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INTERVIEWS

ON THE RATIONALITY OF EVIL: AN INTERVIEW WITH ZYGMENT BAUMAN

Harald Welzer

ABSTRACT The interview discusses the interdependence of the scientist's biography and the field, the relationship between sociology and the Holocaust, and the question of aesthetics and style in writing on sociological topics.

KEYWORDS Holocaust • modernity • rationality • sociology • writing strategies

(**ZB:** Zygmunt Bauman, **HW:** Harald Welzer, **PB:** Peter Beilharz)

HW: Let us start with a question on your professional biography, your career as a sociologist.

ZB: I did not know that I made a career as sociologist. So what do you want to know?

HW: Very simple. The stages: your studies, your education, your academic positions, etc.

ZB: Well, the facts. As you know I was a soldier in World War Two. After the war, two years after, I started to study at the Academy of Social Sciences at Warsaw. I studied sociology and psychology and did my PhD in Sociology, 1956 at the University of Warsaw. Later I studied Economy at the London School of Economics. In Warsaw I became Lecturer and later Professor of Sociology. They threw me out in 1968 and cut off any possibility to get another job, so I took my three daughters and my wife and left the

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country. First we went to Israel, then I was offered a chair at Canberra in Australia, but I didn't accept, because my wife did not want to live there. Then I was offered the position in Leeds. That's all. I did the job for 20 years and was 14 years Head of the Institute. Then I retired and started working. That's it.

HW: My next question relates to the remarkable fact that you started to deal with the Holocaust issue relatively late, in the eighties. Remarkable insofar as your wife and other members of your family and in some way yourself have been involved in this specific part of history as victims of persecution. Why didn't you start earlier to deal with this subject?

ZB: I cannot explain it better than in the introduction to *Modernity and the Holocaust*. The story with the picture on the wall and the window. Many people know about the Holocaust, but there are very few who take it for more than an episode in history. I dealt with the Holocaust like anybody else. It appeared occasionally in my work, without systematic significance. It was an issue for historians. They are educated to deal with such subjects, they can reconstruct how everything happened. It was simply of no specific interest to me. And it was far away from my interest in organizations, culture and so on. At least it appeared to me it was far away. It seemed to be a completely different issue.

HW: Yes, but thinking of the book your wife wrote, *Winter in the Morning*, she was involved in this part of history so directly and painfully. I am a bit surprised that you perceived the Holocaust in such a distant mode.

ZB: Yes, Janina's book. I knew she was in the ghetto. But we didn't talk that much about it. You should ask her, why it had been that way. But the events have been sort of capsuled in some way for over 20 years. It was not easy to talk about it until she decided to write it down, to write down her history. There is nothing extraordinary about it. You know that many many victims, surviving victims, kept silent about the whole thing for many long years. And if life goes on after all of this and you make a career and live your life it is simply put into the background. It is quite normal to live one's life without contemplating the past all the time. And Janina was a very strong girl. She didn't lose her strength and she wanted to live. I didn't hear much about it. Even when she was talking about it it was quite fragmentary. It was like a picture, a very distant picture, it was like talking about somebody else's life. And the first time I read a survivor's story it was Janina's, my wife's book. I did not take notice of these things before.

HW: Then I will try another question. You are not just doing scientific work on the Holocaust and National Socialism, but it has been part of your own biography. I want to know something about your childhood experiences in this area.

ZB: Well, this is a difficult question. You probably heard about Franz Kafka asked Max Brod to destroy his manuscripts after his death. Not believing that he will do it, of course. Henri Bergson was much more determined,

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that he actually burnt not just his unpublished manuscripts but every personal document, with the purpose that his ideas should not be interpreted in the light of his biography, because he disliked this approach. Ideas have their own logic and life goes anyway its natural development. And that was his view. I think I share his sentiments. I find it very difficult to connect events in life with events in whatever happens when I am sitting in front of my word processor, think and write. This is a general remark, now two more specific remarks. First of all I'm not a student of the Holocaust, professionally. I don't pretend to be an expert of the field. I'm full of admiration and respect for historians like Mommsen or Hilberg who actually explored every single document and said everything that is necessary to say about how did it actually happen and what was the internal logic of the Holocaust process and so on. And I am in a very heavy debt to historians. I simply steal from their work. All the information about it. So in my book *Modernity and the Holocaust* I didn't try to explain the Holocaust. I tried to explain the modernity of the Holocaust. My primary interest is what can be learned from the Holocaust episode, about the nature of the society in which we live, of our society. If you insist on biographical causality, I could say that I started thinking about the Holocaust just after the book *Legislators and Interpreters*. It was my first attempt to come to grips with the unique and so modern civilization. And I came to the conclusion that what is the most important determining feature which sets apart this kind of civilization from others is that it treats the Universe with a certain plague of ideas and will. The idea which ends up with the Nazi idea of *Übersiedlung* where you can actually transplant people who by accident are in a wrong place into another place where they fit better. Now that is the major feature of modern civilization. So intellectually I was in a sense prepared to humble the Holocaust which was one of the most grandiose projects together with Stalin's idea of classless society. And I go on to criticize those grandiose ideas which seek to remake the world according to some sort of a better principle – rational, irrational – that doesn't matter, that's secondary. What does matter is that human will can actually remake the world so that it fits better some image of happiness, the good life, whatever. So I was prepared for that. But to drive a car you need your tank full of petrol, you need a steering wheel, two things which aren't connected, completely different kinds of things. But without any of them you can't drive. You can say that *Legislators and Interpreters* gave me the petrol. But the steering wheel which determined direction was my wife because she published her book and I learned from this book about the Holocaust. That's the point really, because I never was directly involved in it. My direct contact with Nazis and with Wehrmacht was very short – two or three weeks – and I found myself in another totalitarianism, that of Russia, and then I met Wehrmacht again.

HW: Would you explain this a little bit more?

ZB: No, it's that simple. There's nothing particular about it. I share this

kind of biography with so many other people. It's pretty humble, I'm not particularly excited about it. I was a small boy when the World War went east to Soviet Russia. And as foreigners we came from territories that were not part of Russia either before or then, we were transported to the extremities of Russia, where I studied until the Polish Army was formed on Russian territory. I joined the army. I learned about Holocaust like most people did. And that was a very horrifying event, it did happen. As I said in *Modernity and the Holocaust* for me it was just a picture on the wall, like other pictures, very many different pictures. Like one more picture. But I read this book, it was the first book of direct experience of the Holocaust which I read. Suddenly I understood it was more than a picture on the wall, it was a window on the wall, through that you can see on other issues. First of all, contrary to Goldhagen, the intriguing issue is: why did so many people who are not monsters who are even not anti-Semites, who are completely neutral and indifferent, participate in this mass murder? So many people were involved. Some of them were actually enjoying the killing business. But just some of them, not all of them. If you just took only those people who were actually enjoying it, then you wouldn't be able accomplish Holocaust, you could make a pogrom. But in *Kristallnacht* only 100 people were killed, in the Holocaust 5 or 6 million people were killed. You can't do this by pogroms. Even if you have thousands of *Kristallnachte*, you wouldn't accomplish that. In other words, the real problem is not why evil people do evil things, because that is a tautological problem. But why people who are not evil, who are good fathers and good neighbors and good workers, who go to church, consider themselves to be moral persons, why do *they* do it? There must be something in our civilization which enables them to do it. That can happen elsewhere. This is one question which intrigued me after reading Janina's book. The other one was a question why certain people found in themselves a moral impulse to resist this machinery of murder and risked their lives in order to save people who were neither their children nor even their acquaintances, just the others, people who were suffering. That wasn't trivial. Then I started studying the works of historians, because sociologists kept aside of the Holocaust completely. Then there was another discovery. I suddenly realized that all sociologists including myself told this beautiful story about modern civilization, progression, the fight against prejudice, superstition, ignorance and so on. And that's what brought me to the issue. I treat the Holocaust episode as a certain laboratory in which you can find certain aspects of modernity in crystal clear form. In normal circumstances they are dissolved, dispersed, so you don't see them so clearly, don't see their explosive power. Under laboratory conditions they suddenly show their real potential. That was the laboratory of unrestrained, unbridled modernity in its pure form. That's my answer really. I can't give you any other. And there were two roads leading for me, one was towards the study of a bureaucratic phenomenon, this adiaaphorization phenomenon, which in my

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language means making certain actions morally indifferent, exempt from moral evaluation. That was one. And the other topic was the possibility of being moral and being ethical under these conditions. How one can speak seriously about morality in the complex of modern civilization. I told you you will be disappointed.

HW: No, I am not. Let's try to follow my question a little bit further. Maybe by the way of saying that the Holocaust is not a scientific subject like any other subject.

ZB: Yes, that is my belief. I think it plays a very crucial and very central role in understanding the logic of modern civilization. But there are so many people after the Holocaust who produced very thick books about modernity and civilization without even mentioning the Holocaust. Ten years ago when I undertook to study the Holocaust it was taught as a special subject, an optional course for some students, crazy students, who wanted to interest themselves in such unique, unusual, irrational, idiosyncratic things. But it was never a part of mainstream teaching. Even in history departments it was a marginal subject. I agree with you. In order to understand the ordinary you must study it at the real moments when it becomes extraordinary and jumps into your eyes, reveals its inner nature. I think the Holocaust should be made a major chapter in every course about modernity and civilizing process. Norbert Elias could write about civilizing without mentioning the possibility of the Holocaust, but civilizing contains this possibility. It's the other phase of the same process. The crucial issue which is still under discussion is whether the Holocaust was a deviation or a logical product of modernity. I think to understand that important question it should be discussed over and over again and of course I think it would be unthinkable without modernity. The most terrifying lesson of the Holocaust is not that it could be done to us, but that we could do it, every one of us could in the right conditions be able to perform it, participate in it. I think that indicates that the Holocaust is not like the other subjects. It is a very important subject for the survival of humankind.

HW: I agree. And when I read *Modernity and the Holocaust* I was impressed by your switching of the perspective and turning the analysis of this phenomenon back to sociology as a science in itself. But if you make this turn the Holocaust comes closer also to the scientist. Every member of a modern society, a functionally differentiated society, attributes his part to the whole process. By analyzing this process and writing books on it we at the same time perpetuate this huge program of organizing and sorting. If we say the Holocaust was something like an archaic interruption of progress or something like this, a *Zivilisationsbruch*, as Dan Diner coined it, the whole thing is put very much into distance from our own work. And if we follow your reflexive turn of the problem we become part of the problem that we analyze. So the work of a scientist does in this way involve him into the whole problem.

ZB: Yes, it does, it should anyway, theoretically speaking. Your theory is absolutely right. In praxis I'm afraid it doesn't work, the praxis doesn't catch up with theory because nothing happened in sociology in those years. And there are very powerful western interests to preserve this beautiful fairy-tale which we keep repeating to every next generation about the even and beautiful, aesthetically pleasing and morally perfect modern modernity which enobles the world. It is the truth which is very hard to accept.

HW: Of course. But there is a kind of development in the scientific dealing with these things. The first is that classical disciplinary borders are more and more transgressed. Which is a result of this turn of perspectives. And the other thing is that younger scientists and researchers develop another approach to the Holocaust than the older generation.

ZB: But look [picks up a letter]: 'Institut für Genozidforschung'. It's again a number of specialists of the topic, people obsessed with this sort of thing, who keep meeting each other all the time in the same company. They talk to each other – do you really believe in transcending over the boundaries? It is difficult.

HW: A little bit. Actually yes. It's difficult. To change the whole direction . . .

ZB: Yes it is awfully difficult. The whole division of science is the projection of administrative convenience really. Because you need to have a university and departments and faculties and so on and representatives and you have to raise funds. People actually came to believe that the world is divided in the same way as the sciences are. But it is not, of course. You can teach psychology separately from sociology but trying to understand what is going on in the world without drawing from both is impossible. But if you look at the history of science, you will see that there are very many attempts to create this border across the modern communication. The outcome always invariably was bifurcation, the creation of a new discipline, which was as isolated as the older discipline from all the rest. Now there is this new discipline – *Genozidforschung*, Genocide Studies. Now, the more they are, the more difficult it is to communicate between the boundaries. There are so many of them. I remember reading 30 years ago, long time ago really, an article produced by a famous coagulologist. Coagulology is a discipline studying the clogging of the heart. He said in his article that this discipline was created only five years ago also by physicists talking to biologists and talking to chemists. And in these five years there were so many special journals in coagulology that he faced a choice between doing his own research and reading all these articles and papers. So I'm looking on this explosion of Holocaust studies and genocide studies with mixed feelings – it's a political phenomenon and a very dangerous phenomenon again. Here is a new discipline emerging, which will supply additional justification and absolution to the others, to historians or sociologists, not to care about it, because the specialists are doing it. Why should I care, I am doing sociology of organization, for

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example. Sociology of organization should be saturated with the lessons of the Holocaust. But why should I do it? There is Harald Welzer who is doing it, and so many others, it's their business, not mine. This is how it works, I'm afraid. In theory you are right, but in praxis I'm afraid I am right. I really wrote this book hoping that I would stir the conscience of my colleagues, but nothing happened.

HW: I don't agree. I don't think so. Sometimes the effects are coming up in places other than you would have expected. I think that your work and especially this book is highly recognized by the historians, maybe not so highly recognized by sociologists. But it is recognized. And it has an impact in the way that these people look different at their work than they did before.

ZB: But do you speak to other psychologists in your department about the Holocaust and about genocide or do you speak about genocide to other genocide students in other universities?

HW: Of course, also.

ZB: So are you speaking also to psychologists? And are they interested?

HW: Not really. But I am working together with historians, sociologists and political scientists . . . I see I am validating your arguments . . .

ZB: Yes, they have a common denominator, a common interest. They approach from different sides, but still they approach one topic and around this topic new disciplines are crystallizing. Is there an International Association of the Holocaust? Like the 'International Psychological Association'? My prediction is that there will be soon.

HW: Yes, of course. I think so.

ZB: They'll hold the regular congresses every two or three years.

HW: Well, we can continue with a last attempt to insist on my point. This kind of involvement and being close to the subject. I know nothing about your biography, besides the point that your wife wrote that book and that you did this work on the Holocaust from a sociological point of view. If you say you became interested after reading her book . . .

ZB: Well, that's not exactly true. I told you about the petrol and the tank. I came to certain crossroads, to certain points where I had to decide where to go. And the point was that I already had this idea of modernity as a society which treats itself and the world surrounding as an experimental ground, as territory for development. I use the metaphor of the gardener, but I could use the metaphor of developer. The developer comes and sees – oh, there is an empty field, it's awful, it's waste of money, why don't we build something there and get some profit out of it? And I wanted to study that. And the role of my wife was to show me that this was exactly what I wanted to study. And then I went to the study of the Holocaust and I understood that it was the right decision. So it happened, I can't really explain anymore than that. It was actually two years between *Legislators and Interpreters* and

the Holocaust book. It somehow triggered the whole series of further studies, the chain. Before I finished one book, I already had put aside quite a lot of questions, question marks, which made another one. That is how it worked. You said before about the importance of discussing Holocaust and drawing lessons and so on. I think it is even more important to research because I don't think that the Holocaust has an unambiguous lesson. It's a very ambiguous phenomenon and you can draw all kinds of lessons out of it and some really wrong lessons are drawn. Take for example the official version of the Holocaust, the worldwide official version of the Holocaust, which is Spielberg's film, *Schindler's List*. The lesson which is drawn there is who is stronger, who survives? And the whole issue of the Holocaust is the question of survival. This is a really dangerous lesson that you can draw from the Holocaust. Therefore I think the issue is even more important than you indicate, it is not just the question of remembering the Holocaust, it is the question of how to remember the Holocaust. And it is an extremely contentious issue, a very hot issue and full of danger. So I think that a wrong kind of memory is a posthumous triumph of the Holocaust. The Holocaust is a ghost, haunting our house, we are all living in an haunted house really. And we are all trying to exorcize the ghost but we are using different issues. And some of them are ever more disastrous than the ghost itself. I don't think that this is the full story, I think we are in the middle of it.

HW: The Holocaust has become the universal metaphor of the absolute evil. Can we talk about evil?

ZB: Very often people say that I repeat Hannah Arendt's thesis about the banality of evil which I don't. Because my formula is rationality of evil, not banality of evil. I follow Hans Jonas, who said that from the point of view of science the problem of saving mankind is equally important as the problem of destroying mankind. Science doesn't distinguish between the two questions. Both are topics of research. And he wrote about this separation of cognition, morality and aesthetics. Three different universes, three different criteria, three different sets of rules. And we still consider the separation of these three as the important basis of all this spectacular success of technology and science. But at the same time there is a mortal danger in separating science from ethics. There is perhaps good epistemological ground but there is no human ground to separate them. So the science which is freed from aesthetical and ethical considerations which is indifferent to them, which adrophorizes them, is a double exhortation. It may create war and death, and also it may destroy mankind. That's the issue, the rationality of evil. If you have a rational goal, like making Europe better fit for German people, for example. You want just to secure superior conditions for superior people. All the racists are perfectly rational. From the purely scientific point of view you cannot dispute it. Some people think that the Holocaust is a good example of scientific management, good operation. There are people who studied it as an example of rationality. What more needs to be said on the Holocaust?

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What is the cause of success of science is at the same time the cause of its mortal danger. So you can't have one without the other. That is the ambivalence of modernity. You don't have any radical cure, because what is good stands on the same roots as that what is evil. Whatever decision you take, there are risks involved. And you can calculate the degree of risk, but you can't avoid it. Ulrich Beck's idea is that people must reconcile themselves to the risky nature of modern endeavors. Then they will be less self-confident, they will be more careful, more cautious about what they are doing and more open to argument. The major danger is that people are taking risky actions pretending that there are no risks involved. The view of the mainstream in sociology is Manichean: good and evil are separate elements – here is good and here is evil. Now the only problem is that good should kill the evil, destroy the evil and everything will be good. In *Postmodern Ethics* I promote the idea that even very basic social situations are already ambivalent. There is not a straightforward choice between good and evil. Hardly ever do we have such a luxury of facing clear-cut situations – now that's good and that's evil. Sartre said once that Frenchmen were most free under German occupation. What he meant is that they had relatively straightforward choices – resist, a very straightforward choice. If you resist, you are OK, if you don't resist, you are not OK. But in normal daily life very seldom such choices occur. You can't have a party without offending someone. There is always someone who is damaged. And it's very difficult: not to live in ambivalent conditions, but to live in ambivalent conditions and being aware that they are ambivalent. That's awfully difficult. But I fear that is the only answer I can give. That is the strategy which I try to follow.

PB: You have a kind of personal strategy too, to step away from social sciences and turn to philosophy. So that *Legislators and Interpreters* opens the problem of the field of modernity, *Modernity and the Holocaust* focuses on the dialectic of modernity.

ZB: No, there is *Modernity and Ambivalence* first. And that is the conclusion from the *Modernity and the Holocaust*.

PB: A philosophical response.

ZB: Yes. The incurable, endemic, perpetual nature of ambivalence in modern human predicament. At the same time all modernity was about abolishing ambivalence. So it is fighting all the time against its inevitable condition; the war is doomed to be lost, but, before it is lost, it might do quite a lot of damage.

HW: Can we turn to a question concerning the formal and aesthetical aspects of scientific work? For example, if you take Horkheimer's and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, I think the greatest impact of this book was that it was not a book, it was just fragments. What you could learn out of it was less dependent on the content – there are many very problematic aspects in it anyway. But the inspiration and radicality lies between the chapters, between the fragments.

ZB: *Minima Moralia* is even a better example. The problem with writing is the linear nature of writing, that you have to express your ideas in a linear form. The ideal form of expressing would be a circle. But because of the nature of writing it is impossible unfortunately. I agree with you entirely. In all my books I constantly enter the same room, only that I enter the room through different doors. So I see the same things, the same furniture, but out of a different perspective. That's the only way I can do it, I don't know any other way. I also hate this linear nature of writing, I think it should go in circles rather. Whether it makes more impact on readers, I don't know, but what I do feel is that it reflects better the natural experience. It is the idea of the hermeneutic circle, you go round and round, you turn to the same subject with a different knowledge, you see it in a different light. And that's how human experience, personal experience works, unlike scientific experience. Psychologists sometimes wrongly present the development of the maturation process as a linear process, which is wrong. It goes in circles. Because you can return to what you have done before but in a different way. I am not really sure about this sort of writing – it makes it less comprehensive for the reader. But I believe it allows you to grasp better the nature of reality which you want to grasp. There is an adequacy between the form of writing and the form of reality.

HW: Well, if you take Hilberg's book *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders*. It is very interesting, because it is like a montage. It's completely different from his first famous book, *The Destruction of the European Jews*. What happens while reading *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders* is that the reader assembles the pieces of the process of destruction by her- or himself. I thought it is very interesting that Hilberg did it this way because in another sense he is a very orthodox political scientist. And he was heavily criticized in America, because nobody understood why this book was written in the way it was. So this is what I'm thinking about, what can be a formal, not just a substantive way of dealing with the problems we were talking about. What can be the form to do the work, where you can feel there is some kind of adequacy of what is been talked about and the style of the talk. A way not to just add another piece to the process that seems to be analyzed.

ZB: Well, my point is not how it ought to be. I think there should be many books, many different books. I don't think that one style would be the best solution to problems. And from this point of view, the way in which every person writes a book is sort of a conjunction of certain things he or she learned, some sort of image of how a book should be written and of character and temperament. You can't really help your temperament very much.

HW: But your books are done apparently in different style. The Holocaust book is very clearly structured. Do you think of this as a strategy because you were trying to convince sociologists?

ZB: Do you think it is well structured?

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PB: Well, yes it is.

HW: It is very different to *Modernity and Ambivalence*, very different, from style, even from the structure of the sentences.

PB: A good deal of your style otherwise is the excursive, isn't it. It is conversational. My recollection of the Holocaust book is that it is much more systematic.

ZB: Well, the Holocaust book was a one-topic book, right? *Modernity and Ambivalence* is a multi-topic book. That is the one difference. But there is also another, more general aspect. Physics or chemistry, which are influential, make impact on reality by their results rather than by their conversation. Our field is more conversational. The only way of making impact on reality is conversing with people. Sociology has to be readable. Unless sociology addresses the experience of ordinary people, it's useless. I don't see the point in doing it. Of course, you can get a PhD out of it, you can get a chair out of it, but that's all. It would remain a completely esoteric activity. If you do physics in such a way, it is OK, because you have these results, you make machinery. Look at this beautiful TV set. I have no idea what is inside, I never had a look behind the screen. I just push the buttons, and it is OK. But there is no sociological equivalent of this. You can't supply people with sociological equivalents of this wonderful machinery, to push buttons. They are buttons themselves. They have to push themselves. The only way is to engage in a conversation, to discuss things, to interpret. Not to legislate, but to interpret.

PB: I taught a seminar on Zygmunt's work with my students in Australia. Probably most of them come to Zygmunt's work after the Holocaust book, therefore with curiosity about the postmodern. I think they were puzzled, they were stimulated. There was a different kind of provocation going on. Partly because the style of the Holocaust book is probably not provocative or less provocative than the subject matter is.

ZB: But it was meant to be provocative. I wanted to provoke my sociological colleagues mostly.

PB: Whereas, the nature of writings about the postmodern is continuously provocative. And still, the style is less predictable. But I think some of my students were puzzled, what they took as a kind of defining focus in your work was the postmodern and yet this Holocaust book is actually modern. Perhaps there is more sympathy of style to do this subject matter.

ZB: I am the last person to answer questions like this. You know Marcel Reich-Ranicki, this *Literarische Quartet* in Germany. There was a similar broadcast equally influential in France, done by Antoine Piveau. They have absolutely different styles. They do the same thing, talking and reviewing books, but in a different style. Piveau invites all sorts of people, sits them around the author of the book, they press the author, trying to extricate out of him the mystery of the meaning. As far as I know, Reich-Ranicki never once invited any author to the *Literarische Quartet*. It is always people from

outside who discuss it. The difference is so striking, that *Le Monde* made an interview with Reich-Ranicki and asked why he never invited the author. The answer given by Reich-Ranicki was that the author is the last person he would ask about the meaning of his book. And I agree with him. Perhaps my distance from one topic is bigger than from the other. The Holocaust is a closed event. I can actually approach it from outside and treat it as an object. Postmodernity is something else, we live inside it. It is the ongoing experience, the developing experience, an unfinished process. So it is more patchy, fragmentary, episodic, impressionistic, if you wish, by necessity. It is not a closed period, not a closed chapter. One has a feeling that I am participating in the very thing, my work is a part of it in a sense. I wouldn't say that my book on the Holocaust was part of the Holocaust. But I can say that my books about postmodernity are part of postmodernity. But I am not sure whether I am right or wrong. Reich-Ranicki was right.

HW: Back to this point with sociology that it is not producing machines and buttons but is adding to conversations. Whose work do you like under this aspect? Which sociologist as an author?

ZB: Well, in Germany I have two favorites. The one is Ulrich Beck and the other is Claus Offe. They write for other people. And I think other people can actually disagree, agree, be furious, be enchanted, it doesn't matter, but think. I wonder whether non-philosophers, non-sociologists could take a book of Habermas? I think, it would be a waste of time. Habermas' world is very complex, very complete, a world of ideas. It is a world populated by concepts, not by people. Not by living acting people. It is sort of theoretical fetishism, to paraphrase Karl Marx, who speaks about commodity fetishism. So, it's a different world, a very interesting world, but separate from the real world. Here in England I think Anthony Giddens is a writer for ordinary intelligent people, not for everybody, but for a very wide range of interested people, open-eyed people. In France you have quite a number of them, you have Pierre Bourdieu and there are many people who write like that. In America you have Richard Sennett, very inspiring. But it is a minority. The ordinary academic sociologists write very hermetic, very often simply unreadable.

HW: What about Norbert Elias?

ZB: Well, Norbert Elias. When his 70th anniversary was celebrated, he was asked, how did it happen that he produced this wonderful book on the civilizing process. He gave a very simple answer: 'I didn't read a single sociological book'. I was torn apart, when I was still acting as a supervisor of PhD students, because I wanted to make my students as courageous and creative as possible. On the other hand, I know very well, that if I do it, then the PhD thesis won't be accepted by any committee. So I had to force them to abide by the rules. How to expect that people trained in such a way will become eventually creative scholars? If they do, they do it in spite of the training, not thanks to the training. It is another ambivalence. The surprising thing is that

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the most readable and profound sociologists spend most of their life outside academia. Karl Marx was never professor. Georg Simmel became professor one year before his death. Norbert Elias never had a chair in his life. There must be some connection between these two things. They were not bound by these silly rules, which pretend that sociology or psychology is like physics or chemistry or biology. It is not. Either it is able to communicate with ordinary people or not. The physicists do what they do, they describe the splashes of the screen of the gigantic cyclotron in California, which costs two hundred million to build. You don't have a cyclotron at home, he doesn't have a cyclotron at home, I don't have one in my kitchen. There is no problem like common sense in case of physics, because there is no common sense about cyclotron, about neutrons or about protons. They are free to interpret as they wish and to tell us the results and that's it. But in sociology we are talking about experience which is available to everybody, not about cyclotrons. But about marrying and divorcing, about being born and working in a factory or in an office, taking leisure time. Reprocessing what is already processed by everybody is what we do. It is secondary in a sense. We are interpreting what has already been interpreted. Unless we have a common language with this stuff we could as well keep silent really.

And now we should have whiskey.

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