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Editors' Introduction: Being a Sociologist

“Without this strange intoxication, ridiculed by every outsider; without this passion, this ‘thousands of years must pass before you enter into life and thousands more wait in silence’—according to whether or not you succeed in making this conjecture; without this, you have *no* calling for science and should do something else. For nothing is worthy of man as man unless he can pursue it with passionate devotion”

Max Weber, ‘Science as a Vocation’

One of the great discoveries of C. Wright Mills’ still essential discussion in *The Sociological Imagination* is that there are two positions that can be adopted towards this particular mode of knowledge production called ‘sociology’ (Mills 1959). It is possible to ‘do’ sociology and, in so doing, to orient one’s self and one’s work according to the dictates of the institutionalised discipline with its politics of power and prestige. According to this position of ‘doing’ sociology, it is important to be obviously well read of the disciplinary canon and to play a part in internal debates and disputes. Zygmunt Bauman has always been rather ill equipped to ‘do’ sociology. He has commented that he never really learnt “respect and reverence for ‘canonical texts’” and wonders whether this has been an “original sin in the eyes of the model academic.” According to Bauman, “I was never any good in the art of exegesis, in ‘sticking to the letter’ of hallowed texts, and it barred me from ever being admitted to any school or caucus. In any established company I was out of place” (Bauman in Bauman & Tester 2001: 23).

Aspects of this being out of place can be found in the conversation with Bauman that is contained in this volume (and which is the only time to date that Bauman has reflected on the Polish context of his early work), as well as in the paper by *Keith Tester* which shows how he was at once considered and forced to be ‘out of place’ in the ‘established company’ of English academia when he arrived in the United Kingdom in the early 1970s. This ‘out of placeness’ continued for many years in the UK. From the perspective of the present, when Bauman’s work is so widely known, it is difficult to remember how unknown he was before he started to write about postmodernity and the Holocaust. Let us provide a few anecdotes: in 1985, when Keith Tester told a very solid and established British sociologist that he was going to study for a PhD under Zygmunt Bauman’s supervision, the sociologist remarked that he “had vaguely

heard of Bullman (*sic*).” Equally, when Michael Hviid Jacobsen was a visiting scholar in the US a few years back, nobody at this rather esteemed sociology department had ever come across the name Zygmunt Bauman nor any of his books for that matter. Many, however, were later thrilled when reading his books and discovering his unique sociological imagination.

Zygmunt Bauman does not ‘do’ sociology, and indeed it is probably no exaggeration to say that from the point of view of the conventions of this position in relation to the discipline he is actually a very poor sociologist. It is indeed the case that he rarely engages in exegesis (although he can if he chooses to, and can to good effect, as his *Hermeneutics and Social Science* reveals; Bauman 1978) and ‘canonical’ texts are simply ignored if they do not stimulate ideas. Bauman rarely if ever begins his book in the orthodox manner of providing a comprehensive literature review. But in the case of Bauman these failings are nothing less than the roots of the great success and provocation of his work. It might even be said, as *Tony Blackshaw* says in this collection, that Bauman is ‘too good for sociology.’ Bauman’s work is the pre-eminent exemplar of the second of position in relation to sociology that Mills uncovered almost half a century ago.

His work reflects a commitment to the *vocation of being a sociologist*. For Bauman, sociology is not just a job or a career; it is a way of life, and a mode of being in the world. It is nothing less than an enterprise ‘till death do us part.’ But what is this kind of sociology that is always in a condition of *being*, never decisively and finally *done*? Bauman identifies sociology as a ‘learned commentary’ that is intended to be “helpful to people struggling daily with the challenges of life.” This means that this kind of work can never be completed, and the sociologist can never rest in the confidence that at last the final word has been said. Indeed, being a sociologist means avoidance of the hubris that pretends that the last word can ever be said or ought even to be thought. To be a sociologist means *speaking* with others and waiting to hear what they have to say in return. It most certainly does not mean shouting or preaching at them without caring about their reactions and actions. To be a sociologist means to speak “to someone who has not only ears but also a mouth. When it starts, speech does not know where it will end: it takes its cues from others” (Bauman in Bauman & Tester 2001: 21). Thus, sociology is a mutually stimulating dialogue between the human world and academia, not an authoritative monologue. The aforementioned is an important quotation because it cuts to the heart of Zygmunt Bauman’s vocation of *being* a sociologist and, moreover, it explains why Bauman has become so important and valuable.

First, since Bauman does not ‘do’ sociology, his work never contains any of the arrogance that tends to go hand in hand with the conceit that the truth has at last been found. Bauman’s work is not a search for answers; rather it is about posing questions so that a discussion might start in which men and women might be able to begin to make different sense of their lives and, thus, life better lived with others. Indeed there is a continual suspicion of any claims that the truth has been found and therefore that there is no alternative but to do what the truth requires or what the possessor of the truth demands. Bauman’s work is radically and deliberately *incomplete*

and looks towards its readers to spin it out of the sphere of the author's intentions. This is because Bauman's work is built on the supposition that to be human is to be social and therefore if sociological work is going to have any human relevance whatsoever, it must be open to—and also open up—social encounters rather than delimit them through declarations of 'truth.' This social dimension of Bauman's sociology runs through *Peter Beilharz's* paper. To this extent, sociology is nothing less than utopian because it, in Milan Kundera's memorable phrase, constantly seeks to "crush the wall behind which something that 'always was there' hides." *Michael Hviid Jacobsen's* paper explores the continuity and resonance of utopianism in Bauman's work. Apart from containing certain utopian undercurrents, Bauman's sociology is also metaphorical—a topic explored in a paper by *Sophia Marshman* and *Michael Hviid Jacobsen*. Through his frequent use of metaphors, Bauman seeks to show us that the world is not necessarily what it seems and that it may be construed and depicted differently than what is made possible by most conventional sociological methodology. Also in this methodological connection, Bauman's sociology is different.

Second, Bauman's argument that sociology is a form of speech that "takes its cues from others" explains his extraordinary ability to pull great meaning from otherwise throwaway comments in newspapers or television, as well as his concern to respond to the events of his times. Given that sociology is a form of speech, and given that the speech is only going to be human if it inter-relates with others, it must be of its times in both form and content. And yet for that work to remain as *sociology* rather than journalism, it must also be guided by a resolute commitment to values that do not change along with a pair of shoes (to misquote Bertolt Brecht). As Bauman said in his Inaugural Lecture at the University of Leeds on 7 February 1972: "More than ever we must beware of falling into the traps of fashions which may well prove much more detrimental than the malaise they claim to cure. Well, our vocation, after all these unromantic years, may become again a testfield of courage, consistency, and loyalty to human values" (Bauman 1972: 203; for an example of Bauman trying to rescue human values from fashion, see his essays on postmodernity and sociology in Bauman 1992). It is perhaps worth wondering whether his abandonment of the term 'postmodernity' in favour of 'liquid modernity' can be read as a realisation that, at least sometimes, fashion beats human values. But then, as the disappearance of the term postmodernity from academic debate might also show, in the end human values will always win out so long as they are never abdicated or ignored. On Bauman's understanding of time, historical continuity and mutability, *Elzbieta Tarkowska* has written a paper for this special issue.

In a sentence, the work and vocation of Zygmunt Bauman shows that more important than merely 'doing' sociology is *being a sociologist*. The status that Bauman has been accorded also shows that if that vocation is practised in terms of a firm commitment to human values, then the work will become a rich and respected partner in the social speech upon which it commentates, and from which it takes its cues. Put another way, the fact of the existence of this special edition of *Polish Sociological Review*, and the variety of the positions from which the contributors have written,

is a testimony of the sheer humanity of Bauman's work and of what it means to *be a sociologist*.

This special edition of *Polish Sociological Review* on Zygmunt Bauman is dedicated to the loving memory of one of his close friends, sociologist Marian Kempny, who passed away unexpectedly during the preparation of this issue.

References

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