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Bauman Before Exile—A Conversation with Zygmunt Bauman*

(Conducted by Keith Tester (KT) & Michael Hviid Jacobsen (MHJ) in autumn 2004)

KT & MHJ: *We would like to begin with a simple question. This interview focuses on your early English language work, for the most part the essays that were published while you were still based in Poland. Quite simply, why was so much Polish sociology published in English (for example the* Polish Sociological Bulletin *was an English language publication)?*

ZB: Every sociologist who thinks and writes in a 'non-global' language has been confronted with the question of publishing in English. It has been a question of to-be-or-not-to-be in a profession that has been global since its inception. Nor is it any wonder that, in most non-English speaking countries, local sociologists lean over backwards to put together a periodical that makes their works available, and hopefully known, to the speakers of the global-language. In addition to the 'Catch 22' quandary in which all aspiring authors are everywhere cast (you won't find a publisher unless you have made yourself a name, but you will not make a name unless you find a publisher), a foreign-language writer can hardly count on English publishers, because they are reluctant to invest money in translating the works of unknowns who are also blighted with unpronounceable names. I could tell a lot of stories about this. I have tried hard but mostly unsuccessfully to convince quite a few publishers to take a risk with some of the remarkable *oeuvres* of my Polish colleagues.

But I doubt whether Polish sociologists are any more keen or successful than others in getting their work published in English. The most profound and precious, and particularly the most original, works of the greatest Polish sociologists, including my masters, are still waiting in vain to be made available to a global readership—a situation more harmful to the latter than to the first, by the way, since Poland is a large country with its own wide, avid, critical and grateful readership, and almost all Polish sociologists are fluent in English.

As to myself, the list of my Polish-language publications of the period covered by your bibliographical interest is not just longer, but it includes the positions which were

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central to my preoccupations of the time and which, retrospectively, also appear to be the turning-points of my intellectual itinerary (works like *On the Need of a Sociology of the Party* ["O Potrzebie socjologii partii"], *Essay on Bureaucracy*, *On the Profession of Sociologist* ["O zawodzie socjologa"] or *Visions of Human Worlds* [*Wizje ludzkiego świata*]). Those positions derived their inspiration and whatever meaning and significance they had from trials and tribulations that were internal and specific to Poland. They were too deeply and tightly enmeshed in Poland's own (and at that time still mostly subterranean) struggles, to be of any interest, or indeed to be comprehensible, to native English readers.

KT & MHJ: *You say that, amongst others especially two Polish-language publications*, On the Profession of Sociologist *and* Visions of Human Worlds, *were essential to the emergence of your position. Could you say something about what they argued? What does the profession of sociologist require, and what are the 'visions' of the human world to which you referred?*

ZB: A word of warning is in order: Contrary to a common opinion which social scientists tend to endorse, much of our thinking, and perhaps the most seminal part of it, is not 'targeted,' not a 'purposeful activity.' From my own experience, at least, I am rather inclined to endorse Adorno's resigned conclusion that we think just because we can't not. The 'objective' of mental efforts usually comes as an afterthought, a codicil that is added later. I would be cavalier with the truth were I to say that I undertook the works you've mentioned with the intention of elaborating a position. The 'in order to' at the time I wrote them up was not the same 'in order to' as the one which later ruminations, and your question, have retrospectively imputed.

Trying hard to recall the 'motivational causes' that prompted and guided my search, or rather to fill blank spots in memory while calling imagination to help, I believe I need to start from remembering the situational setting. After a few years of exile, sociology was let back into the post-Stalinist era through the back door. No identity card was issued, no clear status accorded, let alone assured. Sociology lived in a sort of 'suspended animation' that could be terminated at any moment on any pretext, or without one. It was without doubt an unpleasant situation to be in, and yet with the benefit of hindsight I suspect that such a state of guilt without a charge, of under-definition unconstrained by any canon, unhampered by a 'paradigm,' was in a way a blessing, even if in a very unprepossessing disguise. It spurred critical self-scrutiny that drew into focus the 'self-evidences,' and so offered a closer look at a host of unspoken assumptions which under more enjoyable circumstances gladly would have been left in the shade and in silence. We went on asking ourselves about the fundamentals about which our 'Western' colleagues did not much worry (at least not in the fifties living under the protective wings of Parsonian self-confidence!) and were genuinely puzzled when challenged to make explicit and analyse.

In Poland, I was just one among many aspiring sociologists who had first to find the address at which the new home was located and to scan its interior to make it fit

for decent, sensible living. The two pieces you ask about were inspired by (indeed, were a logical consequence of) that preoccupation.

The first piece reported the search for location. Sociology collects the information about whatever follows from the fact that humans are not loners but live in company and willy-nilly influence each other's choices and the condition under which choices are made, as well as their plausible range. In other words, sociology collects the information about the difference that is made by living 'in society.' That much was commonly agreed. The rest, though, was 'essentially contested' and called for taking sides. Some of the contests called for taking sides more imperatively and urgently than others. One such contention was the main theme of the essay that was dedicated to unpacking the sociological profession, a somewhat updated and domesticated version of Weber's *Beruf*. When working on it, I thought, mistakenly as it later transpired, that I was trying to resolve a thoroughly local and hopefully temporary, Polish (or the 'socialist camp's') dilemma, which arose from the authoritarian nature of the political regime and from its bid to manage everything and eliminate the un-manageable. It did not occur to me that a life-long position would emerge on that occasion. I just did not realize at the time that the local Polish experience was but an extreme and particularly festering specimen of a contention that in the plight of sociology was neither incidental nor local. I did not realise then that it was precisely the extremity of the Polish case that made it possible to perceive a universal dilemma more clearly than elsewhere.

To start with, Polish state authorities were quite outspoken about matters in which other, non- or less-authoritarian, powers preferred to move in a roundabout, underhand and a rather inconspicuous fashion, while careful not to leave too many foot- and finger-prints. The Polish rulers left little doubt that what they wished sociologists to do (and the only sociological undertaking they would tolerate) was to help them make the obstreperous obedient and the obedient more docile yet, to convince the unconvinced and make the convinced immune to doubts. In short (to resort to Weber's terms again) they wished the 'really existing' *Herrschaft* to rebound, just as its ideal type did in theory, in the unconditional *Disziplin* of the subjects. Having made '*value* rationality' their un-shared prerogative, they intended to use sociologists to amend and enhance '*instrumental* rationality.' They wished to know the rules guiding human behaviour, in order to manipulate the setting in which the behavioural choices were made—so that only such choices as agreed with intended effects would be taken, while other choices either would be made irrelevant or effectively marginalised. They most gladly have accommodated sociology in its 'behavioural science' version, a version made to the measure of panoptical power and the 'Fordist factory,' and at the time the dominant and still gathering tendency in Western, and particularly American, sociology.

I do not pretend that I understood all that when the essay on the profession of sociologist, focused as it was on the apparently local and hopefully transient worry, gestated. But what I did articulate and clarify for myself in the course of writing helped me later in grasping the nature of the contradictory pressures under which all sociological work, under any kind of regime, is conducted—and the fundamental

choices no sociologist, wherever placed, can avoid. I believe now that it was then that the vision of sociology as an essentially critical activity took shape in my mind (a model that was more fully articulated only ten years later in the extended essay *Towards a Critical Sociology* that was written in parallel with *Socialism: The Active Utopia*).

That was the only lasting benefit and saving grace of the effort invested in the writing. Otherwise, the essay was fatally misconceived. It reads now mostly as a testimony of the shameful naivety of its author. The essay was an invitation to the rulers to join in a discussion, and an attempt to explain that they would benefit from opening themselves to argument. Something along the line of 'what good government needs is a watchful and imaginative opposition' couched in terms that the rulers would (so I hoped…) understand and find acceptable. The idea, of course, was stillborn, only I was not aware of that at the time. I believed that the inanities of the country's rulers and the ineptitudes of the 'system' they called into life were more like 'unanticipated consequences' than deliberate moves, and arose from errors of judgment, not from design. I thought that the rulers might be talked to and persuaded to listen, engage in a debate, argued with, and in the end—who knows?—converted to a different, better model of the state and a strategy of running it. A hiccup of the 'enlightened despot' dream, I suppose. Well, the rulers made no mistake. They just behaved true to form. It was I who was mistaken, grossly and totally. In the quasi-totalitarian quasi-Soviet regime, sociology as I saw it could only be an alien body and treated as the enemy's fifth column. And the rulers understood it before I did. It took me a few more years to catch up with their wisdom.

The core of the *Visions* book—a sort of an inventory of the house contents—was provided by three extended studies: of Talcott Parsons, C. Wright Mills and Antonio Gramsci. In the first study, I attempted to reconstruct the vision of society as seen from the managers' offices and a model of sociology made to the measure of managerial reason and management tasks (Parsons' work was a most conspicuous and authoritative exemplification of both). In the second, following Mills's suggestions and example, I tried to develop an alternative programme, as well as a strategy of resistance to the advances of the 'administered society.' I guess that between themselves those two studies, of Parsons and Mills, prepared a framework for the opposition, explored in the *Towards a Critical Sociology* book, between the 'science of unfreedom' of the kind represented most spectacularly by what I dubbed 'Durksonian' sociology, and a sociology bent on enhancing the range of freedom. Finally, in the course of the third study, a distance from the concepts most common in the sociological discourse of the time (like system, totality, structure, determination, etc.) was acquired and the broad outlines were drawn of the concept of 'social reality' as a continuous and infinite, open-ended interplay between human pursuits and countervailing social pressures experienced as 'constraints.' I suppose that between themselves the studies of Mills and of Gramsci offered me basic insights from which the programme of 'sociological hermeneutics' soon afterwards emerged. Or at least so it seems to me after all these years.

All in all, I'd describe the two works you've mentioned as 'vanishing mediators.' They were extremely helpful, indeed indispensable, even if coarse, clumsy and awk-

ward. Their role was to ease me (or push me?) into a realm of thought where their continued services were no longer needed. They, so to speak, worked themselves out of a job, and by doing that they proved their importance. In this lie their sole, though formidable, merit.

KT & MHJ: *You have said before that you took up sociology because you wanted to play a part in rebuilding Poland in terms of justice, equality and an overcoming of the humiliation of poverty (see Bauman & Tester (2001):* Conversations with Zygmunt Bauman*). Was sociology allowed to play such a role in Poland in the 1950s and 1960s?*

ZB: Allowed it was not, but it struggled to gain such a role and in the end it did play such a role, though not at all how I naïvely and gullibly expected it to. Polish sociology (which was resurrected and recovering its public voice after a brief numbness during the Stalinist period, which was considerably shorter in Poland than in other countries under Soviet influence) offered one of the very few independent standpoints and narratives that was available in a country where independent thought was fast becoming a rarity, and its chances of being heard even fewer and farther between. Sociology whispered an alternative to the story that was officially shouted, and so it became an element, however slight and insistently marginalised, of plurality in a forcefully 'homogenised' society. And it had to stand up against the new injustices and inequalities that the new powers spawned in profusion in the course of extirpating the old ones. The labours of sociology exemplified the resolution of the most thoughtful and conscientious part of Polish intellectuals to cooperate with the new powers in their good deeds, in lifting the country from its centuries-long backwardness, while at the same time watching carefully and vigilantly the hands of the power-holders.

KT & MHJ: *In the English-language material that was published before 1968, it looks as if it took some time for your own voice to emerge. Some of the very earliest English-language pieces seem to be almost managerial thanks to their emphasis on statistics, graphs and so on. The present-day reader has to look very hard to find any critical dimension in these pieces. It took a while for these essays to reflect the concerns of a more obviously critical sociology. Do these pieces accurately reflect your themes and concerns, and the changes that they underwent?*

ZB: 'Managerial vein'… Stanislaw Ossowski and Julian Hochfeld, the two teachers to whom I owe most of what I learned at Warsaw University, were deeply suspicious of the cognitive value, and even more of the cultural impact, of the prevalent managerially oriented model of a thoroughly quantified and statistics-obsessed sociology. I guess that suspicion is an irremovable and indelible part of their bequest, to which as much as I could I tried to remain faithful from the start, and have carried on trying throughout my own work. At the same time, though, Ossowski and Hochfeld were only too aware that selling to the communist managers the kind of sociology that they preferred—a critical and 'humanist' kind of sociology—would be a tall order, if not a lost cause and a waste of time. If any argument stood a chance of reaching the Polish rulers'

ears, it could only be a plea that emphasised the services that the sort of sociology imported from the U.S.A. promised to render to the managers. Sociology could only be 'sold' to the powers-that-be as a handmaiden of management, as a heads-counting enterprise and a briefing for those who sought conformity to their orders and were bent on making society obedient and pliant.

Such a setting was conducive to schizophrenic responses. Ossowski's thoughtful yet tormented book on the peculiarities of social sciences was a vivid testimony of that. In other words, the two accents which you rightly spotted were not successive, but simultaneous. They coexisted, since they *had* to coexist, in an uneasy alliance rent with mutual suspicions.

KT & MHJ: *Your critical sociology was part of the intellectual ferment that was going on under the dull surface of Gomulka's 'little stabilisation.' Reading histories of this period creates the impression that sociology was a key player in a very broad oppositional culture that included intellectuals, journalists, filmmakers, and novelists. Could you say something about the circles in which your critical sociology circulated and participated?*

ZB: The 'milieu' you are asking about was far from unified. There were all possible degrees of opposition, and people differed as to how far they were prepared to go in manifesting their resistance, as well as in what kind of conduct would best serve the purpose. Not that the differences mattered much in the end. I remember a little play *The Hand*, by the outstanding Polish dramatist Slawomir Mrożek, in which a huge hand stretched from the wings of the stage and beckoned to two hapless little men to take off their clothes, bit by bit. One man meekly followed successive orders, the other loudly protested against each order, all the time furiously quarrelling between themselves about the respective virtues of their responses. Both men ended up naked. I remember our sad but sober admission that the play flawlessly assessed the practical value of our strategic *querelle*.

But you are right in principle. The various acts of resistance somehow added together and complemented each other in keeping the spirit of dissent alive and the fire of independent thought smouldering, even if the actors found it difficult to reconcile their programmes and their tactics. All the same, there was no 'centre' which all the scattered and diffuse, and often ephemeral, circles ('condensations') of opposition would have recognised as such. This was all the more the situation because the dividing lines were constantly redrawn, depending on the issues that were currently on the agenda. However, in the 1960s a 'hard core' of people with the highest and a seldom questioned moral authority crystallised around a few persons of outstanding courage and determination—writers like the poet Antoni Słonimski, academics like Leszek Kołakowski, or just indomitable 'professional revolutionaries' like Jan Józef Lipski, a man who was always ready for the fray and always in the frontline of the battle.

In all, though, the 'resistance movement' was too diverse, too protean and complex, to be given justice in a short conversation like ours. Much has been written about it, but the multi-volume monograph that it deserves remains to be written.

KT & MHJ: *During the period roughly 1963–1968 your work often focused on questions of youth and education. Why?*

ZB: Alongside other things and perhaps more than anything else, watching the hands of power meant finding out whether and how life-attitudes and characters had changed or were changing (to the better, of course—more ethical, more solidary) in the result of the 'socialist transformations.' After all, a 'new man,' feeling at one with the community of citizens, friendly and confident, trustworthy and trustful, free from fears, from suspicion towards others and from humiliating docility, was allegedly the ultimate purpose of those transformations and the test of their success or failure. And where was the answer to be found, if not in the younger generation, born and grown in the new post-transformation social setting?

Looking back, I suspect that the outcome of our research into the attitudes of Polish youth marked, perhaps not the first, but certainly the most profound, of my disenchantments. What I found was not what I and other 'believers' like me had hoped to find. What I found was a mixture of downright conservative and parochial, petty bourgeois life ideals, with alarming symptoms of an emerging cult of shrewdness, craftiness and 'getting by.' There was little trace of socialist values. The new social setting was not working. Most certainly, it did not turn out to be the school of humanity whose prospect attracted so many, myself including, to the idea of socialism. The task was now to find out what stopped it from becoming such a school.

KT & MHJ: *After your exile, you must have been subjected to a number of pressures from the West to become a 'dissident' who would blow the whistle on the truth of actually existing socialism. But you never did this. You published some essays on Polish communism, but they are marked by a dialectic of sociological critique and the maintenance of socialist commitment. Did it ever feel like your work was in danger of being 'filed away' as 'dissident'?*

ZB: After leaving Poland I was inundated with offers to join all sorts of 'sovietologist' establishments, and with invitations to write for their journals. I was one of the 'Warsaw six'—the 'dissident' professors of Warsaw University who were demoted and expelled on 25 March 1968 on the accusation of fomenting student riots—and the case was widely publicised in the Western press. I refused the offers. I had no intention of living the second half of my life off the first (as things looked then, I could live quietly and happily ever after out of my 'dissident past'). I wanted to remain what I was, a sociologist, and re-establishing myself in that role in new surroundings was to me a matter of personal honesty and self-respect. Most importantly, were I to have succumbed to the seductive offers and recycled myself into a 'sovietologist,' I certainly would have found myself out of place among the hosts (and very soon have been found to be out of place by them), as much as I found myself (and was found) to be out of place in 'really existing socialism.' Being 'anti-Communist' was certainly not enough to make us feel comfortable in each other's company.

KT & MHJ: *You arrived at Leeds in 1971. How congenial were British intellectual—and specifically sociological—debates to your concerns? You arrived in the days of student radicalism. Did all of this seem to be continuous with what you had discussed in Poland, or did it all seem like middle-class self-indulgence?*

ZB: Beware similarities. They are treacherous. They easily misdirect and lead astray. From my new English friends, fresh from the battlefields of student rebellion, some full of nostalgia and some blowing on their burnt fingers, I heard exhilarating stories of a protracted, joyful and thoroughly enjoyable youth carnival, a Woodstock *avant le letter*. It struck me right away that when Warsaw students took to the streets, no one laughed.

Edward P. Thompson, who was then the guru of the British 'intellectual left,' in his devastating newspaper review of my *Between Class and Elite*, accused me, together with the other exiled 'dissidents,' of betraying the Western Left's expectations. At the time, Thompson believed that the British proletarian-socialist revolution was just around the next corner, while in the book I presented my 'sociological deduction' that the British labour movement had ran its course and gone as far as it was capable of going, a prognosis that time was to corroborate. Thompson's ire was directed mostly against Leszek Kołakowski, who indeed, instead of offering the hoped for shot in the arm to the emergent British 'New Left,' moved promptly to the right of the political spectrum. I was the 'collateral casualty,' so to speak, of Thompson's main frustration. I must admit, though, that his judgment was not completely erroneous. I did not, and could not make myself, share in the illusions of the 'New Left.' I was a recent witness to the testing of those illusions, and to their failure of the test.

I remember that Perry Anderson castigated E. P. Thompson for sticking to the empirical and shunning theory. For me, however, both antagonists suffered of an excess of theory, and of a kind of theory that was clearly not my cup of tea (soon afterwards the majority of the 'New Left' was enthusiastically in embracing the worst variety of the excess in the form of Althusserian dogmatism). Their differences notwithstanding, they were too detached from the messy and unclean realities of human life. They seemed to me to be equally 'intellectualistic' (a rather morbid, most incapacitating disease that may befall the intellectual). Years later, Richard Rorty poignantly articulated for me my vague resentment of that time, when he called on the intellectuals of the Left to speak more about money and less about stigma, complexes and political correctness.

KT & MHJ: *Is there anything that you continue to carry with you from the early essays?*

ZB: Myself, warts and all. Or at least, this is what I would wish to be true.