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## Intellectual Immigration and the English Idiom (Or, a Tale of Bustards and Eagles)

For D. M.

*Abstract:* Although English intellectual life frequently operates according to a story that stresses openness to ideals and thinkers from abroad, it is also the case that not all arrivals are equally welcomed. That was the fate that befell Zygmunt Bauman when he took up the Chair of Sociology at the University of Leeds in 1971. His first publication after his arrival was the English language translation of *Klasa—ruch—elita: Studium socjologiczne dziejów angielskiego ruchu robotniczego*, which had been originally published in Poland in 1960. The book was subjected to a hostile review by E. P. Thompson, and this paper seeks to understand the stakes of the attack. It is contended that Thompson's review, along with his *Open Letter to Leszek Kołakowski*, reflects quite how open English intellectual life can be. This essay consequently looks in two directions; it is a specific analysis of the early English reception of Bauman's work and also more generally a study of the parameters of the English intellectual idiom.

*Keywords:* immigration; idiom; Englishness; Thompson; Kołakowski

### Introduction

Bryan Turner suggests that: "If England has been a nation of shopkeepers, then its own intellectuals have been passive traders between the old and new world" (Turner 1992: 183). This is a role that has been enhanced and enriched by the arrival of immigrant intellectuals into the worlds in which English intellectuals confidently operate (and often those are rather restricted worlds; Turner notes that the English are not renowned for their skills with 'foreign' languages), and in the case of sociology and to a lesser degree cultural studies, this has enabled the 'English intellectual scene' to be "a conduit between Europe and the global English-speaking community, but this role of intellectual mediation has been combined with a pronounced involvement with and focus on national English questions" (Turner 1992: 205).

Yet it is not a conduit that is without blockages or filtering mechanisms. Very often the story of the conduit is told in terms of the immigration of intellectuals who

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have been forced to leave their countries of origin, and who add something previously unimagined—or only glimpsed uncomprehendingly—by the flows of English intellectual life. That is indeed what numerous immigrant intellectuals have managed to do, but what this story neglects are the pressures and relationships that these newcomers have to negotiate in order to achieve that status. Such a neglect is rather illustrated by Turner when, in the quotation at the beginning of this paper, he says that English intellectuals are ‘passive traders.’ According to this story then, English intellectuals do nothing other than make themselves and their institutions open to what comes to them from outside. Of themselves, these intellectuals are possessed of no active force, and they add nothing to what they trade other than the gift of a global language and a particular national focus (in terms of which it might well be discovered that the intellectuals and ideas from elsewhere need to be ‘refined’). To put it in the commercial terms that are invited by the ‘trader’ analogy, according to this story English intellectuals add no value to what it is that they trade. They are absolutely honest, just like their shopkeepers. However, such a universal openness does not seem to be terribly likely, and it actually serves to diminish English contributions to global intellectual debates (although it has to be admitted that writers who compile lists of world-class English sociologists, for example, tend to be able to complete their task relatively quickly; as one instance, see Kumar 2001: 53). Moreover, the ideas which the English trade are not abstractions. Historically and frequently they have been brought to England by immigrant intellectuals, and whatever happens to their ideas, these immigrants have often had to learn the lesson that the English might not be the ‘passive traders’ they believe themselves to be.

The point is that the ‘English intellectual scene’ that is confronted by the immigrants—and which is inhabited by the locals who purportedly welcome the immigrants—is a pre-existing and already-structured field that has its own distinctive practices, institutionalizations and power relationships. This pre-existing and already-structured field positions both immigrants and natives into distinct categories that are then subjected to certain practices of assimilation or exclusion, welcome or disdain. In particular, the immigrants are positioned as *outsiders* precisely because they do not occupy the positions of power and control that are monopolized by the natives (nor indeed share their national focus of concern and relatively limited linguistic competence). The natives consequently become able to identify themselves as the ‘insiders’ who possess the legitimacy to define what is and is not right and appropriate in this specific field. In this regard, intellectual immigrants are not merely confronted with the problem of reconstructing life in a new country. They are also confronted with the problem of negotiating acts of positioning that might well deny them the status of being a legitimate intellectual. In short, whether or not an intellectual immigrant becomes part of the flow of the cultural conduit is the result of social, cultural and political struggles, and not of some mythical hand of welcome that is extended come what may by ‘passive traders.’

A rather domesticated, and for that matter extremely English, expression of these struggles over positioning can be found in the stories of the personal peculiarities of those who never gave up on their status as either immigrant or intellectual. These

stories are not necessarily as innocent and heart-warming as they might appear at first glance. Although they can certainly convey a personal affection and respect for the immigrant when they are told in terms of friendship and admiration, when told by less caring voices they can also be taken to be indications that this particular person is not 'like us.' This ambivalence runs very powerfully through a number of the published memories of Norbert Elias, an immigrant whose positioning as outsider by the 'English intellectual scene' never was, and now never will be, overcome. (This is almost certainly one of the main causes of the ignorance with which most English sociologists confront Elias's work, and one of the reasons why the 'Leicester School' of sociology that Elias helped to establish was eventually given up by the very institutions that ought to have valued it, see Rojek 2004). The point is that Elias never denied the vocation with which he came to England, and so he never allowed himself to be positioned in a way that confirmed the legitimacy of the 'English intellectual scene' to classify. Consequently, he was excluded, ignored and made exotic. After all, in order to be carried through the flow of a conduit, one must allow one's self to become part of the general mix and have one's protective edges eroded away. This is something that Elias never permitted.

Another story about an intellectual immigrant which contains all of the ambivalences of that positioning can be found in the case of Dennis Smith's definition of Zygmunt Bauman as a 'successful outsider.' He says that Bauman is, "a 'successful outsider' who knows the art of belonging and the value of commitment" (Smith 1998: 39). Bauman's books "deploy both his brilliance and his 'outsider-ness,'" and they are worth reading because the "outsider ... has privileged insight into the defining boundaries of our world and can help shape a discourse which allows communication across those boundaries" (Smith 1998: 40–41). Although there is absolutely no doubt that Smith wrote in order to praise not bury Bauman, and apart from making 'outsider-ness' seem to be an exceptionally good career move, Smith's comments neglect to raise the possibility that perhaps the 'boundaries' are so practically embedded, institutionalized and defended that communication across them is not possible nor, indeed, considered legitimate by those on the 'inside.' Wherever there is a boundary there is also a centre, where things are at the hardest and most well-defended. Smith positions Bauman as an 'outsider,' without appreciating that to be an outsider is to be excluded. It is an *objective* condition, attributed to others by the agents that control definitional power, and not merely (if at all, except when it is chosen from a position of safety and without risk), a *subjective* achievement. (There is little or no evidence that Bauman ever chose to be an 'outsider,' see Bauman & Tester 2001). Meanwhile, Richard Kilminster and Ian Varcoe have commented that Bauman "has never become involved to any great extent with the British sociology establishment. Nor has he, as far as we know, become a member of any established British institution" (Kilminster & Varcoe 1998: 26). Although this observation is valid, it hides the possibility that this lack of membership might not have been merely a subjective choice, whereby Bauman did not want to join because he was not interested, but might also have been the result of being positioned as an outsider, so that Bauman was not able to join because these institutions were not welcoming. (It must be stressed that those

comments ought not to be read as attributions of intentionality to Bauman. I have neither knowledge of—nor indeed interest in—Bauman’s membership or otherwise of institutions; I am trying to make an analytical and not a biographical point).

This paper seeks to raise questions about the processes of positioning through which the ‘English intellectual scene’ acts as a conduit for the coming together of different intellectual traditions and approaches, and it seeks to explore whether the English intellectual is always a ‘passive trader.’ The way into a discussion of these issues is a case study of the reception of a book which Zygmunt Bauman published shortly after his immigration. As such, this paper can be approached as a contribution to the sociological understanding of the sociological work of Zygmunt Bauman. To this extent the paper contains an interpretation of some of the themes that are raised by a couple of the very few published reviews of the first book of Bauman’s to be published after his arrival in England, *Between Class and Elite* (Bauman 1972). The aim is not to rescue the book from the reviews, which were extremely critical, but instead it is to uncover some of the issues that they raise about intellectual immigration and the ‘insiders.’ This leads into the *general* import of the paper, which is its concern to explore questions about the relationship of immigrant intellectual work to the ‘English intellectual scene’ and, specifically, to an *English Idiom*.

### Bauman’s Reception

Bauman arrived in England in 1971, when he was appointed to the Chair in Sociology at the University of Leeds. For the preceding couple of years he had been based at a variety of institutions in Israel, Australia and the United States, in the wake of his exile from Poland. Although it is not strictly true to say that Bauman was expelled from Poland, he was put into a position by the authorities of the Communist state that led inexorably to one conclusion: get out. Bauman was deprived of his livelihood, his children were threatened, and an exit permit was dangled in front of him. Bauman was part of the departure of both intellectuals and Jews from Communist Poland, a departure that might not have been required *de jure* but which was most certainly necessary *de facto* (J. Bauman 1988).

On 26 March 1968, Bauman was one of six professors who were dismissed from the University of Warsaw, officially on the grounds of being the ‘spiritual instigators’ of a wave of student unrest. The others were Bronislaw Backo, Leszek Kołakowski, Stefan Morawski, Maria Hirszowicz and Włodimierz Brus. The former Minister of Education Stefan Zolkiewski was dismissed from the Polish Academy of Science at the same time. *The Times* noted that, ‘Professor Baumann (*sic*) is known to be Jewish.’ It was reported that Zolkiewski was Jewish too (*The Times*, 26 March 1968: 4). The dismissals were the culmination of weeks of state-initiated criticism of attempts to humanize Marxist thought and practice (see *The Times*, 28 March 1968: 7; for a discussion of Bauman’s political position at this time, see Tester 2004: 43–57, 77–81), and of a wave of anti-Semitism that the authorities stage-managed in order to defuse tensions that were building up within the Party apparatus (for an excellent

contemporary report, see Davy 1968). Perhaps because the West—as was so often the case during the Cold War—had its eyes elsewhere than Poland (in this case on Czechoslovakia where, for a while, it looked as if the Prague Spring might become Summer, while in 1956 when the Polish October was opening up possibilities, all eyes turned to Budapest; for an account of 1956 in Poland, see Syrop 1957), public expressions of support for the dismissed were, in the first instance, rather limited. A group of academics that included Stanislaw Andreski, A. J. Ayer, Antony Quinton, John Rex and Edward Shils wrote a letter to *The Times* expressing their ‘dismay and indignation’ at what had happened (Acton et al. 1968), while Bauman was the subject of a letter by Robert McKenzie (with whom he had worked when he was at the London School of Economics in the late 1950s). McKenzie said that he judged Bauman to be, ‘one of the half-dozen outstanding sociologists in the communist world’ (McKenzie 1968).

*Between Class and Elite* was the first book that Bauman published in English, after his arrival at Leeds. Indeed, it is a curious book, the product of Bauman’s time at the LSE with McKenzie and of distinctly Polish sociological and political concerns. Bauman spent 1957 at the LSE, where he worked on the project that was to be published in Polish in 1960 as *Klasa—ruch—elita: Studium socjologiczne dziejów angielskiego ruchu robotniczego* [Class—Movement—Elite: Sociological Study of British Labour Movement], (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe), and in English twelve years later as *Between Class and Elite*. At one level the book was what it appeared to be. It was one product of a sustained interest in the British Labour Party, an interest which Bauman expressed in four Polish language articles, and which was no doubt motivated and guided by his teacher, Julian Hochfeld (for a list of Bauman’s Polish language articles on the Labour Party, see Tester & Jacobsen 2005: 224–226; for an insight into Hochfeld’s interest in the British Labour Party, see Hochfeld 1957). But as with so many texts written by intellectuals from Communist states, the text had another dimension that lurked between the lines. It was also about Poland and the ossification of socialist hopes and ambitions in the form of an overbearing Party. As Bauman has said, reflecting on the failure of the Polish October of 1956, and making his own political commitment clear: “I knew our hopes had been dashed, and was eager to find out what went wrong and where our mistake lay. Hence the study of the dialectics of the social movement and its elite, to which the year spent at the LSE ...was entirely dedicated” (Bauman & Tester 2001: 25). The ambivalent status of the book is confirmed when Bauman says that it was “a story of a working-class movement running out of steam, and an analysis of the irreparable heterogeneity of the origins, outlooks and objectives of, respectively, its elite and its rank and file, or the fishermen and their catching area. I came to believe that the trends that I seemed to have discovered in British labour history carried a more general import. They also illuminated the truth of things at home” (Bauman in Tester & Jacobsen 2005: 91).

The themes and argument of *Between Class and Elite* are neatly summarized by Dennis Smith. Bauman divides the history of the British labour movement into four periods. First, between 1750–1850 there is the ‘embryonic’ period, followed between 1850 and 1890 by the period of ‘coming of age.’ Between 1890 and 1924 there

was the period of a ‘mass movement’ and finally, from 1924 to 1955, there was the period of ‘consolidation.’ This periodization was social theoretical and not empirically based. Each period is characterized by specific relationships between the working class, the organized labour movement and its elite leadership. The elite, in turn, was divided between heroic agitators and conservative bureaucrats. The narrative of the book is one about how the labour movement was increasingly dominated by the conservative, bureaucratic, elite which marginalized heroic agitators and became part of the organization of capitalism (Smith 1999: 70). As soon as the book is summarized in this way, derived from Smith, the resonances with Polish experiences leap out. Peter Beilharz, meanwhile, identifies a strand of Bauman’s argument that became controversial. Unlike historians such as E. P. Thompson who read the category of class back into history so that they could then tell a story about the difficult making of something of the present (Thompson 1968: 8–9), Bauman argued that the actions of historical actors are much messier than that, and consequently the challenge is one of understanding phenomena of action rather than reading contemporary categories backwards (Beilharz 2000: 5). Bauman’s conceptual schema was developed as a way of opening up precisely that kind of understanding, and this concern explains his comment that approaches like Thompson’s (and Perry Anderson’s, Thompson’s main English critic), “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)” (Bauman in Tester & Jacobsen 2005: 45).

However, of all of the books that Bauman published in Poland (for a list see Tester & Jacobsen 2005: 223–224), *Between Class and Elite* was at once the most obvious and unfortunate to have been translated. The *most obvious* because ostensibly it dealt with issues that spoke to the national focus of the intellectual scene in which Bauman was now located. The *most unfortunate* because in the more than a decade between the original publication of the text and its translation, the English debate on labour history and politics had been institutionalized and revised. As such, Bauman’s book fell into the dual trap of departmental turf wars and a degree of the condescension of posterity. In this context, which is of course absolutely independent of Bauman’s book itself, it is unsurprising that the reviews were minimal in quantity and less than glowing in quality.

The book was reviewed as a contribution to a debate with Edward P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (Thompson 1968), even though Bauman made it quite clear that his concerns were not historiographic (Bauman 1972: x). In *Contemporary Sociology*, the American reviewer Michael Hechter noted that Bauman’s mode and narrative of argument was quite different to that of Thompson: “Whereas Thompson credits the imagination and fortitude of British workers in their attempts to make themselves into a single class, Bauman prefers to rely on structural arguments in which acting groups have a very small role to play.” According to Hechter, Bauman’s book does not use empirical evidence either well or frequently, and this is taken to be an indication of “how the sociological enterprise has changed in the past two decades ... A good argument is no longer all that is required in a study

of this nature” (Hechter 1975: 175). Running through Hechter’s review is a sense of confusion about why this book has been published in translation. He says that “for its time this may have been a suggestive study; now, however, many of the explanations it advances are being questioned anew” (Hechter 1975: 177). Hechter is not at all condescending towards the book. His review rather highlights an inevitable gap of interpretation between the time of the book’s writing and the time of its reading in translation.

When English historians got their hands on Bauman’s book, they were not so sympathetic or subtle. Although John Murray Winter noted that the book was a direct translation of a volume that had first appeared in Poland in 1960, he criticizes it for failing to consider the wealth of historical material that Thompson, Hobsbawm and others had generated since 1958 (Winter 1975: 296). Apart from the logical problem that Winter is thereby condemning *Between Class and Elite* for failing to take into account debates that post-dated its writing, he does seem to have had three substantive problems with the book. First, Bauman’s analysis is identified as drawing on a theoretical model of labour movement development and stagnation, and thus fails to pay due attention to the discovery of the historians that the only valid approach to these questions is to “place working men in a setting in which both their struggles and their complex cultural, political, and work experiences can be understood and evaluated.” Here then the objection boils down to the argument that Bauman is not a historian. Second, Winter follows the lead of Thompson and the others in maintaining that discussions of the labour movement and working class culture require “a school of historical writing which shares not identical political commitments but rather the belief that such commitments are necessary for the writing of labour history.” Here then, the nub of the argument seems to be that Bauman is insufficiently committed. This leads to the third objection. In the book Bauman argues that the labour movement has and will stagnate as it becomes more and more ossified in institutions—a version of this thesis reappeared in Bauman (1982). Winter objects that this view is ‘short-sighted.’ Presumably then, committed labour history is the way of making sure that stagnation will never happen. Indeed, Winter nails his colours to the mast of E. P. Thompson’s contention that the aspirations of the working class movement wax and wane, take different forms, point to different socialisms, but never disappear (Winter 1975: 296). In essence, John Murray Winter is saying that Bauman has not kept apace of developments in English debates and that he is working in a disciplinary area that debars him from talking validly about labour movement history.

When he signed off the review of Bauman’s book, Winter gave his institutional affiliation as the University of Warwick, and consequently it could be argued that his applause of Thompson was not particularly surprising. (Thompson was Reader in the Centre for the Study of Social History at Warwick). Winter’s attitude is even less surprising in the context of Thompson’s own 1972 review of *Between Class and Elite*. It is an exceptionally nasty piece of work that says rather more about the reviewer than the reviewed. Thompson condemns the book on the grounds that it provides an overly schematic sociological theory of the labour movement. Although the theory

might well be subtle and coherently organized, it leads to a distorted and empirically inaccurate understanding of the actual experiences and processes of that movement. Thompson says that the problem with Bauman's analysis, and the way it brings together the theoretical and the empirical, is that, 'none of it is true' (Thompson 1972). Bauman is condemned for being 'cavalier' with facts and for not updating the book to take recent research (that is, Thompson's research) into account. The problem was that Bauman used sociological theory to marshal empirical material, rather than allowing the empirical to constitute the only legitimate evidential base for theorization. Thompson concludes his review with the assertion that Bauman uses sociology to make the decline of the labour movement inevitable and inescapable, and thus ignores the experiences through which the labour movement was continually made and remade. In a flourish which shows Thompson's lack of willingness to understand, he says that Bauman's book is a product of those intellectuals who "celebrate in the name of science, what is at root of determinism of the status quo: what has happened had to happen in that way. And a new, preposterous, pedagogic, pretentious, counter-empirical and plain boring 'sociological methodology' comes to birth" (Thompson 1972: this quotation is direct, lest it be thought that the grammatical infelicities have been added). It must have been tempting to have asked Thompson to stop pulling his punches and say what he really thought.

The question is: why was Thompson so aggressive? There is more going on in the review than Thompson fighting a turf war to keep non-compliant sociologists out of his own sphere of expertise (although that is definitely one of his aims). The first possible answer can be rejected immediately. Thompson does not appear to have been motivated by *personal malice*. Indeed there is every sense that at a personal level he had no knowledge whatsoever of Bauman. The clue is given in the review when Thompson writes of Bauman: "He is, *one gathers*, a victim of the nauseous nationalist and anti-Semitic ascendancy of the past few years" in Poland (Thompson 1972; emphasis added). Admittedly, the public campaign on behalf of Bauman and the other Polish intellectuals was not exceptionally high-profile, but it can be presumed that within universities—and indeed in the New Left circles in which Thompson so loudly and publicly stomped—it would have been easy to do more than 'gather' information about Bauman's background. In other words, Thompson's defence against animosity is ignorance. Second, there is the possible answer of *political difference*. The review does contain this dimension. Thompson argues that Bauman's socialism is little more than a self-applied badge. According to Thompson, Bauman's theoretical model of the labour movement, and the strategy of *Between Class and Elite* of putting empirical material into a pre-conceived theoretical framework, shows that Bauman's socialism has been distorted by Stalinism and working class nationalism to such an extent that he has become one of a group of intellectual who are "liable to view the creative potential of working people with a wary eye and with undiminished [should that be diminished?, KT] expectations." These intellectuals come to the West and "are liable to see as their allies not any section of socialist intellectuals but ... Bob McKenzie and the LSE" (Thompson 1972). Again, there is a lot of ignorance here (one recalls that Robert McKenzie did much more to help the Polish exiles—or at

least Bauman—than Thompson), but the point seems to be that any intellectual who has moved from Communism, under whatever circumstances, must be tending to lean towards the non-socialist camp even as their thought evidently betrays the traces of Stalinism. It is probably not accidental that Thompson identifies Bauman as an *émigré*. In English the word has a certain baggage that implies Tsarist escapees from Bolshevism. *Émigrés* tend to be pre-imagined as right wing. Here it is odd to see Thompson putting assertion before evidence and making what he would identify as a counter-empirical argument. (It would have been very easy to find out about the relationship of the Polish exiles to determinist thought, had Thompson been bothered to do so. Indeed Thompson loudly proclaimed his reading of Leszek Kołakowski's texts. Given the massive distance between those texts and any kind of determinism, it can only be concluded that Thompson did not read them very well).

It is hard not to conclude that Thompson's review is not really about *Between Class and Elite* at all. It is about something *external* to the book. That is certainly Bauman's interpretation. It is worth quoting Bauman at length:

E. 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 (Bauman in Tester & Jacobsen 2005: 45).

Thompson had noticed that Bauman was a Polish intellectual immigrant, and at the same time he was engaged in a publicly one-sided war of words with another Polish intellectual immigrant, Leszek Kołakowski. Thompson seems to have assumed that his self-congratulatory destructive attack on Kołakowski could also be directed at Bauman. When all is said and done, Thompson seems to have believed that an attack on one exile from Poland is a sufficient attack on all of them. Consequently, the crucial clue in uncovering the mystery of Thompson's hostility towards *Between Class and Elite* is to be found in his attitude towards Kołakowski.

### Thompson's Letter and the English Idiom

Leszek Kołakowski was the best-known in the West of the professors who were dismissed from the University of Warsaw in 1968. Kołakowski's writing played a massive role in the development of the principles of the humanist revision of socialism. He had been one of the most prominent intellectuals during the Polish October in 1956, and his opposition to the Party carried on through the 1960s (for Kołakowski's thought during this period, and particularly for his humanist attack on the Party's brand of Marxism, see Kołakowski 1969). According to a letter of support that a number of

academics wrote to *The Times*: “In 1956, at the time of the Polish ‘Spring in October,’ Kołakowski was the conscience of Polish youth” (Acton et al. 1968). Indeed, Kołakowski was often singled out for attack by the state authorities. For example, after the dismissals Kołakowski was personally accused of launching ‘hysterical attacks’ against the cultural policy of the Party (*The Times*, 28 March 1968: 7). After leaving Poland, he taught for a while at McGill University in Montreal and at Berkeley, before settling as a Senior Research Fellow at All Souls College, Oxford, in 1970. One of the first public welcomes extended to him by the ‘English intellectual scene’ was E. P. Thompson’s one hundred page long *Open Letter*.

Thompson’s *Letter* was first published in *The Socialist Register* in 1973 where it appears without explanation. It was the product of specific struggles that Thompson was fighting, and this context became clearer when the *Letter* was republished in the combative book, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (Thompson 1978). At that time, however, the confrontation with Kołakowski was rather overshadowed by Thompson’s attack on Althusserian Marxism. That was the lead piece in the book, and in it Thompson witheringly and wittily revealed many of the conceits and dead-ends of what was then the dominant brand of Marxist theorizing in Britain. *The Poverty of Theory* is a book that is made up of essays that look in two directions. First, it is an attack on what Thompson interprets as the collapse of the English New Left in the face of foreign brands of theorization, and, second, it is an attempt on Thompson’s part to find allies in his struggle to bolster the English Idiom of intellectual work and Left politics. The need for allies appears to have been felt especially keenly because Thompson repeatedly mentions his isolation. Admittedly, there is a sense of melodramatic self-presentation here (and Thompson frequently fell into that trap), but it is very obvious that Thompson was embittered by what he saw as the manoeuvring that had resulted in him being moved from the centre of the British New Left (that is, the Left that emerged after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956), and to its margins. Thompson wrote his *Letter* as an unwilling outsider. Indeed: “It was a real sense of isolation and even of alienation from some part of that New Left and from much of that ‘Marxism’ which must explain the personal tone—and even postures—of my ‘Open Letter to Leszek Kołakowski’” (Thompson 1978: ii).

When it is read in this context, Thompson’s text becomes less a letter and more a drama. Thompson is trying to enter into a discussion with someone who he thinks might be an ally but who instead turns out to be another foe to be slain. This explains the frequently self-indulgent tone of personal hurt and disappointment that runs through the *Letter*. But what is much more important is the way that Thompson responds to the disappointments that Kołakowski implies. His response is to position Kołakowski as an outsider who is incapable and unwilling to participate in debate, and by pushing Kołakowski out to a margin, Thompson manages to recentralize himself. In other words, the problem is not with Thompson, it is with Leszek Kołakowski who as the unwitting recipient of an unasked for *Letter*, nevertheless performs a very important role for Thompson. In these terms, Thompson set up a contrast between his own moral and political rectitude and the back-sliding of Kołakowski. This is the explanation of Thompson’s comment: “What we dissident Communists did in Britain

... was to refuse to enter the well-worn paths of apostasy” (Thompson 1978:305). The hint is that, according to Thompson, this is what Kołakowski did not manage to do. The *Letter* moves from politics to personal abuse in such a way that Kołakowski’s rather disdainful response to Thompson becomes somewhat magisterially wonderful (Kołakowski 1974). This is the route by which Thompson approached Bauman’s *Between Class and Elite*, and it is the conflict in which Bauman became a ‘collateral casualty.’

Thompson looked to Kołakowski as an ally in the struggles of the English New Left, because he thought that the newly arrived Pole would add a new and principled voice to the debates amongst the Marxists. He proposed that they shared the experience of defeat in 1956 (in Kołakowski’s case the defeat of the promises of the Polish October, and in Thompson’s the defeat of Communist aspiration after Budapest), and that Kołakowski might therefore find a home amongst “the small number of Communist intellectuals” who “belonged to a defeated and discredited tradition—or so it was the business of every orthodoxy in or culture to assure us. We were not heretics but barbarians who desecrated with our presence the altars of the liberal Gods” (Thompson 1978: 303–304). Here, Thompson is implying a family kinship of the ‘barbarians’ on the grounds that just as he and his comrades were made discreditable in England, something similar happened to Kołakowski in Poland. They were alike because they shared a commitment “not to Communist states in their existence, but in their potential—not for what they were but for what—given a diminution in the Cold War—they might become” (Thompson 1978; this commitment to the recovery of potential in the context of the Cold War was a recurrent theme in Thompson’s work; see also Thompson 1982. Meanwhile for a discussion of Thompson’s politics, see Soper 1990). This is Kołakowski positioned as ally.

It was on the basis of these shared experiences and commitment to Communism as a potential that, according to Thompson, he upheld a principle of *solidarity* with Kołakowski, even as they were kept apart by the Cold War. He says that by holding to a commitment to Communism as potential rather than actuality, the lonely and isolated British ‘dissidents’ (note how Thompson universalizes for his own particular purposes a word that had very different—and more immediate—consequences at Warsaw than at Warwick University), gave to Kołakowski a gift of their support. But as Marcel Mauss would lead us to expect, this support was no free gift: “And I claim this as a debt upon you, as a solidarity we paid to you, although you may not see it in the same way at all” (Thompson 1978: 305). Kołakowski owes Thompson a debt because, evidently, the struggles of the Polish dissidents was never far away from the minds of the English dissidents and indeed the example of the East emboldened the English: “If such men as you were content to remain Communists ... if such men and women as the Czech insurgents of 1968 were to emerge directly from the Communist tradition, who were we to deny the claims of solidarity?” (Thompson 1978: 305). Furthermore, such expressions of solidarity were necessary because, according to Thompson, they were the only way in which Communists could overcome the Cold War division of the world into two competing camps without falling into the traps of either Stalinism or capitalist apologetics (Thompson 1978: 306). In all, Thompson felt

able to tell Kołakowski: "I feel that I have some petty claim of relationship to you" (Thompson 1978: 307).

That relationship devolves upon the debt that Kołakowski owes to Thompson because of the gift of solidarity that the latter gave, without the former asking for it. As such, Thompson is managing to position himself as the dominant partner in the relationship. He is defining the terms of the relationship (it consists in the solidarity that dissident Communists owe to one another), and he is putting Kołakowski into a position of weakness, because now the time has arrived for repayment of the gift that the English dissidents freely gave. This is the basis of Thompson's attack: Kołakowski does not repay the gift, and so Thompson is, according to his own positioning strategies, justified in demonstrating the subordination and lack of moral fibre of Kołakowski. Now, Thompson cannot make that move on the basis of a repudiation of all of Kołakowski's work. To do that would be to deny what he identifies as some of his own political resources, and it would also undermine the very claim for solidarity (the claim upon which Thompson sought to position Kołakowski as an ally in struggles about which the immigrant knew little). In short, the avenue of intellectual superiority was closed before Thompson and so he had to make a different move. That is precisely what he did. He made the attack in tones of almost paternal disappointment, and directed it at Kołakowski's naïveté in the face of the West into which he had been thrown. Thompson implies that all the time Kołakowski was in Poland, they could be identified as allies in the 'Marxist tradition' (Thompson 1978: 320; in his reply to Thompson Kołakowski mocked this idea of a tradition which made all Marxist members of the same family, see Kołakowski 1974: 14–15). But after the immigration from Poland, "I feel less certain of your identity" (Thompson 1978: 308). The lack of certainty derives from the fact that when he came to the West, Kołakowski's attitude to Marxism was shown to be rather more complex than a mere family dispute could allow.

Thompson alludes to a couple of pieces in which Kołakowski is read as expressing a movement away from Marxism and a refusal to repay the solidarity that had been gifted to him. Kołakowski's first 'Western' pieces are criticized for refusing to explore "the reasons of capitalist power and ideology: for the absence of expression from you of intellectual fellowship with your political analogues and former comrades in the 'West'" (Thompson 1978: 308). Instead, Kołakowski had obviously expressed doubts about the revolutionary potential of the student movements that had a high profile in the West in 1968. Within that general point, comments had also been made about the status and validity of some of the varieties of Marxism that were available in the West and ostensibly promoted by the students. Kołakowski condemned some of the currently fashionable ideas about world revolution as 'blind enthusiasm' for a 'meaningless' principle. But Thompson calls Kołakowski to task for failing to notice differentiations. He was politically naïve because he failed to notice that while some of the students of 1968 were motivated by a 'mania' for something or other called 'world revolution,' nevertheless there were others who were engaged in very grounded forms of political struggle that challenged the bases of capitalism and, moreover, revealed the potentials latent within Marxism. Consequently, Thompson took it upon himself

to educate Kołakowski in the realities of the West. First, Thompson wondered whether Kołakowski was “perhaps unaware of the great ‘law of development’ of intellectual life in ‘the West,’ in this stage of competitive consumer society, that cultural modes must change, like sartorial fashions, with dizzy speed from one year to the next” (Thompson 1978: 310). In other words, the ‘mania’ that Kołakowski found in Germany, Britain and North America was not psychosis but the way of the consumer West, were he but capable of seeing it. Second, Thompson took it upon himself to show Kołakowski that this urge always to be up to date is seen nowhere more clearly than amongst leftist intellectuals (Thompson 1978: 310–311). Here the point seems to be that if Kołakowski changes his own views, he is guilty of upholding the principles of the consumer market in intellectual ideas even though, according to the first lesson, he does not understand it. It is quite plain that Thompson is attempting to position Kołakowski as an outsider to the world in which he now finds himself, as someone who needs to be guided through that world, and who is yet unprepared to attend to the lessons that those (such as Thompson himself) who can guide can teach. Kołakowski thus becomes both ungrateful and a fool.

But why was Kołakowski so naïve? According to Thompson, it was because his work had moved away from its Marxist roots and become overly philosophical. This is the basis of Thompson’s implication that Kołakowski has become an ‘apostate,’ and it justifies—if not indeed requires—an intellectual and personal attack. In this regard, the key moment in Thompson’s *Letter* comes when he quotes a comment by Leopold Labetz that Kołakowski’s ‘post-revisionist’ thought (that is to say the thought with which he arrived in the West and sought to understand his new circumstances), was indebted to a range of philosophers including the likes of Spinoza, Kant, Marx, Dilthey, Husserl, Sartre, Heidegger and Camus. Thompson comments: “To this pantheon ...my first instinctive, but irrepressible, comment would be: ‘Humph!’—a term too inexact to introduce into philosophical discourse” (Thompson 1978: 316). Thompson protests that if Kołakowski draws on this list of influences, then his thought must fly “like great eagles soar” (Thompson 1978: 319). In so doing it leaves the ground behind, starts to talk about philosophical abstractions that have no grounding and, moreover, it proves itself utterly incapable of addressing—or being contained within—English soil. Contrary to the eagle of Kołakowski, Thompson is happy to “remain on the ground like one of the last of the great bustards, awaiting the extinction of my species on the diminishing soil of an eroding idiom, craning my neck into the air, flapping my paltry wings” (Thompson 1978: 319). The hint seems to be that if Kołakowski did not fly with the eagles, he would not be buffeted by the winds of intellectual fashion. He might well be consigned to stay on the ground, but thereby his thought would be more rooted and more principled (of course, this fails to appreciate that Kołakowski’s departure from Poland was not entirely voluntary).

This is another aspect of Thompson’s positioning of Kołakowski. This time he is being associated with a kind of Europeanism that has nothing whatever to say to England and English circumstances (here then, Thompson illicitly connects Kołakowski with Louis Althusser in that his criticisms of them are in the end similarly parochial). Thompson is able to carry out that positioning precisely because he associates himself

with the 'soil' of a certain Idiom, to which he is rooted like a bird that will soon become extinct because it cannot fly away to fields that are more abundant in the kind of life upon which the Western intellectual consumer culture feeds. Kołakowski is an eagle who cannot understand the bustard and who is, indeed, dangerous to its very survival. Thompson positions Kołakowski as an outsider to the only Idiom through which the England where the Polish eagle has landed might be understood and, indeed, legitimately addressed. Kołakowski is positioned as being *with us* but not *one of us*. (Given these tendencies in his thought, it is unsurprising that Thompson had a Blakean, Romantic and very English connection to the landscape, see Thompson 1983).

The influence of European philosophers and ways of thinking is worthy of suspicion because it is interpreted by Thompson as being so utterly contrary to the *English Idiom*. An Idiom is defined by Thompson as a 'manner of expression' (Thompson 1978: 314). But it is clear that he also conceives of it as a structure of sensibility and feeling that is unique and deeply rooted in the national culture. From this perspective, external ways of sensing and feeling are blind to English manners and they contaminate indigenous ways. The contrast becomes clear when Thompson gets extremely angry about a philosophical comment that Kołakowski makes about religious consciousness being a universal dimension of human culture. Thompson rages in a way that makes the positioning of Kołakowski as an outsider extremely clear: "You may say this in Poland: you may say this, if you wish, in Italy or France. But by what right, what study of its traditions and its sensibility, may you assume this as a universal in the heart of an ancient Protestant island, doggedly resistant to the magics of religious symbolism even when they remained believers...?" (Thompson 1978: 316). It scarcely needs saying that the version of Poland, Italy and France to which Thompson is contrasting this 'Protestant island' is Catholic. Indeed, he had already made the point that English intellectuals have been opposed to "the universalist priests (Catholic or Anti-Catholic) of Western Europe for several hundred years" (Thompson 1978: 316). The point is, of course, that Kołakowski is not only a Pole who has been influenced by French thought: he is also the representative of a Catholicism that is quite incompatible with Englishness. Thompson implies that in itself this is sufficient explanation for Kołakowski's inability to understand the England in which he has landed, and by reversal Thompson seems to be saying that the necessary (although not of itself sufficient) prerequisite for any understanding of England is Protestantism.

The 'English Idiom' is established by Thompson as being deeply entwined with Protestantism. This is the Protestantism of the dissenting sects who appear in the pages of Thompson's (1968) own *The Making of the English Working Class* rather than the state-authorized sort of the Church of England. Consequently, it is the Protestantism of a way of sensing the world, of a way of feeling, rather than a Protestantism of liturgical practice. It is a Protestantism of the individual conscience responding to a world that is experienced as contextually present in all its little particulars. And this is the core of the English Idiom: "Our best idiom has been protestant, individualist, empirical, disintegrative of universals; our best moralism has been contextual" (Thompson 1978: 316). Unsurprisingly, the key thinkers of this Idiom are characters who have kept their feet firmly on English soil. In a list that is meant to bring back to mind

the distinctly European and philosophical intellectual roots of the ‘post-revisionist’ Kołakowski, Thompson says: “Take Marx and Vico and a few European novelists away, and my most intimate pantheon would be a provincial tea-party: a gathering of the English and the Anglo-Irish.” He explained: “Talk of free-will and determinism, and I think first of Milton. Talk of man’s inhumanity, I think of Swift. Talk of morality and revolution, and my mind is off with Wordsworth’s *Solitary*. Talk of the problems of self-activity and creative labour in socialist society, and I am in an instant back with William Morris” (Thompson 1978: 319). These are presented as reference points that are not simply chosen voluntarily from off the shelf of the intellectual consumer culture. Rather, these are the contributors to the English Idiom in terms of which Thompson identifies himself as thinking. They are writers who are possessed of the Idiom that enables them to nourish the thought of the English. Consequently, in the end these Englishmen are Thompson’s true and only reliable allies. Moreover, they are allies who can never line up alongside Kołakowski, and neither can he line up besides them. The gist of Thompson’s point is that however much an immigrant might read the *words* of the likes of Milton, Swift, Wordsworth, Morris and of course William Blake, however much the immigrant intellectual studies their works in depth, they will never truly understand what they *mean*. The immigrant intellectual can never be part of the English Idiom precisely because they bring with them influences and debts from beyond the shores of this “empirical island anchored off Europe” (Thompson 1978: 313).

In these terms, what leaps out from the pages of Thompson’s *Letter* is the argument that only those who are happily and securely within the English Idiom can understand England. Only within that Idiom is it possible to develop the kind of empirically-focused knowledge that seeks to recover the Protestantism of individual experience from the constraints of externally imposed intellectual abstractions. In short, the message is that, however much he might try to be an insider, however much he might be embraced unto the bosom of the Oxford college in which he landed, the eagle who is Leszek Kołakowski has absolutely no legitimate right to say anything about England, and neither indeed can he understand what he surveys around him. For the immigrant intellectual, England is a mystery. Or at least, Thompson hopes, long may England remain so. As Thompson put it, speaking with typical self-indulgence, he had become “too stubborn in resistance to assimilation” (Thompson 1978: 320). But as the *Letter* and the review of Bauman’s *Between Class and Elite* rather imply, this was a stubbornness that Thompson was perfectly happy to indulge, so long as it positioned these intellectual immigrants as *without*.

### Conclusion: Back to Bauman

Through the light that is cast by Thompson’s *Letter* to Kołakowski it becomes possible to understand why he was so aggressively critical of Bauman’s *Between Class and Elite*. Beyond simply not liking the book, what Thompson was more significantly trying to do was to position Bauman as an outsider to the English Idiom and, thereby, as

someone who has nothing legitimate to say about England. To this extent, Thompson was not some 'passive trader' and neither was he attempting to open up a kind of conduit through which new ideas might flow, to the enrichment of all. Rather, he was identifying his own intellectual activity with a naturalized English Idiom and monopolizing its occupation so that strategies of inclusion and exclusion might be prosecuted on its basis.

In this regard, the title of Thompson's review of Bauman's book becomes extremely revealing: 'Boring from Without.' At a first reading the emphasis seems to be on the first word, 'boring.' By this argument, Thompson is suggesting that Bauman's book is tiresome, dull, and monotonous. Thompson implied this when he admonished 'sociological methodology.' But there is another way in which the title can be read, a way towards which Thompson was almost certainly gesturing given his knowledge of the history of English socialism. In 1884 a group of middle-class intellectuals established the Fabian Society to try to achieve social change through the transformation of the state into an agency that would implement welfare reforms. Fabianism rejected revolution and, as one of the group's slogans said, it attempted to 'bore from within.' There can be absolutely no doubt that E. P. Thompson was familiar with that slogan, and the title of his review of Bauman's book parodies it self-consciously. Consequently, the weight of the title of Thompson's review is not on the first word, 'boring,' at all (indeed, the meaning of the word now shifts from boredom to 'making a hole' or drilling into something external; that is how the Fabian slogan understands 'boring'). The weight of the title falls on the last word, 'without.' Thompson is doing to Bauman exactly what he did to Kołakowski: positioning him as an outsider, as someone who is without (in both senses of that word) the English Idiom and, therefore, as someone who is not a legitimate contributor to these debates.

Through this *particular* study of the intellectual immigration of Zygmunt Bauman and the initial reception of his work in England, it is possible to reach *general* conclusions about the English intellectual scene as a cultural conduit managed by passive traders. On the basis of this discussion, it is not appropriate to conclude that the conduit and traders imagery is a myth. But in the light of this particular example it is most certainly appropriate to suggest that the imagery ought not to lead to blindness about the strategies of power and Idiom through which intellectual immigrants are positioned as 'without.' What Bryan Turner calls the 'English intellectual scene' is not necessarily as welcoming or kindly as that benign phrase, with its conduits and passive traders, implies. What also needs to be considered is the 'stubborn resistance to assimilation' with which English intellectuals like E. P. Thompson have welcomed exiles.

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