are all engaged in ›life politics‹ – we are ›reflexive beings‹ who look closely on every move we take and seldom are satisfied with its results. Somehow, however, that reflexion does not reach far enough to embrace the conditions which connect our moves with their results and decide their outcomes. We are critically predisposed, but our critique, so to speak, is ›toothless‹, unable to affect the agenda set for our ›life-political‹ choices. The unprecedented freedom which our society offers its members has arrived, as Leo Strauss warned a long while ago, together with unprecedented impotence.

One hears sometimes the opinion that contemporary society (the late modern or post-modern society, or, as Ulrich Beck recently suggested, the society of ›second modernity‹) is inhospitable to critique. That opinion seems however to miss the nature of the on-going change by assuming that the meaning of ›hospitality‹ itself is invariant. The point is, rather, that contemporary society has given to the ›hospitality to critique‹ an entirely new sense and invented a way to accommodate critical thought and action while itself remaining immune to the consequences of that accommodation and emerging unaffected and unscathed from the tests and trials of the open-house policy.

One can think of the kind of ›hospitality to critique‹ characteristic of the present-day modern society after the pattern of a camping site.