

## BOOK REVIEW

# Wagner: Bauman

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Historians have come to be uneasy about using the word “fact” and many historians do not accept that a value-free or neutral historical account is either possible or desirable. It is simply not possible to root out bias and subjectivity when doing history. The past can never be seen as a collection of acts and ideas that the historian simply has to find. Similarly, “doing biography” is never an objective activity. Instead of collecting facts about what happened to Zygmunt Bauman in his past, Izabela Wagner’s book *Bauman: A Biography* (Polity, 2020) has selectively drawn upon the historical record to present a positive evaluation of Zygmunt Bauman’s biography. Wagner explains that her approach is based upon selecting data to fit her assumptions about Bauman’s past, and her purpose in writing the book was to “defend [Bauman] from misunderstandings and erroneous accusations, and to expose the impact of xenophobia, nationalism and anti-Semitism” (p. 404)—prejudicial ideas and practices that helped to shape Bauman’s life course and that was central to Bauman’s perceived master status.

Wagner draws upon Everett Hughes’ approach to biography that focuses on the individual’s feeling of identity (Who am I?) and master status (How do others see me?). Hughes was interested in the status and perception of Black American doctors in the 1950s. At that time race was defined by Hughes as a master status-determining trait. The dilemma, for white Americans who came into contact with a Black doctor, was do they choose to treat the Black doctor as a member of a racial group or as a member of a professional group? The favoured [SP1] way of avoiding this dilemma was to limit contact with Black professionals. One of the central themes of Wagner’s argument is that Bauman’s life was overshadowed by the tensions between his Polishness and his Jewishness.

The book draws upon an interview with Zygmunt Bauman, interviews with his family, friends, and colleagues, and unpublished autobiographical material, including a seventy-page letter to his children and grandchildren entitled “The Poles, The Jews, and I: An Investigation into Whatever Made Me What I Am,” Janina Bauman’s autobiographical publications, and selective use of the Polish archives. Wagner is clear that her focus is on Bauman’s life, not his work. As she explains to her reader: “I should reveal that I was not a ‘Baumanist’ at the outset of this work” (p. 403). Despite the limited engagement with Bauman’s body of work, the book has received wide critical acclaim from Bauman scholars.

The first 11 chapters reflect Bauman's childhood, his education, his early wartime experiences, military experiences, entry into academic life, and the exclusion from Poland in 1968. There is a lot of information contained within these pages that I was unfamiliar with, such as Zygmunt's weight problems and that Janina had been engaged to be married before she met Zygmunt.

Several interesting issues are not discussed by Wagner. The circumstances around Bauman's invitation to become Professor of Sociology at Leeds, for example, was glossed over by Wagner. Former Conservative minister and newly appointed Vice-Chancellor Edward Boyle was keen to close the Warwick files issue that had dogged his predecessor. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, students had discovered that several universities were keeping records on individual students' political views and activities. Best (2013) argues that Boyle's motivation for appointing well-known Marxists such as Bauman and Ralph Miliband was to demonstrate Boyle's willingness to embrace political diversity within the university.

Wagner outlines Bauman's passion for photography, a passion that he had for several years and then abruptly stopped. On page 357, Wagner mentions in passing that Bauman hired some female models and did a series of nude photographs. Wagner does not explain that Bauman had an exhibition of his work in the Brotherton Library. The series of nudes was not well received by visitors, described by many as soft porn, especially one photograph with the title "Woman making an exhibition of herself." A number of the photographs were vandalized by visitors. The Bauman Institute did have a photo montage video of Bauman's photography, including some nude models; however, the Institute has since taken the montage off their website.

One of the many strengths of the book is Wagner's detailed account of the relationship between Keith Tester and Bauman. Wagner outlines Tester's account of Bauman's distinctive approach to PhD supervision, which Bauman viewed as a vocation rather than training, the interest that Bauman took in Tester's family life, Bauman's lack of engagement with Tester's book (2004) about Bauman's social thought, the love they shared for film, and how Bauman influenced Tester's view of the world. In Wagner's interview with Tester, he described Bauman as his friend, mentor, and spiritual father. Despite this, Tester confessed to Wagner that he did not think he knew Zygmunt because: "I don't think there was a Zygmunt to know" (Wagner, 2020: 333).

However, I would have liked to have read more about the intellectual tensions within the Sociology Department, especially between Richard Kilminster and Bauman. Norbert Elias had taught Richard Kilminster at Leicester on the MA programme, which was a turning point in Kilminster's academic life. Kilminster went on to become an influential commentator and promoter of the work of Norbert Elias. Bauman was Kilminster's PhD supervisor at Leeds. Bauman took exception to the underpinning argument presented by Elias in *The Germans* (1997) that stands in opposition to the argument presented by Bauman in *Modernity and the Holocaust*. The status and validity of Elias's arguments was a bone of contention between Kilminster and Bauman and shaped the tensions between the two men. Wagner (p. 330) quotes Tester as saying that Bauman was not enthusiastic about Elias's work.

My understanding is that Kilminster and Bauman were often on friendly terms. As a student in Kilminster's classes, I got the impression that Kilminster appreciated the vibrant intellectual atmosphere that Bauman helped to create in the Department at Leeds, and he co-edited a book in honour of Bauman's work (1996). On the other hand, Kilminster could be critical of Bauman, suggesting that beneath his skilful use of metaphor his work often seemed like many other Marxist critiques of "bourgeois sociology." Also, there is a rumour, shared with me by Keith Tester, that

Bauman was confronted by Kilminster over the shortlisting for a vacant teaching post in the Department. The story goes that Bauman intentionally hid Ali Rattansi's application from the panel because Bauman disliked how Rattansi engaged with Althusser's work. I have, of course, no idea about the truth of this account.

Nevertheless, I had many interesting conversations with Tester about the Kilminster/Bauman relationship. In particular, we discussed Kilminster's attempt to develop a post-philosophical sociology, in contrast to the Bauman approach that often drew upon support from philosophical texts. The lack of any engagement with Richard Kilminster is a serious omission from Wagner's account of Bauman at Leeds.

I am very surprised that Wagner does not discuss why Bauman moved away from his sociology of postmodernity to the sociology of liquid modernity. Bauman's approach reminds me of what Osrecki (2015) describes as "retrospective realism": a way of building an argument that involves the construction of a "historical juxtaposition," counterpoint, or comparison that first reduces the past to a narrow set of abstract characteristics, the role of which is to act as a background of the present. Secondly, this approach presents a very abstract, ideal type of solid modernity as a real empirical description of reality that neatly forms the opposite of the newly emerging societal epoch. In the 1980s Bauman was regarded by many—including Peter Beilharz (2002), one of his leading commentators—as the most interesting and consistent of postmodern sociologists. Is liquid modernity an even newer kind of modernity, a newer post-postmodern, and even more extraordinary and unparalleled period of human history that departs in fundamental ways from the previous solid and post modernities? Tony Blackshaw (2005) and Matt Dawson (2013) both argue that the underpinning arguments and assumptions within Bauman's sociology of postmodernity and sociology of liquid modernity are the same. The transition from the postmodern to liquid modern is not a movement from one type of society to another. There is no transition from postmodernity to liquid modernity in Bauman's work, but there is one in terms of his conceptual reasoning. One view explored by Best (2013), which Wagner does not engage with, is that Bauman's redefinition of modernity in a liquid form is rebranding for commercial purposes rather than an attempt to make a new contribution to knowledge.

The intellectual friendship and mutual admiration between Bauman and Henry Giroux is also not discussed by Wagner. Giroux described Bauman as "the great sociologist" (Giroux, 2006: 255) and came to the latter's defence after a paper was published on Academia.edu by Peter Walsh and David Lehmann, "Problematic Elements in the Scholarship of Zygmunt Bauman" (2015). In the paper, Walsh and Lehmann accused and presented evidence that Bauman had engaged in "self-plagiarism," recycling ideas and arguments previously presented in earlier publications. Giroux and his co-author Brad Evans (2015) described Walsh and Lehmann's article as a form of "character assassination"; a "neoliberal assault on global academia"; a "reactionary ideological critique"; and a form of "public shaming ... tantamount to a Stasi witch hunt" by the "academic police squad." In contrast, Evans and Giroux celebrated Bauman's style of writing and described his reproduction of previously published ideas and arguments as "strategic repetition" with the caveat: "We are not suggesting here that the demands for previously unpublished originality are unimportant in certain contexts. There is a clear appreciation that academic journals demand this consideration. Bauman is actually exemplary in this regard" (Evans and Giroux, 2015).

Bauman is not exemplary in this regard. There are sections of his article "Education in the Liquid – Modern Setting" (published 1 January 2009) reproduced verbatim in "Education in the World of Diasporas" (published 1 January 2010). For example:

“What matters most for the young is the retention of the ability to reshape ‘identity and the ‘network’ whenever a need to reshape arrives or is suspected to have arrived. The ancestors’ worry about identification is increasingly elbowed out by the worry of re-identification. Identities must be disposable; an unsatisfying or not-sufficiently-satisfying identity, or an identity betraying its advanced age, needs to be easy to abandon; perhaps biodegradability would be the ideal attribute of the identity most strongly desired” (Bauman, 2009: 165; and Bauman, 2010: 406).

Walsh and Lehmann (2015) were not the first people to identify repetition in Bauman’s work. In his review of *Liquid Modernity*, Nicholas Gane pointed out that Bauman was in the habit of reproducing earlier texts in his writing (2001: 271). Keith Tester (2018) has written an interesting response to Walsh and Lehmann (2015). Tester does readily acknowledge that there is repetition in Bauman’s work, with sections of text appearing in more than one book and journal articles later reappearing as book chapters. However, for Tester, when the same text reappears in the book, it does so in a changed context, and the changed context changes the meaning.

The most contentious chapter of Wagner’s book is Chapter 5, which addresses Bauman’s involvement with the KBW (Korpusu Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego), the Polish secret service. In the latter part of his life, Bauman was caught up in the process of lustration, which was part of the process of truth and reconciliation in Poland following the end of Communist rule (1944–1990). Lustration is the process of collecting and publishing previously secret archives from the postwar period in Poland, making the names and records of agents and collaborators available to the public, and investigating “crimes against the Polish nation” carried out by former wartime Nazi collaborators and Communists during the postwar Stalinist period. With the end of the Stalinist regime in Poland, the Polish people engaged in the act of disassembling the heritage of totalitarian systems and structures inherited from the previous regime. Many Polish people were concerned that in the immediate post-communist period former Communists attempted to reinvent themselves as democrats and claim a share of the responsibility for bringing about democracy in Poland. The Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) is a governmental institution that has been responsible for, amongst other things, the process of lustration since 2007. The IPN is a founding member of the Platform of European Memory and Conscience, a European Union educational project that is focused on raising awareness and promoting educational initiatives about the crimes of totalitarian regimes.

The lustration process impacted Bauman both professionally and personally following the release of official state documents about his career in the military from 1945 to 1953. In 2006 Piotr Gontarczyk published an account in the Polish magazine *Biuletyn* of Bauman’s activities from the end of the Second World War until his removal from the army in 1953. In 2007 the story was taken up by Polish historian Bogdan Musiał, who also published an account of Bauman’s activities from the end of the Second World War until he departed from the army in 1953. Drawing upon previously secret files that had been made available by the Polish IPN, Gontarczyk explained that Bauman had had a successful career in the KWB. Wagner accepts that the transition from the military to the secret service was smooth, but that was imposed upon Bauman and the soldiers under his command. Bauman was recruited into the security services by Anatol Fejgin, who in 1945 became the commander of the secret police in the Polish Ministry of Public Security. Like Bauman, Fejgin had escaped the Nazi invasion of Poland by fleeing to the Soviet Union in May 1943. At the end of the Stalinist period, Fejgin was put on trial for human rights abuses and sent to prison for twelve years.

The KWB was given the task of managing internal and foreign intelligence, engaging in counterintelligence, monitoring governmental and civilian communications, and keeping in check

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all anti-state activity. The KWB also had a role to play in border control and the management of prisons and concentration camps for political prisoners and opponents of the state. As Bauman (2004: 17) explains, at the outbreak of the Second World War Poland was a multi-ethnic society containing a mixture of religious faiths, languages, and customs. At the end of the war, the Polish government attempted to unify the nation through a process of Polinization, the forced assimilation and conversion of non-Poles into the Polish language, customs, and traditions. Those people who were deemed unsuitable for assimilation and conversion were forced out of the country. This process of assimilation and forced migration was not universally accepted by the Polish population.

The KBW was part of the Ministry of Public Security and its role was to suppress anti-communist resistance in Poland, including the remaining members of the Armia Krajowa (Polish Home Army) who were the main armed resistance to the occupying Nazi forces during the war. The Polish Home Army had organized the 1944 Warsaw Uprising and other attacks against German forces, sabotaging German road and rail transport, assassinated well-known Nazi collaborators and Gestapo officials and supplied intelligence to the Allies. After the war, the Home Army remained loyal to the Polish Government-in-Exile and refused to hand over their weapons to the newly formed Communist regime. Stalin viewed the Polish Home Army as terrorists and an obstacle to the successful Soviet takeover of Poland. According to Dudek and Paczkowski (2005), 32,477 people were arrested for “crimes against the state” between 1946 and 1948, and 8,000 death sentences were passed in 1945–1946.

By simply dismissing Bauman’s critics as right-wing anti-Semites and the role of lustration as propaganda, Wagner concludes that: “In short, there is nothing in the available documents that indicates Zygmunt Bauman was a communist criminal” (Wagner, 2020: 132). She draws upon the historical record to criticize the IPN as a body “essentially geared to distributing pro-government, nationalist propaganda.” She also accuses the IPN of a “smear campaign” against Bauman by selectively releasing documents about his past, which led to “the construction of an erroneous picture of Bauman’s complicity in the construction of communism in Poland” (p. 113). She is critical of the process of lustration as having an underpinning logic that is the same as 1968: to purge society (p. 378–379). She also accepts the legitimate role of the KBW as “protecting the peace in the liberated territories” by tracing “anyone opposed to the revolutionary changes” (p. 118) and Bauman’s account of their activities as “a necessary step in the construction of the new Poland” (p. 19). For Wagner, Bauman’s engagement in the KBW gave him “agency” or the aspiration to build a political system that would bring about social justice: “He was among those who thought they would change the country with a new system that supported a society not divided into religious or ethnic groups” (p. 110).

Although Wagner presents a selective reading on events that “lends credence to the records of the security services” (p. 121) and Bauman’s role in how the events unfolded, there are many interesting insights that she presents. She gives a detailed account of why the Red Army, including the 4th Polish Division in which Bauman was an officer, did not cross the Vistula River and support the Polish Home Army and other Poles involved in the Warsaw Rising. As Wagner explains: “The advance stopped on the east bank of the Vistula River. The armies merely looked on while as many as 200,000 Polish fighters and civilians were crushed by the Germans on the other side of the river ... Polish soldiers, immobilized by Stalin’s decision, passively watched the massacre of the Warsaw population” (p. 96–97). Wagner explains that the 4th Polish Division used their time on the riverbank “cooking and enjoying meals,” studying rules and manuals, and doing cleaning work (p. 90–91).

In April 2007 Bauman gave an interview to Aida Edemariam which was published in *The Guardian*. In the interview, Bauman spoke about his participation in organizations that were involved in the Stalinization of postwar Poland. He started by explaining what attracted him to Communism. Bauman explained that when Germany was defeated in 1945, he became a member of the Polish “internal army,” which he described as a “force” charged with “suppressing terrorism inside the country – the equivalent of that fashionable phrase now, ‘the war against terrorism’”. This is public knowledge – everybody knew that. I never hid it.” He wrote political pamphlets for soldiers: “My job there was very dull, in fact.” He described his role as one of “counter-espionage. Every good citizen should participate in counter-espionage.” Bauman was asked by Edemariam if his counter-espionage role involved informing on people who were fighting against the communist project. Bauman’s response was: “That’s what would be expected from me, but I don’t remember doing [anything like that]. I had nothing to do – I was sitting in my office and writing – it was hardly a field in which you could collect interesting information.”

In *Modernity and the Holocaust*, the excluded are placed behind a wall of indifference that Bauman refers to as a “neighbourless position.” Bureaucratic rationality and the specialization that accompanies it allowed actions leading to genocide to be viewed and performed as morally unproblematic and outside the area of cognition, such a digging coal or driving trains—actions that made the suffering of others “invisible” and “inaudible.” Bauman’s comment about his actions and experiences in the KBW reflect a moral indifference towards people he continued to label as terrorists, towards individuals who suffered at the hands of the organization he worked for and towards himself.

In an interview with Julija Tuleikytė (2013), Bauman discussed his use of the concept of *adiaphoria*. Bauman explained that bureaucracy was the factory of *adiaphoria*, irrespective of your personal feelings of morality. Your only moral obligation is an obligation to achieve the bureaucratic objectives that have been set for you:

“[C]ourt of law is interested whether your behaviour, step you have taken, transgressed some written letter of the law, or whether there is no such paragraph which makes you guilty. And if there is no such paragraph, you may feel personally tremendously guilty, but you will be declared innocent by the court of law. But your conscience won’t declare you innocent – that’s the difference. Court of conscience is far more demanding than these artificial introductions which were introduced by society” (Bauman, 2013: 224).

Bauman continued to believe that he was innocent both in the court of law and in the court of conscience.

When Bauman spoke about his time in the security forces following the Second World War, he “defaces” the Home Army as terrorists and does so without any attempt at re-humanizing the victims of the Stalinist terror in Poland. At best, Bauman is presented by Wagner as the unconcerned, unthinking bystander who witnessed the persecution of others with indifference and passivity. Bauman simply did not question how or why the “internal army” chose to define an issue as a security issue; an act of defining also becomes the act of allocating guilt. This provides the moral justification for acts of organized aggression against the Other who is defined as a threat to the community. The Polish Home Army refused to accept Stalinist rule post-1945, an act which was defined by Stalin as terrorism—ideologically, politically motivated amoral acts. From an Arendt perspective, Bauman was “thoughtless”: his lack of thinking, doubting, and questioning was what underpinned his actions

rather than wickedness at heart. Arendt would no doubt suggest that Bauman's immoral motivation is found in habit rather than passion.

In the last analysis, it is simply not possible to root out bias and subjectivity when doing history, and "doing biography" is never an objective activity. Wagner aimed to present a positive evaluation of Bauman's biography and to defend Bauman from his critics. In that respect, her project was successful on its own terms. The book adopts the stance of the Bauman Institute and, as is the case with almost all Bauman scholars, Wagner does not engage with the work of people who are critical of Bauman's work and his life. The Leeds University Library holds several of my books but not the three books about Bauman. Similarly, the library has many books by Ali Rattansi but not his critical appraisal of Bauman's work. There is an alternative story to be told. If Bauman scholars did engage with critiques of his work, they may move closer to the position Bauman outlined in his introduction to sociology, *Thinking Sociologically* (1990), where he explained that thinking sociologically may encourage us to re-think our experiences and challenge the prejudice and stereotypes of common sense.

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