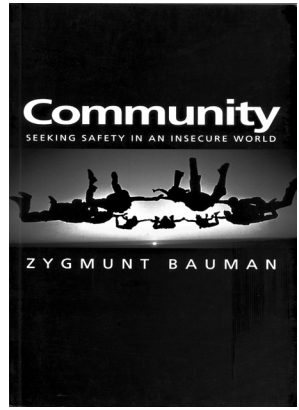
Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World. Bauman, Zygmunt. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2001. 168 pp. ISBN: 978-0745626352. $22.95.



Reviewed by Megan Mari
meganmarie.uic@gmail.com
Malcolm X College Faculty Member

In *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*, Zygmunt Bauman describes not what community is, but instead why the idea of community is so important in contemporary society. He argues that "community" conveys support, safety, warmth, and belonging because the world no longer provides these things in "self-sustained and self-reproducing" communities. His main premise is that community is romanticized—a feeling, more than a reality—because our material, economic, and social exchange is fleeting in postmodernity. We seek the security of community, Bauman argues, precisely because it is impossible to locate.

Yet we are still trying to draw borders, he argues, in problematic ways. Bauman cautions us against fighting to preserve the "community" of hegemonic culture, because cultural ideologies in late capitalism are preserved through individualism and disengagement. He challenges us to admit that individual rights to anything cannot and should not be fought for individually. It takes collectivity to gain control over the conditions in which we struggle—as well as over the definitions of community we allow to proliferate.

It is with definitions of community that Bauman's work speaks directly to the field of composition and literacy studies. What Bauman describes in this book is our "rhetorically" or "discursively" constructed definitions of community. The book details how the way we talk and write about communities influences our cultural imagination of communities' possibilities—including those whom they include and exclude. This would suggest to educators that while community literacy is important, we must be mindful of the ways that literacy practices also draw boundary lines between those who express a privileged literacy and those against which that privilege is defined.

In order to make his arguments, Bauman briefly historicizes past attempts at community building in order to "take stock of the chances and the dangers which solutions

proposed and tried have had in store" (5). His approach is rooted in a postmodern/Marxian ethics designed to fight against the disengagement taking place by the global elite. Bauman calls this disengagement the "succession of the successful"—the state that those with capital don't need, nor can be burdened with, community in order to maintain that capital and its "annihilation of space by time."[1] While there is often a slippage in Bauman's reference to community as a concept versus community as its material embodiment, his description of how the two entities generate one another historically is nonetheless compelling.

Bauman starts by using the myth of Tantalus and how his quest for actualization of knowledge leads him to eternal distress. Bauman extrapolates from Tantalus that happiness is maintained only when one can remain blissfully ignorant of the ideologies at work in culture. As this myth relates to community, the pedagogical purpose for Bauman and educators in composition and literacy is that community will remain reverenced and unquestioned as long as it operates from "common understanding" which comes "naturally." Thus, deconstructing how and why those common understandings arise is key to seeing how communities materially operate around us.

Bauman then takes us on a historical tour of "community," from the genesis of modernity through today. The difficulty of community today, he argues, is that the elite—the economically flexible winners of globalization—have become disengaged or disassociated from community and no longer need to participate in community. While "sameness" is desired in order to stay culturally chic, this is a reinforcement of ideology only, and it necessarily requires excluding those who are not cosmopolitan enough. The elite have no reverence for place, nor qualms about rugged individualism. Unlike their grandparents who experienced the Great Depression and World Wars together, the new elite have gained their success individually and thus have no idea about, or interest in, those who must rely on community for subsistence.

This phenomenon happens because "rights to recognition" and "rights to redistribution" are being separated. Echoing Nancy Fraser, Bauman claims that rights of wealth and identity are being allocated unequally which jeopardizes certain groups without their consent. One agent of this disparity is multiculturalism. Bauman argues that multiculturalism provides a "communal assertion of cultural distinctiveness" while bringing little comfort to those who are at the mercy of an unequal distribution of resources. When multiculturalism is put forth as a global ethic, or taken as the manifesto of reconciliation, "the new realities are surrendered to, not challenged and not contested" (133). Put simply, multiculturalism is not empowering for many who fall within its distinction. Likewise, multiculturalism requires being "with" some people but necessarily not "for" others, so it will never wholly solve the problem of distributive difference. Only work at the local level will.

While Bauman's work does not usually enter into conversations about community and literacy, it does isolate a commonly used disciplinary term and perform a useful academic service for compositionists. As such, Bauman offers four important challenges to our field:

- To fight disengagement and not shirk away from social change
- To deconstruct commonly used terms in order to see the stakeholders they implicate

- To take seriously how, and around what, the borders of our communities are drawn, and
- To work for change at the material and local level

Bauman concludes by offering "modern intellectuals" the chance to celebrate community where it is, all the while being mindful where community is missing. Once we realize that our lives are interdependent—both locally and globally—we can begin to care and struggle together. And this, he suggests, is the best hope we have for actualizing community as a reality.

Notes

[1] See Marx, *Grundrisse* 1857: the "in order to maintain that capital can annihilate space with time" describes capital's propensity to conquer anything in its path that would stop the flow of capital.

Works Cited

Marx, Karl. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. Penguin Classics, 1993.