



# CONVERSATION WITH JANINA BAUMAN AND ZYGMENT BAUMAN

***Ulrich Bielefeld***

***Translated by David Roberts***

**ZB:** Zygmunt Bauman, **UB:** Ulrich Bielefeld, **JB:** Janina Bauman

**UB:** You had to begin life again twice, after the liberation of Warsaw at the end of the National Socialist terror and after 1968, when you left Poland. Your experiences of the liberation of Poland were very different.

**ZB:** When I was 18 in 1943 I joined the Polish Army which had been formed in Russia. I had lived since 1939 in Russia and thus had no personal experience of the occupation of Poland. My parents as Jews were worried by the arrival of the Nazis and we went to eastern Poland which Russia had occupied. Then we moved further and further into the country. My parents stayed in the north of European Russia until they returned. I joined the Army and returned to Poland with it. That's how it was. I was in Poland during the Warsaw uprising, my regiment was on one side of the river, Janina on the other.

**JB:** We didn't know each other then. All the same I prayed to him: please take Warsaw. We first met in 1948. We were both studying at the same university, the Warsaw Academy of Social Sciences. There was no sociology then. I studied social sciences and journalism.

**ZB:** I took my Masters degree at Warsaw University in philosophy, but my further studies (doctorate and higher doctorate) were in sociology.

**UB:** You were both active members of the Communist Party. You had a concrete utopia, you wanted to build a socialist society.

**ZB:** Certainly. Poland was a completely underdeveloped country before the Second World War. There were eight million unemployed, no

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hope, an unimaginable social inequality. And we had the idea of creating a new Poland, with all our energy.

**JB:** I joined the Party only in 1951, much later than Zygmunt who joined in 1946. Before I started studying and before I met Zygmunt I was a Zionist. I was not brought up as a Jew. Nobody in my family was religious, nobody was a Zionist. It was the Nazis who made me a Jew in the ghetto. I wanted to go to Israel and work in the desert. I was ready to go and it was only by chance that I didn't. Then I started studying, read Marx and Engels and began to think. Then I met Zygmunt. He was the first honest communist that I had come across. I hadn't given much thought to communism. He was the first one I really respected.

**ZB:** I made some anti-Zionist propaganda and persuaded her to stay. I was not brought up as a Jew. I had no relation to Jewish life. I hadn't been in the ghetto. There I might have learnt to be Jewish. One can say many bad things about the Soviet Russians of the time but the problem of nationality was not very important. I was Jewish but nobody took any notice. I joined the Polish Army, returned to Poland and felt myself to be Polish. I only recognized my Jewishness in 1967. Then there was not only an anti-intellectual but also an anti-Semitic campaign in Poland.

**UB:** You left the Party then – and became as a Polish Jew a stranger in your own country. What happened to make you leave the country?

**ZB:** In the first place we left Poland for a very simple reason. We had three daughters and we had lost our jobs. We had been thrown out everywhere. In March 1968 the student revolt in Warsaw occurred and six professors were accused of responsibility for the student protests against the Party. All six of us heard on the radio on 25 March 1968 that we had been dismissed. Nobody had said anything about it before. Leszek Kolakowski was one of them. Only one stayed in Poland and has now got his professorship back. He was unemployed for years.

**JB:** From 1967 on we were being reminded again that we were Jews or Zionist, which Zygmunt never was.

**ZB:** The communist newspapers of the time read like the Nazi *Stürmer*, they used the same language. Someone even discovered that an instruction from leading members of the Communist Party was a literal translation from the *Stürmer*. I had never changed my name. Others who had earlier changed their names to Polish ones were 'unmasked' in the newspapers. It was a really terrible atmosphere then. Most Polish Jews had the same experiences. They did not feel themselves Jewish but Polish. Suddenly they had to realize that this was not the case. If you ask me how I became a Jew, this was the way that it happened.

**UB:** If I take your earlier writings – *Between Class and Elite, Culture as Praxis* – I can't read your Polish work – I find in them the classical sociological themes.

**ZB:** You are right. I don't think all this influenced my work. I only

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became interested in Jewish problems and the role of the Jew in modern culture – I must admit – through the influence of Janina's *Winter in the Morning*. I suddenly realized that I had absolutely no understanding of this event. Like most sociologists I hadn't thought about it. It was only a marginal event then, the exception to the rule. Well, I came to other conclusions. Ambiguity and ambivalence, terror and anxiety about ambivalence are in fact the central theme of modern civilization, not just a marginal phenomenon. But I didn't recognize this through direct personal experience but through intellectual influences. I did not experience the process of assimilation, which I described in *Modernity and Ambivalence*, I was not part of this process. It was my ancestors who went through that for me, I was already on the other side and didn't belong to the assimilating generation.

**UB:** To use your image for the assimilating generation: you weren't sitting on the slippery barricade, pulled to both sides and pulled apart?

**ZB:** Perhaps I thought at that time that there is no barricade. I didn't see it. There were problems: as a Pole I was not a Soviet Pole but a foreign Pole in Russia. But I was a Pole in Russia, not a Jew.

**UB:** You went to Israel from Poland in 1968. Was that the only possibility of finding a position or was Israel a goal, your country?

**JB:** As far as I'm concerned, my family was in Israel. If I had to leave my country then I wanted to go to my mother and my sister. I wanted to go to Israel, Zygmunt never wanted to. On the other hand, we were only allowed to go to Israel, we were pushed out with this destination. We couldn't stay any longer. We had both been dismissed. After 20 years work for Polish cinema I was dismissed.

**ZB:** In order to leave Poland we had to apply for an entry visa. Only Israel gave such visas. This was the only way to get a one-way exit visa from the Polish authorities. Nevertheless, we didn't have to go to Israel. We were first in a refugee camp in Vienna and I had an invitation from Robert McKenzie to come to England, also invitations from Montreal and Vienna. Prague University also offered me a position, it hadn't yet been taken over by the Russians. Only from Israel I didn't have an offer. We went there without any security, I couldn't speak Hebrew and thus could only teach in English. Nobody offered me a job despite my enquiries. But we didn't go there for a position but because Janina wanted to go to her mother and sister.

**UB:** Why did you leave Israel after three years?

**ZB:** I wanted to leave after one year.

**JB:** He never wanted to be there.

**ZB:** I had another possibility in Australia and I still regret not going there as I like Australia a lot. But Janina was not willing to go, it was too far. Then I got a telegram from Leeds University inviting me and I accepted. They wanted someone for the vacant Chair of Sociology and we moved to Leeds.

**UB:** It was then a long time before you began to be interested in the problem of ambivalence, of the 'war against ambivalence' and the Holocaust.

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The catalyst was Janina's description of her ghetto experiences. The metaphor of the 'state as gardener', of the state as the one who distinguishes between plants and weeds, was first used by you in *Legislators and Interpreters*. Or were there already anticipations in earlier writings?

**ZB:** Beginning with the very early book *Culture and Society* – published in Poland in the early sixties – my interest switched from social structure to culture, in which I saw the most powerful historical force. *Legislators and Interpreters*, the first book of the trilogy of books about modernity, is the continuation. My interest in the internal contradictions of modern culture extends over many years, it is difficult to give an exact date. Before *Legislators and Interpreters* I wrote *Memories of Class*. This was my farewell to reading history as class history. In it I critically examined explanations of history, of social dynamics in terms of class conflict. Perhaps a little earlier than most western sociologists. I was thus in a situation comparable to the present situation in Europe because the disappearance of the conflict between the communist and western world has left an empty space. But what takes its place, what the central theme is now, that is what I was searching for and *Legislators and Interpreters* was the product of my search. The beginning of my interest in this problematic was a book about intellectuals.

**UB:** Is it still a long way from intellectuals to strangers?

**ZB:** No. You will find in this book a reference to the underdetermined position of intellectuals themselves. Intellectuals are themselves strangers. One can't be an intellectual if one is not also to some extent a stranger. Niklas Luhmann writes that we are all to some extent 'displaced', and Karl Mannheim only repeated what Shestov had already written. This theme, the question of the stranger, of alienation, and the inherent critique which is endemic as it were to the position of the intellectual, continues to interest me. I wanted to find out what experience lies behind it and how it is reflected.

**UB:** Was the 'invention', the production of the 'conceptual Jew' as 'inner enemy' the result of an intellectual effort, of an intellectual definition?

**ZB:** You remember that in *Modernity and the Holocaust* there are two chapters concerned with anti-Semitism and the comparison of the two very different forms. The old and the new anti-Semitism are very different phenomena. The new anti-Semitism is based on quite different conditions to the old. The new grounds I found in the problem of the 'slimy', the 'liquid'. The stranger sits on the barricade, he is neither here nor there, he belongs neither inside nor outside. This thorn in the body of modern society is directed against the kernel of the modern project; transparency, clarity, rationality. But this didn't work.

**UB:** The image of the 'state as gardener' gives the impression of unity, of a unified development of the emerging Europe of national states. There are, however, different gardens and different types of garden such as the English and the French gardens, there are different forms of the desire for

assimilation, and there are also perhaps historical conditions which apply specifically to Germany and made the developments leading to the Holocaust in Germany more probable.

**ZB:** Perhaps I overemphasize the non-national grounds for the origins of the Holocaust, that is, overemphasize that it is not a German question. I think this is necessary because the whole tendency of argument in sociology is to do what you did, that is, to relate the event to specifically German questions. But what I wanted to say and still say at every opportunity: don't be self-satisfied, the roots of this event are everywhere, they are only waiting to be fertilized and to bear fruit. Of course there were particular grounds in Germany which didn't exist elsewhere. French anti-Semitism was much livelier than in Germany before Hitler. The first really anti-Semitic pamphlet, which strongly influenced the development of modern anti-Semitism, was Louis Drumont's *La France Juive*. The first person to write that Jews should be burnt in ovens and be gassed, was the Frenchman Céline. Nobody in Germany wrote about incinerating Jews. They did finally incinerate the Jews but nobody wrote about it. The material, the raw material was there, what made Germany different? Simply that it became a nation later and this process is still not completed, because they now have problems with their East Germans. The nation was very young, very insecure, and in addition the state was destroyed in 1918 and the national state lost its continuity, its traditional legitimacy. One had to start again, there was the Bavarian revolt in Munich as well as others. All this created a specific problem of identity which was far more virulent than in all the other long-established national states.

**UB:** You mean that the state is of great importance for the protection of minorities or strangers? We need the state but at the same time it is also responsible as gardener for the atrocities done to strangers and precisely to the exemplary strangers, the Jews.

**ZB:** Contemporary neoliberalism is in part the product of the fact that the holy trinity of the traditional nation state, economy, political and cultural sovereignty, is dissolving. Economic sovereignty is dissolving upwards into the European institutions, into multinational companies, etc. Indeed the state has only a limited economic sovereignty. At the same time it is losing its cultural sovereignty as it is no longer very interested in cultural homogeneity, in assimilation, in unifying. This is dissolving downwards into the market, into the groups, the ethnic minorities. What is left is pure political sovereignty without economic or cultural support. And this is what makes today's nation state so weak. There is probably no power which could organize an industrial action like the Holocaust. On the other hand there is plenty of space for 'tribal' violence.

This interview originally appeared in *Mittelweg* 36 (1993) and is published with permission.