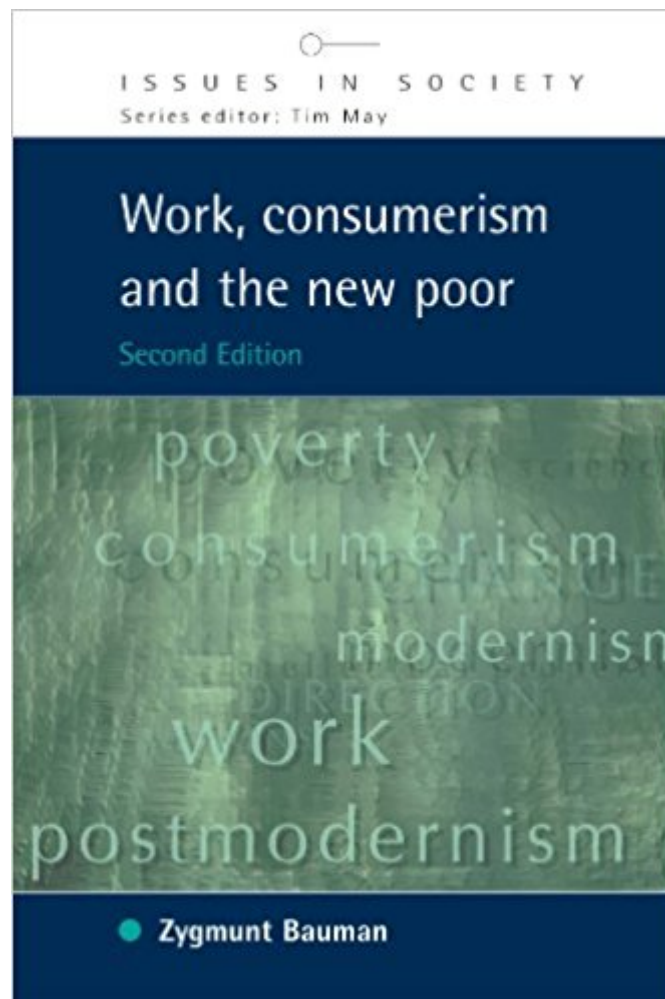




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Work, Consumerism And The New Poor (Issues In Society)



Synopsis

From one of today's most eminent thinkers--a piercing examination of poverty in the modern age If "being poor" once derived its meaning from the condition of being unemployed, today it draws its meaning primarily from the plight of a flawed consumer. This distinction truly makes a difference in the way poverty is experienced and in the chances to redeem its misery. This absorbing book traces this change, and makes an inventory of its social consequences. It also considers ways of fighting back advancing poverty and mitigating its hardships, and tackles the problems of poverty in its present form. The new edition features: Up-to-date coverage of the progress made by key thinkers in the field A discussion of recent work on redundancy, disposability, and exclusion Explorations of new theories of workable solutions to poverty Students of sociology, politics, and social policy will find this to be an invaluable text on the changing significance and implications of an enduring social problem.

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Customer Reviews

"This book presents a significant breakthrough in the study of marketisation and managerialism in primary schools." - British Educational Research Journal --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Zygmunt Bauman is an emeritus professor of sociology at the University of Leeds. He is one of the

foremost commentators on the postmodern condition. His latest books include *Postmodernity and Its Discontents* and *The Globals and the Locals*.

Zygmunt Bauman's argument, put very simply, boils down to the fact that in the present consumerist society, the plight of the dispossessed is to be helpless spectators of other people's party, and to be made to experience the humiliating gap between themselves and the successful: the big spenders. Not so long ago the Protestant "work ethic" was the basis of capitalist societies. It's within the living memory of many older people in the UK. In the 1950s real unemployment in the UK was below the half million mark, and it was an accepted objective of government to keep it that way. As UK Prime Minister Harold Macmillan famously put it: "You've never had it so good." He was right. Before 1939 unemployment, along with the weather, was regarded as beyond the reach of governments. The post-war consensus changed all that, and full employment lasted into the early 1970s. The unemployed were a small minority. The long-term unemployed were an even smaller minority. Then came Margaret Thatcher, globalisation, and massive unemployment. Previously safe employment in industry was destroyed. The idea of "jobs for life" was finished. Welcome to the new insecurity. The power of unions to protect employees was broken, and it was 'open season' on the welfare state and the public sector. In parallel, changes from broadly redistributive taxes on income to regressive taxes like VAT - and a growing range of stealth taxes - fuelled the widening gap between rich and poor. The rich now come from the money markets and banking, and they are joined by a new elite from the media, entertainment and sport. Globalisation - you could call it 'Murdochisation' - injected huge sums into the once-upon-a-time "working man's" sport of soccer, and it did not stop there. Overnight the new mega-rich flaunted their affluence, and became objects of both veneration and envy. Work appears to be but a small part of the lives of the new elite: conspicuous consumption appears to be all. The "work ethic" suddenly looks dowdy and old fashioned, rather like the sad pit villages left by Thatcher's defeat of the miners, or those Stalinist tower blocks from the sixties. They are archeological remnants from only yesterday. Bauman describes the tensions at the heart of the consumer paradise: "Boredom is one complaint the consumer world has no room for and the consumer culture has set out to eradicate it ... To alleviate boredom one needs money - a great deal of money - if one wishes to stave off the spectre of boredom once and for all, to reach the state of happiness." But, as Bauman perceptively tells us, happiness is not a state of mind, it is a fleeting experience. But globalisation has taken care of that. Planned obsolescence ensures that just as last month's object of desire fails to bring about a state of happiness, this month's upgrade - with life-changing new features - is there waiting to be bought.

online, or at the new cathedral: your local shopping mall. The new connoisseurs, says Bauman, attain "their right to universal admiration." And where is this new society at its most successful? You've guessed it: post-Thatcher Britain. " ... the country widely acclaimed as the most astonishing 'economic success' of the western world, has been found also to be the site of poverty most abject among the affluent countries of the globe. ... Nearly a quarter of old people in Britain live in poverty, which is five times more than 'economically troubled' Italy and three times more than in 'falling behind' Ireland. A fifth of British children live poverty - twice as many as in Taiwan or Italy and six times as many as Finland. ... The wealthiest fifth are among the richest in Europe ... And so the 'subjective sense of insufficiency' (of the dispossessed) ... is aggravated by a double pressure of decreasing living standards ... reinforced rather than mitigated by economic growth in its present, deregulated, laissez-faire form." The problem, now, as Bauman makes clear, is that this society no longer needs a "reserve army of labour" - that has been exported - now, when there is a "downturn" in the economy, politicians call for a 'consumer-led' recovery. In this, the poor can play no part. "And so, for the first time in recorded history the poor are now purely and simply a worry and a nuisance. ... In a world populated by consumers there is no room for a welfare state ... what used to be a sensible investment now looks like ... an unjustifiable waste of taxpayers' money." So we reach the point where, as the author rightly points out, "poverty is, first and foremost, perhaps solely, the question of law and order." We are (in the UK), as he implies, only a few steps away from the Germany of the 1930s. It is a sobering realisation. The hedonist party effectively stops us from asking more fundamental questions, such as: why does society no longer put itself in question at all? If, as the author suggests, our arrangements are arbitrary, why can we no longer even consider changing them? History shows that winners release their grip on power only with the greatest reluctance. As would be the case with a solution he offers for consideration: Claus Offe's idea of decoupling income from work. In what sounds something like Milton Friedman's Negative Income Tax, the idea's main problem is that it would come up against huge opposition from those funding it: the people who might have to cut down on their consumption. As Margaret Thatcher put it: "There's no such thing as society".

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