
On *Modernity and the Holocaust* – inspirations and critique after three decades

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Abstract: The article discusses the main theses of Zygmunt Bauman's book *Modernity and the Holocaust*, the contexts of its writing and its early critical reception in the 1990s. As an introduction to the issue's theme, it focuses on the proposals for a contemporary interpretation of Bauman's work put forward by the authors of the articles published in this issue of *Studia Litteraria et Historica*. In the final section, the author proposes a reading of *Modernity and the Holocaust* in relation to educational issues raised in the 1960s by Theodor W. Adorno.

Keywords: Zygmunt Bauman; *Modernity and the Holocaust*; antisemitism; Theodor W. Adorno; education after the Holocaust

First published in 1989, *Modernity and the Holocaust* belongs to the most frequently cited works of Zygmunt Bauman. Together with *Legislators and Interpreters* (Z. Bauman, 1987), it raised wider interest in Bauman's thought, and brought him international recognition that was later confirmed by the popularity of books such as *Globalisation* (Z. Bauman, 1998a) or *Liquid Modernity* (Z. Bauman, 2000)¹. This year (2022) marks thirty years since the publishing of the first Polish translation of *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Z. Bauman, 1992b). For several years, Bauman was a member of the scientific board at the *Studia Litteraria et Historica*, and the journal's scope overlaps with many areas of his reflection rooted in sociology but stretching beyond the traditional boundaries of academic disciplines. Thus our idea to rethink the contents and contexts of *Modernity and the Holocaust*, and to search for new interpretations of the book, including critical ones, resulted naturally from both the thematic scope and interdisciplinarity of the journal in the study of the past and its uses for contemporary matters.

Significant for the re-reading of Bauman are recently published biographies (Domosławski, 2021; Rosiak, 2019; Wagner, 2020) as they prompt new questions about contexts of his major works but also those lesser known. One proof of the living academic interest in Bauman's reflection on the Holocaust and modernity is this year's publication of a collection of studies (Palmer & Brzeziński, 2022) whose editors are

1 An indication of this international recognition before the end of the previous century is the presence of four Bauman's titles – *Postmodern Ethics* (Z. Bauman, 1993), *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Z. Bauman, 1991), *Intimations of Postmodernity* (Z. Bauman, 1992a) and *Life in Fragments* (Z. Bauman, 1995a) – on the Books of the XX Century list announced by the International Sociological Association based on its 1997 survey. See *Books of the XX century* (n.d.).

also authors in this issue. When our call for abstracts on “contexts, interpretations and legacy” of *Modernity and the Holocaust* was being distributed, we had not yet known about the plans of publication of the British volume. We were interested in the status of *Modernity and the Holocaust* in Polish and international scholarship; how the book changed the ways of thinking about modernity, the Holocaust and their connections; where it proved less sufficient in grasping key issues, and which studies can help to identify such insufficiencies; what today’s social analysis, historiography and biographic findings can contribute to critical reflection on this book; finally, what makes Bauman’s perspective useful today, and what might make one reject it.

“Should we still read Bauman on the Holocaust?” is a question posed in this issue by Peter Beilharz, Bauman’s long-time friend and a scholar of his thought. Beilharz’s answer opens a wide possibility of discussion: it largely depends on “our purpose, and on our cultural and political setting”. Our specific research interests can lead us to perceive Bauman’s book as a reflection on modernity, as a particular perspective in Holocaust studies, or as a historical sociology of genocide (Nijakowski, 2013). One can see it as a contemporary exemplification of Weberian analysis or an application of critical theory. Even Bauman’s method of inquiry may be inspiring in itself, as a way out of conventional sociological empiricism. Bauman’s primary intention – discussed by authors of this issue – was to challenge “traditional” sociology. He thought sociology was unable to explain the Holocaust, and this inability resulted from the very orientation of sociological knowledge as justification for modern civilisation: “orthodox sociology can only deliver a message bound more by its presuppositions than by ‘the facts of the case’ [...] that the Holocaust was a failure, not a product, of modernity” (Z. Bauman, 2008, p. 5). Bauman argues the opposite: the Holocaust is the test of modernity, extreme evidence of modern civilization’s possibilities that include separation between action and moral reflection. Bauman develops his argumentation via the subsequent analyses of:

- antisemitic racism (as a tool of “garden culture” of the nation-state, that is, a culture oriented at removing incompatibility of Jews treated as strangers and demonised through various propaganda images [“conceptual Jew”]);
- uniqueness of modern genocide (purposefulness, division of labour, dehumanizing actions, bureaucratic rationality);
- ways of manipulating the situation of the victims (isolation, enforcing self-destructive actions consistent with genocidal policies, atomisation of the will of survival);
- the problems of obedience, authority and moral distance (inspired by Stanley Milgram’s experiments²);

2 See Milgram (1974). However, Blass (2002, p. 104) states that: “While Milgram’s approach may well account for their dutiful destructiveness, it falls short when it comes to explaining the more zealous hate-driven cruelties that also defined the Holocaust”. It is worth mentioning that Milgram’s experiments as well as Zimbardo’s Stanford prison experiment, which was another significant reference for Bauman (Z. Bauman, 2008, pp. 166–168), were recently criticised on methodological and ethical grounds (Bregman, 2020; Perry, 2013).

– questions of pre-societal sources of morality and social sources of the lack of morality (social making of distance, the question of proximity and responsibility etc.).

Modernity and the Holocaust concludes with a discussion that juxtaposes moral obligations and rationality of survival. Bauman's perspective thus not only reverses sociological thinking about morality but also provides an argument contradictory to widespread views on the relationship between ethics and the hierarchy of human needs. Bauman kept returning to ethical issues in the following decades, while his understanding of modernity was outlined in *Legislators and Interpreters* (Z. Bauman, 1987) and developed later in *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Z. Bauman, 1991). The latter book can be seen as a theoretical background for his earlier discussion of the Holocaust.

Another text that is significant for *Modernity and the Holocaust* is *Winter in the Morning* by Janina Bauman (J. Bauman, 1986), a survivor of the Warsaw ghetto³. Bauman wrote about his wife's memoir in the preface to his own work, emphasising the role of the book in raising his awareness of how the Holocaust should be understood. Janina Bauman's book is thus a key to Zygmunt Bauman's thought and their texts complement one another (Cheyette, 2020; Wagner, 2020). Yet there are more biographic contexts. Bauman's personal experience as a victim of antisemitism at various moments of his life (his childhood in Poznań, military service, and the antisemitic witch-hunt of March 1968) and his confrontations with nationalism as embodiment of the "garden culture" also had a likely impact on his reflection on modern devices of exclusion. Indeed, the "Jewish incongruity" discussed in *Modernity and the Holocaust* was Bauman's own fate as a refugee from antisemitic persecutions. He wrote on Jewish themes and antisemitism on many occasions both before and after his book on the Holocaust: he analysed the dynamics of Moczarite nationalist offensive of March 1968 (Z. Bauman, 1968, 1969a, 1969b), the condition of European Jews (Z. Bauman, 1988a, 1988b, 1989, 1996; Cheyette, 2020; Dawson, 2020), and he popularised Artur Sandauer's term "allosemitism" (Z. Bauman, 1998a; Sandauer, 1982, p. 9).⁴

A detailed discussion of the reception of *Modernity and the Holocaust* is a task beyond the scope of this introduction, but some early reactions are worth bringing forward. The reviews in leading sociological journals were rather concise and tended to praise Bauman's analysis of the Holocaust as a result of modernity. These reviews also connected his reflection to contemporary social problems. For example, dominant modern "managerial" culture was seen as a continuation of amoral bureaucratic logic of efficiency embodied by the Nazi regime (Banton, 1991; Richmond, 1990), and another

3 For more about the life and literary work of Janina Bauman, see Wolff (2011), Cheyette (2011), Pollock (2011).

4 Another significant biographic context can be pointed to, that is, Bauman's life in Israel after exile from Poland. On the one hand, some of his writings contain a critique of ways the Holocaust is spoken about in Israeli politics (Z. Bauman, 2008, p. 11, also Afterword therein, pp. 237–238). On the other hand, it was most likely during their early exile in Israel that Baumans engaged in discussions about the Holocaust that they both took as the subject of their works a dozen or so years later (Wagner, 2020). On Bauman's views about Israel, see also Domostawski (2021, pp. 468–514). The experiences of the antisemitic campaign in 1968 and the circumstances of emigration are told in Janina Bauman's autobiography (J. Bauman, 1988).

warning was identified in Bauman's description of abolishing civil autonomy in the Third Reich by centralisation of power and disempowerment of social resistance (Goldfarb, 1990). More critical reviewers soon pointed out Bauman's insufficient problematising of ideological aspects including his ambiguous linking of the Holocaust and anti-semitism. An author of an otherwise positive review (Turner, 1992) doubted whether modern rationality was the sole element of the Holocaust whereas the perpetrators were driven by quite irrational "male fantasies" – antisemitic, misogynist, and anti-communist (cf. Theweleit, 1987, cited by Turner). The reviewer also thought Bauman's "blame-everybody doctrine" leaves no space for blaming anyone since everyone is "a little cog in the machine" and everyone is guilty, and he asked rhetorically: "but what about the victims and the survivors?" (Turner, 1992, p. 508). Also generally favourable Milchman and Rosenberg (1990) suggested that more extensive use of the intellectual tradition of modernity's critique would have strengthened Bauman's argument; and they also pointed to a lack of clear definition of racism as well as what they saw as unjustified separation of morality from rationality and his rejection of social-historical origins of morality. Sue Rechter (1993) formulated similar criticism in suggesting that Bauman wrote "as if the Frankfurt school never existed", and that his vision of modernity is "too undifferentiated to be sociologically useful". The relationship between anti-semitism and modernity was also seen as unclearly problematised. While Bauman devoted two lengthy chapters to this issue, he conceptualised antisemitism as "anti-modern phobia", which seems contradictory to the central thesis of his book (Postone, 1992). Bauman's depiction of destructive tendencies of modernity was criticised as exaggerated in an early Polish discussion of his book published in 1993 in *Kultura Współczesna*, soon after the first Polish translation of *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Krupa, 2012). Critique of an inconsistent and overly pessimistic vision of modern civilisation, which marginalised the emancipatory current of modernity, returned in reviews published in following decades (Cannon, 2014). In defence of Bauman, we may quote his own words: "From the fact that the Holocaust is modern, it does not follow that modernity is a Holocaust" (Z. Bauman, 2008, p. 93). Yet this statement remains general, and a number of omissions, inconsistencies or even contradictions of *Modernity and the Holocaust* were indicated by Yehuda Bauer (2002) just over a decade after the publication of the book. Admitting Bauman's contribution was "especially significant", Bauer criticised vague definitions of genocide and modernity, wrong assessment of the functioning of the Judenräte as well as the German bureaucratic machine, and most importantly, diminishing the role of antisemitic ideology in setting the goals of the Nazi ideology and a misunderstanding of Nazism as "anti-modern modernism" and of Nazi Germany's specificity in comparison with other modern states (Bauer, 2002, pp. 69–86). One may add other weaknesses of Bauman's book: his overlooking of diversity of geographic and socio-cultural contexts of the Holocaust beyond the actions of the Nazi bureaucracy as well as an undifferentiated picture of Jewish experiences. These matters are also discussed in the present issue.

The articles published in this issue take various interpretive routes vis-à-vis *Modernity and the Holocaust*, focusing, on the one hand, on reading Bauman's book parallel to historical studies published in recent decades, and on the other hand, developing some conceptual ideas, including those brought by Bauman's other works. The issue opens with two articles that situate Bauman's book in a historiographic perspective. Katarzyna Chmielewska begins with highlighting the inspirations drawn by Bauman from works of the Frankfurt school, especially from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – clear, yet only implicit ones (Peter Beilharz makes a similar observation in his contribution, pointing to “a kind of uncanny absent presence” of Adorno and Horkheimer in Bauman's analysis of the Holocaust). Chmielewska also critically assesses Bauman's brief mention of the concept of authoritarian personality (based on post-war study by Adorno's team), which he reduced to an example of psychologising the process of the Holocaust, whereas the category could bring a much more promising research perspective for social analysis. Chmielewska focuses primarily on reading the sociological framework of *Modernity and the Holocaust* in opposition to the works of historian Timothy Snyder who authored the notion of “bloodlands” (Snyder, 2010), and especially his book *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (Snyder, 2015). Bauman's ideas still hold true: modernity was a frame for processes that lead to the Holocaust, and in such processes, especially in dehumanisation of the victims and in creating the moral blindness through moral distance and indifference of bystanders, state bureaucracy played a special role as an embodiment of instrumental reason. According to Chmielewska, Snyder's thesis is somehow reverse: what enabled the Holocaust was the decline of state institutions and the related breakdown of norms preventing the outburst of mass violence. Chmielewska argues that the Third Reich as a state of emergency still remained a state as such. She also criticises Snyder's argument for diminishing pre-WWII antisemitism and overlooking its cultural – and not only affective – dimension, downplaying nationalism as the logic of nation-state political culture, relativisation of genocidal agency of local murderers, as well as insufficient insight into local relations between non-Jews and Jews, including the role of Catholicism. Chmielewska maintains that, in the light of numerous historical works of the last two decades, Snyder's thesis on isolation of local non-Jewish populations from Jews during the Holocaust cannot be defended. A serious flaw of *Black Earth* is also a narrow horizon of political history. Chmielewska gives various examples of polemics from Snyder, and her text concludes with an outline of differentiation of perspectives in the field of Holocaust research.

Some of these matters are also discussed in Kamil Kijek's article. Taking inspiration from questions posed by Bauman, Kijek contextualises them in peripheral modernity, highlighting weaknesses of *Modernity and the Holocaust* from a perspective of Central and Eastern Europe, especially areas of interwar Poland. The author points to the fact that since the publication of the book over three decades ago, there has been a significant turning point, indeed a “revolution”, in understanding this regional specificity. The

change, epitomized by dozens of important publications, including many by Polish authors, took place under new conditions of closer international cooperation of scholars, which enabled the development of new research ideas. Kijek asserts, however, that these new studies often lack a “longer term” perspective reaching back at least half a century before the Holocaust⁵, that is, a period when specific features of modernity were shaped in structural peripheries of Europe. He finds such a helpful contextualisation of the war and the Holocaust in Snyder’s *Bloodlands* (Snyder, 2010), although he sees – much like Chmielewska – a major weakness of the book in its reducing the dynamics of genocide to “interaction between Hitler and Stalin” and in overlooking specific trajectories of development in peripheral societies of Central and Eastern Europe. Therefore he suggests looking at “bloodlands” through “Bauman’s window”. This might help to notice what is missing from Bauman’s view. For example, Bauman gives the major agency to omnipotent German state bureaucracy. Yet to understand local anti-Jewish violence during the Holocaust one must take into account also the political and socio-cultural “long shadow of the interwar period” east of the Third Reich: patterns of Christian-Jewish relations, dynamics of political and religious antisemitic agitation, methods of collective violence present at least from the 1930s; in sum, the factors that lead to alienating Jews from the universe of the “Polish community”. The key critical point about Bauman’s book is the overlooking of non-rational and non-planned dimensions of modernity: the collective emotions, tensions and phobias shaped by political ideologies interacting with “post-feudal social and cultural distances” that were rather aggravated than mitigated under the conditions of war and occupation. Bauman downplayed the link between “traditional” and “modern” antisemitism. Moreover, his discussion on the social production of moral indifference among the Nazi bureaucrats and German citizens can be applied to the relations between elites and dominated classes in Central and Eastern Europe already in the final decades of the 19th century. A fuller picture of the Holocaust seen in a “longer term” could also include agency of Jews themselves: autonomy and diversity of the Jewish society prior to World War II as well as a wide range of Jewish responses to the Shoah. Telling a story of unfulfilled assimilationist hopes of European Jews, Bauman’s work largely ignores other (and dominant in Central and Eastern Europe!) variants of collective aspirations of Jews in political, religious or cultural and educational spheres. Kijek argues that without taking Jewish diversity into account, Bauman’s reflection remains incomplete: it may highlight the logic of racist social engineering in Nazism but it ignores those social, political and cultural histories of emancipation and exclusion of Jews which do not fit the model of assimilationist modernisation.

5 It is thus a shorter perspective than what is typically treated as “long term” (*longue durée*) i.e. periods spanning hundreds of years (cf. Braudel, 1982; Wallerstein, 2001, 2004).

The articles by Chmielewska and Kijek feature critical perspectives most saliently. Their criticism aims not only at what Bauman's and Snyder's perspectives lack⁶. They both suggest that the popularity of Snyder's works in Central and Eastern Europe may result from the fact that his "geopolitical" frame relieves local participants in antisemitic violence and the Holocaust from responsibility, or at least may diminish the significance of the local socio-political dynamics and the lasting ideological and cultural patterns. Bauman's work can have a similar function as it concentrates on agency of the Nazi state (but, importantly, not on "Germanness" of the perpetrators) and marginalises genocidal agency of individuals and communities on the territories occupied by Germany (Kijek rightly notices that Bauman mentions only Ukrainian units among local collaborators of the Nazis). Perhaps the popularity of perspectives that synthesise a view of the past results also from the status of authors affiliated with dominant western academic centres and promoted by large publishers, whereas more detailed and micro-historical studies by scholars from outside of those centres are not as visible in global humanities and in international publishing markets. This subject deserves further discussion beyond this introduction.

Other authors in this issue make valuable contributions in suggesting what remains of Bauman's work as inspiration in today's social research and critical humanities. Michael Hviid Jacobsen undertook the theme of *ambivalence* as a universal element of the human condition, especially (though not only) in the modern era. The author argues that the concept of ambivalence is useful for analysing complex experiences under contradictory possibilities, expectations or choices that cannot be realized all at once. Tracing the conceptual history of ambivalence, Jacobsen takes us from early psychological approaches to sociology classics and ideas about social roles and tensions within roles to a perspective linking ambivalence with modernity, which was Bauman's own direction of study in *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Z. Bauman, 1991). Bauman saw modernity as the key background for studying ambivalence in that he saw the modern era as an order-aimed project, or "garden culture" characterised by "mixophobia", that is, fear of mixing; fear of diversity. In our context, the order is embodied by the nation-state, while the "gardening" operations target groups thought of as strangers. Mixophobia implies strategies that Bauman, following Lévi-Strauss, termed as anthropofagic and athropo-emic, that is, assimilation-oriented actions, or various forms of exclusion politics (Z. Bauman, 1995b, p. 2; see also Lévi-Strauss, 1961, p. 386), which render ambivalence a waste deposit of modernity. Although *Modernity and Ambivalence* was published two years after *Modernity and the Holocaust*, it provides a broad context for the latter book. Jacobsen thus inscribes the category of ambivalence into interpretation of the Holocaust that was the most extreme attempt to destroy the ambivalence of the European Jews by a nationalist (national socialist) regime that opposed the Enlightenment but at the

6 These articles continue a critical discussion of Snyder's works, which was present in *Studia Litteraria et Historica* already a decade ago. For example, criticism of the notion of "bloodlands" can be found in articles published as a thematic section in the first issue in 2012 (see "Bloodlands revisited", 2012).

same time was very modern in its hostility towards ambivalence as an obstacle to creating a new order. The author also traces the theme of ambivalence in Bauman's later works, for instance in his reflection on uncertainty and risk of the consumerist society. Jacobsen, however, argues that Bauman's approach towards ambivalence was not always negative, since the author of *Liquid Modernity* acknowledged the omnipresence of incongruity or contradictions of social life, and thus appreciated its ambivalent aspects against structural-functional models of society, and he even defended ambiguity as a factor of human freedom and a potential of possibility.

Dariusz Brzeziński concentrates on the mechanism of *adiaphorization* and on the process of social construction of *strangeness*. *Adiaphorization*, the process of emptying actions of their moral meaning, possesses three characteristics. Firstly, it weakens the link between action and moral reflection, which was made possible in the Holocaust due to fragmentation of organisation of the genocide process. Secondly, it is about "erasing face", that is, dehumanisation of victims, which was the task of antisemitic propaganda and the constant intensification of anti-Jewish discriminatory measures. Thirdly, organisational fragmentation enforces specialisation of tasks that are assessed according to criteria of technical and instrumental rationality, and not according to moral principles. However, the dangers of adiaphorization and construction of strangeness do not belong only to the world of "solid modernity" driven by visions of transforming the social order, discussed by Bauman in *Modernity and the Holocaust* and *Modernity and Ambivalence*. Moral indifference is also part of "liquid" type of modernity, that is, contemporary individualist and consumerist culture, which under conditions of neoliberal capitalism leads to uncertainty and privatisation of coping strategies. Adiaphorization in "liquid-modernity" could, according to Bauman, manifest in an attitude of distancing and disengagement as opposed to bureaucratic forms of control in "solid modernity", although in both cases human interaction is located beyond moral judgement. One response to the uncertainty of consumerism is the observable "nostalgic turn" which can lead to populism, xenophobia and the return of the politics of exclusion, and which is undoubtedly facilitated by the state institutions. Brzeziński refers to Bauman's analyses of "liquid-modern" anti-immigration moral panics and waves of racism in the early decades of the 21st century, although he emphasises the presence of the theme of strangeness in Bauman's works already in the 1960s and 1970s. Although late writings of Bauman are sometimes accused of pessimism and the lack of constructive vision of social change (unlike his early works inspired directly by Marxism), Brzeziński argues that Bauman not only expressed the need for shifting the ways social sciences understand and analyse modernity – a thought most emphatically outlined in *Modernity and the Holocaust* – but also called for the strengthening of those norms and attitudes which could effectively counter the destructive aspects of modernity.

The latter issue is discussed also by Jack Palmer, who contends that "[w]hat is often mistaken for gloominess and pessimism in Bauman's analysis" should rather be seen as

“a crucial resource for sociology in its speculative imagination of possible futures”. Palmer’s reflection focuses on dystopia and its “active” function in analysing the possibilities inherent in the society. Bauman called his vision of socialism “the active utopia” (Z. Bauman, 1976). Following Keith Tester (2004), Palmer considers Bauman a “sociologist of possibility”. This concerns also the dystopian vision of the Holocaust as repeatable in another form. Active dystopia is a “counter-image to the active utopia”; it is a heuristic tool to capture possibilities of the society that is always somehow at the crossroads. Contrary to what Bauman’s critics often claimed, the leading idea of *Modernity and the Holocaust* focused not on modernity’s responsibility for the Holocaust, and even less so on the inevitability of the Holocaust, but, indeed, on the genocidal possibilities inherent in modern civilisation. In other words, Bauman’s purpose was to highlight the most extreme possibilities created by the structural, institutional and ideational conditions of modern society. Palmer draws our attention to Bauman’s notion of culture, which was shaped long before the study of the Holocaust, and which contained a critique of “mechanistic image” of human beings popularised via technocratic ideas (a “managerial sociology” which serves the bureaucratic administration of populations). The critique offers an “activistic image” to replace the domination of social determinism with human actions, which are only partly predictable. Palmer discusses an unpublished manuscript written by Bauman probably in the mid-1970s, titled *Is the Science of the Possible Possible?* Bauman gave a negative answer to the main question, criticising the notion of “forecasting”, and opposing probability with possibility, with the latter located in the sphere of making (*poiesis*). This thread leads to reading *Modernity and the Holocaust* as a sociological reflection on possibilities of modernity rather than a sociology of the Holocaust. Bauman was critical of sociology as a knowledge allied with modernity, that is, a way of knowing closely linked with the object of knowing (which was modernity), and therefore saw sociology as unable to look critically at possibilities inherent in its object. “Active dystopia” helps to overcome this sociological incapacity to explain and understand the Holocaust.

Peter Beilharz reflects on Bauman’s book by discussing three texts published over the past three decades. The first is, naturally, *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Beilharz restates its main theses and emphasises that its main focus is modernity, while the Holocaust is seen as a test of possibilities of modern society. The main target readership of Bauman’s book were sociologists, not historians, and the fuller understanding of the book required getting acquainted with *Modernity and Ambivalence* (a point made also by Jacobsen in this issue). The second point of reference are four volumes edited by Beilharz, containing secondary texts on Bauman writings (Beilharz, 2002). Certain omissions of *Modernity and the Holocaust* were already visible by then, such as factors in the “Holocaust from below”. That is why, Beilharz argues, the key to understanding Bauman’s analysis lies in reading Janina Bauman’s memoir *Winter in the Morning*. As the Holocaust studies and Jewish studies developed in the 1990s, early criticisms chal-

lenged Bauman on stressing universal aspects of violence, such as instrumental reason, but marginalising antisemitism. The third reference is the already mentioned volume *Revisiting Modernity and the Holocaust: Heritage, Dilemmas, Extensions*, edited by Jack Palmer and Dariusz Brzeziński and published in 2022. New interpretations and polemics show that for Bauman himself as well as for the research field, *Modernity and the Holocaust* was a turning point. We can now also see much more of what Bauman missed, and which references should accompany the reading of his book today. Bauman offered a “meta-level” analysis or a hermeneutics inspired by Weberian interpretive sociology, philosophical-theoretical texts (e.g. Arendt) and historical syntheses such as Raul Hilberg’s (2003). Yet his work missed a “thick description” based on diverse data, which could include archival sources and tools of comparative analysis. However, all these insufficiencies do not disprove arguments of *Modernity and the Holocaust*, and the book can still inspire researchers, for instance in sociology of violence. Beilharz reminds us that Bauman was a forerunner and that the analytical ideas of his book and its message remain helpful.

The edited volume published by Palmer and Brzeziński at Routledge is more extensively reviewed by William Outhwaite. The book is a result of conferences organised in 2019 in Leeds and Wrocław on the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of *Modernity and the Holocaust*. The reviewer highlights two main themes. The first is the need to situate the Holocaust in the pre-modern history of antisemitism and in the later history of genocide. In Palmer’s and Brzeziński’s book, antisemitism is discussed by Joanna Tokarska-Bakir who critically assesses Bauman’s idealisation of pre-modernity and his overlooking of essentially non-modern ways of participation of Polish rural and small-town populations in the German project of genocide (Tokarska-Bakir, 2022). Arne Johan Vetlesen and Jack Palmer problematise Bauman’s framework in relation to genocides in Bosnia (Vetlesen, 2022) and Rwanda (Palmer, 2022). The second theme is an attempt to revisit the view of “industrial” aspects of the Holocaust vis-à-vis recent studies and memoirs of the survivors. Outhwaite highlights both themes against the background of events that in late winter and spring of 2022 unexpectedly provided a significant context for this collection of studies: “a new potentially genocidal war at the centre of Europe”. Another issue concerns a critique of Bauman’s terminology and it is postulated that the word “cooperation” with regard to non-resistance of some Holocaust victims, is replaced with “obedience” (Ferenc, 2022). The title of chapter five of *Modernity and the Holocaust* (“Soliciting the Co-operation of the Victims”) rightly raises objections, although Bauman explicitly admitted that: “If they had a choice, none of the Jewish councillors or policemen would board the train of self-destruction. [...] But they did not have that choice. Or, rather, the range of choices had not been set by them” (Z. Bauman, 2008, p. 149). The reviewer also notices that today Bauman’s perspective is problematic for both terms placed in the book title. Holocaust studies developed far beyond Weber-grounded analysis of bureaucratic machine and rationalising processes.

Furthermore, despite inspirations drawn from his wife's testimony, the author of *Modernity and the Holocaust* essentially ignored the voices of survivors (Wagner, 2022). Finally, the view of modernity requires nuancing, for example by considering multiple variants of modernity (Palmer, 2022).

The closing article is Michał Kozłowski's review of the book by Dorota Jarecka (2021) *Surrealizm, realizm, marksizm. Sztuka i lewica komunistyczna w Polsce w latach 1944–1948* [Surrealism, Realism, Marxism: Art and the Communist Left in Poland 1944–1948]. While the text was not submitted as a part of the thematic issue, the reviewer highlights themes essential to modernity of the mid-20th century doing so from a political angle as much as from an artistic one. Kozłowski notices Jarecka's replacement of a binary view of confrontations in the field of visual arts (e.g. avant-garde vs. Modernism, or avant-garde vs. socialist realism) with the triple configuration of "isms" from the book title. The triad, and the related confrontations during the years before Stalinist tightening of censorship in cultural politics, are discussed from the perspective of the Polish revolutionary Left of that time with significant references to France as well as the Soviet Union of the early revolutionary period. Jarecka focuses on important markers of Polish surrealism by discussing artistic works of Zbigniew Dłubak, Erna Rosenstein and Marian Bogusz, largely due to their biographies, references to fascism, anti-fascism, and the Holocaust. Another interesting trope is anticolonialism, which in this context is understood – unlike in the later and now dominant radical leftist thought – as the liberation struggle of the Jewish people against British imperialism for their independent state of Israel (Bogusz's painting *Mr. Brown Greets Fighting Palestine* refers to this struggle⁷). Kozłowski contextualises the support for Zionism in those years as an expression of internationalist solidarity, and he emphasises the need for problematisation of the historical and contemporary antifascism. He poses the question which he sees as timely again: "what exactly would antifascist art be in the fundamental sense". It seems that the question of the meanings of "antifascism" is indeed timely in the international arena, and it goes beyond disputes over artistic representations.

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When discussing the idea for this year's thematic issue of *Studia Litteraria et Historica* among the editorial team, a point was made that it is impossible today to read *Modernity and the Holocaust* uncritically, and that perhaps the book can no longer be

7 The description of the painting on the website of the Muzeum Sztuki [Museum of Art] in Łódź reads: 'Is the eponymous Mister Brown a typical Englishman? Or is he perhaps Eddie Brown, a deserter from the British Army who was an accomplice in the 1948 Arab bombing in Ben Yehuda Street in Jerusalem? The painter does not give clear answers to these questions. The painting does not depict an armed conflict, but a woman surrounded by grotesque faces and organic forms. The work draws on surrealism. It is persiflage: Bogusz hid mockery behind a serious subject. He unleashed imagination in the times when artists were expected to praise the brotherhood of nations. The picture was presented at the First Exhibition of Modern Art in Kraków in 1948. It was the last exhibition of modern art before the introduction of socialist realism as the official artistic style in communist Poland.' See: <https://zasoby.msl.org.pl/arts/view/9876> (*Marian Bogusz: Mister Brown pozdrawia walczącą Palestynę*, n.d.).

defended successfully. Reading the articles contributed to this issue, one realises that Bauman is still worth reading but his critics also must be read. Moreover, to quote Beilharz again, reading Bauman often means “reading sideways”: looking for confirmations or falsifications, making well-known theses disputable, and searching for inspirations that are only implicit, absent or overly general in Bauman. One such path leads to the question of what this analysis implicates for us today, and not necessarily on the level of research programme or “paradigm” but rather on a much less spectacular yet more demanding level of social praxis. In the light of reflecting on the Holocaust, the question of possibility of change – in epistemology, moral thinking or culture – leads to the matters of education. This theme has yet to be fleshed out from the presented interpretations of Bauman’s thought.

An in-depth discussion of formal and informal initiatives that have been undertaken in Poland for over two decades (and perhaps are still expanding) to teach about the Holocaust (Ambrosewicz-Jacobs & Hońdo, 2005; Szuchta & Trojański, 2000) or to foster learning through reflection on the Holocaust (and the two approaches are not necessarily the same thing) deserves a wholly separate discussion that would extend this introduction. Here we can offer a more general idea that is of significance not merely for didactics in humanities or social science classes on different stages of instruction, but for educational efforts in a broader sense both individual and social. In reading Bauman “sideways” it is thus worth revisiting his inspirations. Reviewers and commentators of *Modernity and the Holocaust* were repeatedly surprised that Bauman grounded his analysis in such a limited way in the Frankfurt school, indeed, reversing some of its perspectives. And in the few references he made – as in the case of “authoritarian personality”, a concept developed by Adorno and others (Adorno et al., 2019) – he oversimplified his interpretation. Postone (1992) argued that assuming the social origins of moral and amoral actions (and not locating the former in “pre-societal” sphere as opposed to social production of moral blindness) would strengthen Bauman’s theses. Indeed, it is difficult to grasp this differentiation without taking a metaphysical or essentialist orientation, since it is challenging to pose a question regarding human beings’ moral development, without asking about societal conditions of such development. And it seems that it is the development of the moral subject that may be at stake here; and it may become the focus of the “practical” reflection inspired by Bauman’s book, especially his proposal for a new sociology of morality.

What can be helpful is a well-known essay by Adorno on “education after Auschwitz”, delivered twenty years after the end of World War II. While its addressees were the Germans, the essay should be seen universally due to its message: “Every debate about the ideals of education is trivial and inconsequential compared to this single ideal: never again Auschwitz” (Adorno, 2005, p. 191). Today other symbolic names of sites of crimes can be added to this message next to Auschwitz. Adorno’s premise is in fact identical with what Bauman wrote a quarter of a century later: genocide can be repeat-

ed as long as the essential conditions enabling it exist, and the subsequent generations are not free of the danger of complicity. This idea resounds also in the articles of the present issue. Major points of Adorno's argument can be summarised as follows: it is necessary to identify the ways in which the perpetrators of cruelty are "produced", to make people aware of those mechanisms, and to prevent the formation of the ability to inflict harm. The key tasks here are the analysis of social situations and the making of favourable conditions – in early childhood and the later stages of education – for critical reflection on the motives of the perpetrators. What is at stake here is not so much the formation of some desirable standard personal models but the prevention of tendencies such as: blind obedience to authority and to the collective, reified consciousness, manipulative character and social atomisation (as a precondition of the lack of disobedience). Adorno's postulate boils down to the need to create ability to resist group ideologies of violence, via the awareness-raising about the perspectives of people experiencing harm: "The only education that has any sense at all is an education toward critical self-reflection" (Adorno, 2005, p. 193). Much of this argumentation was developed in his lecture from 1967 titled *Aspects of the New Right-Wing Extremism* [*Aspekte des neuen Rechtsradikalismus*] (Adorno, 2020). Adorno rejected moralising and instead emphasised that people subject to propaganda should be made aware of their interests, and that functional aspects of authoritarian ideologies must be exposed: "give them very drastic names, describe them precisely, describe their implications and thus attempt to immunize the masses against these tricks" (Adorno, 2020).

Unlike in Bauman's text, we deal here not with unspecified "pre-societal" sources of moral actions, presented in opposition to rationality, but with a triad that can be articulated as an objective of education: rational reflection on the "mechanisms of evil", affective attitude towards such mechanisms, and competences or dispositions to counteracting them. The "responsibility for the other", as understood by Bauman and Levinas before him, can be returned to the social and concrete dimension in educational ideals. An idea so outlined requires, of course, translation into the language of contemporary pedagogies and realities of educational situations, but it already implicates the vision of education as a constant "process of reflection on the needs of individuals and of the society at large", where the process takes place under democratic conditions and with an assumption of subjectivity of the participants in this process (Boroń, 2013, p. 205). Such an assumption is in line with Bauman's view of democratic pluralism as "the best preventive medicine against morally normal people engaging in morally abnormal actions" (Z. Bauman, 2008, p. 165).

The question of significance and usefulness of Bauman's work goes beyond academic debate. If we think the question has a political dimension, then such a dimension will be only marginally grounded in Bauman's status as a victim of ideological attacks motivated by antisemitism and anti-communism (and also due to his status as an object of public admiration). The political is much broader, since it is inspired by the need to

reflect on the Holocaust in our times. Accurate description, clear analysis and convincing interpretation – all three will foster the reflection, and they make disputing Bauman's thought worthwhile. If "classic" works are to serve us, they need less justification than they need critique that demands such justification. Yet beyond the changeability of knowledge, it is mainly confrontation with dynamics of the social world that provides contents to a critical stance. Bauman's ideas can help us succeed in such confrontation, but they can serve only as a component (sometimes central and sometimes not) of new perspectives. Let these new perspectives themselves undergo a validity test and let them inspire us to interpret the world and to change it. Let this inspiration be no worse than that which is drawn from *Modernity and the Holocaust*.

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Wokół *Nowoczesności i Zagłady* – inspiracje i krytyka po trzech dekadach

Abstrakt: Artykuł omawia główne tezy książki Zygmunta Baumana *Nowoczesność i Zagłada*, konteksty jej powstania oraz wczesną krytyczną recepcję w latach dziewięćdziesiątych XX wieku. Jako wprowadzenie do tematu numeru, koncentruje się na propozycjach współczesnej interpretacji dzieła Baumana, przedstawionych przez autorów i autorkę artykułów opublikowanych w niniejszym numerze „*Studia Litteraria et Historica*”. W końcowej części autor proponuje odczytanie *Nowoczesności i Zagłady* w odniesieniu do zagadnień edukacyjnych, podnoszonych w latach sześćdziesiątych przez Theodora W. Adorno.

Wyrażenia kluczowe: Zygmunt Bauman; *Nowoczesność i Zagłada*; antysemityzm; Theodor W. Adorno; edukacja po Zagładzie



Article No. 2935

DOI: 10.11649/slh.2935

Citation: Starnawski, M. (2022). On *Modernity and the Holocaust* – inspirations and critique after three decades. *Studia Litteraria et Historica*, 2022(11), Article 2935. <https://doi.org/10.11649/slh.2935>

This is a translation of the original Polish-language article entitled *Wokół Nowoczesności i Zagłady – inspiracje i krytyka po trzech dekadach*, which was published in *Studia Litteraria et Historica*, 2022(11), Article 2935.

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The work has been prepared at the author's own expense.

Competing interests: The author is a member of the Editorial Team of the journal and the Editor-in-Charge of this number.

Publication history

Received: 2022-11-07; Accepted: 2022-12-04; Published: 2022-12-31