# Editors Introduction: Through the Window Again: Revisiting *Modernity and the Holocaust*.

Jack Palmer & Dariusz Brzeziński

*This is a book which grew out of the experience that spans the until recently deep and seemingly unbridgeable divide between what we used to call ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ Europe. The ideas that went into the book and its message gestated as much in my home university of Warsaw as they did in the company of my colleagues in Britain, the country that – in the years of exile – offered me my second home. These ideas knew of no divide; they knew only of our common European experience, of our shared history whose unity may be belied, even temporarily suppressed, but not broken. It is our joint, all-European fate that my book is addressing*

(Bauman, 1991b: 137)

These words were uttered in 1990 by Zygmunt Bauman upon receiving the Amalfi Prize for *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Established in 1987, the award associated with the beautiful coastal town in Italy rewards works of sociology which constitute a significant contribution to the development of the discipline. It is also a commendation bestowed upon works that strengthen European culture[[1]](#endnote-1). Bauman’s orientation to and embeddedness within a ‘common European experience’ are consequential for several reasons. They lay bare his disagreements with any *Sonderweg* reading of European history, in which Germany took a uniquely twisted path to and through modernity which contained the propensity for genocidal anti-Semitism. Having been made by a Jew born in Poland before being forced to move from east to west at the behest of a Soviet satellite state which he once served, the arguments of *Modernity and the Holocaust* struck a thunderbolt in the German *Historikerstreit* whose embers had barely cooled in 1989 upon its publication*.* This is one of the reasons why the eminent German sociologist, Hans Joas, termed it ‘one of the decisive texts of a *sociology after Auschwitz*’ (Joas, 1998:48; see also Varcoe, 1998).

The evocation of a heritage and fate shared by Europe *tout court* also chimed with the processes that were converging toward the Maastricht treaty of 1992. As Tony Judt memorably termed it in his panoramic survey of post-war Europe, a particular form of Holocaust remembrance came, after the collapse of Soviet state-socialism, to constitute something like a ‘European entry ticket’ (Judt, 2005:803). Bauman's account aligns with this cosmopolitan vision. Conspicuously absent in his interpretation were many of the mainstays of official Marxist interpretations of the Holocaust which had hitherto been prevalent in Eastern Europe. Fascism or anti-fascism are barely mentioned in *Modernity and the Holocaust* let alone ascribed any causal significance. The precipitating context of the Second World War – in which the memory of the Holocaust was for many years subsumed, in narrations of national trauma and martyrology – is also largely elided (Subotić, 2019). And though Bauman owed a significant debt to the Frankfurt school, as Jonathon Catlin’s contribution to this volume outlines (see also: Jacobsen and Hansen, 2017), and although he remained a resolute socialist after expulsion from the Polish People’s Republic, he largely avoids the ‘Western’ Marxist analysis of the Holocaust in which it unfolded as a pathology derived from the crisis tendencies of capitalism, explicable in psychoanalytic terms. Indeed, in *Modernity and the Holocaust* and works thereafter Bauman would elucidate the genocidal potential of state communism, the ‘other totalitarianism’ whose shadow casts over the twentieth century (Beilharz, 2002)[[2]](#endnote-2). The common referent was modernity, a condition that Bauman interpreted as the obsessive pursuit of order and the eradication of ambivalence, indeterminacy and uncertainty, and which incorporated the entangled histories of Auschwitz and the Gulag.

As Lydia Bauman, Izabela Wagner and Griselda Pollock point out in this volume, *Modernity and the Holocaust* is intimately (and ambiguously) tied to a book of Janina Bauman’s, his first wife and life companion from 1948 until her death in 2009. This book is *Winter in the Morning* (J. Bauman, 1986), her testimony of adolescence in the unimaginable circumstances of the Warsaw Ghetto and in hiding in various locations in Poland. It achieved significant notoriety and was later turned into a stage play, the acclaim greatly pleasing Zygmunt. As he wrote to a friend: ‘That success may come to persons like her, is one of the few remaining arguments in favour of letting this world of ours to continue’[[3]](#endnote-3). Zygmunt claimed that Janina’s testimony shattered his prior understanding of the Holocaust as akin to ‘a picture on the wall: neatly framed, to set the painting apart from the wallpaper and emphasize how different it was from the rest of the furnishings’ (MH: vi). After reading it, he said that the Holocaust instead became a ‘window’ through which one could glimpse the genocidal possibilities latent in modern societies, actualized in a unique concatenation of routine features of modernity. ‘What I saw through this window I did not find at all pleasing’, wrote Bauman. ‘The more depressing the view, however, the more I was convinced that if one refused to look through the window, it would be at one’s peril’ (MH: viii).

*Modernity and the Holocaust* can now be treated, over thirty years after its publication, as an *artefact*, itself akin to a picture hung on the wall, neatly framed within its spatio-temporal context as a testament to the ‘ongoingness’ (Wagner-Pacifici, 2017:5) of the event of the Holocaust in memorialisation and hauntology (see: Bauman 1998a). But the work retains a *heuristic* power, on its own substantive terms*,* offering its own ‘window’ not only as a scholarly tract on the Holocaust (which, as several contributors to the volume argue, has in some senses been outstripped by historiographical developments and new data sources unavailable to Bauman at the time of writing) but as a source for thinking about the dark inner potentiality of modern societies. *Modernity and the Holocaust* is, to use Umberto Eco’s expression, an ‘open work’ (Eco, 1989 [1969]), the horizons of which fuse with ours as we read it in the present Though familiar and even uneasily canonical, his claims remain insightful, provocative and assist in the contemporary interpretation of social phenomena of violence, dehumanisation, cruelty and indifference.

The book also resonate beyond the narrow confines of sociology. So much is demonstrated by this collection which brings together scholars from across the social sciences and humanities, and from across ‘the until recently deep and seemingly unbridgeable divide between’ (Bauman, 1991b: 137) East and West, especially from Poland and Britain, the twin poles of Zygmunt Bauman’s exile. It revisits his critical messages concerning the limitations of understanding and explanation, the dark side of the condition of modernity and the failures of moral responsibility. Moreover, the collection necessarily looks beyond Bauman’s analysis. From various angles, the authors evaluate *Modernity and the Holocaust* in the light of new developments in Holocaust historiography, theoretical advances in the sociology of modern societies, the persistence of large-scale genocidal violence after the book’s publication, as well as the acute problems of remembrance in the 21st century in various contexts. The collection offers a responding ‘voice in a discourse’ that *Modernity and the Holocaust* established, in the hope that, as Bauman put it in his Amalfi speech, it ‘will stay in the focus of our shared vocation’ (Bauman, 1991b: 138).

### *Modernity and the Holocaust* as Artefact: Biography, History and Memory

*Modernity and the Holocaust* – like all of Bauman’s work – is intimately bound to the world that it seeks to understand. Born in interwar Poznań, in 1925, he fled eastwards into the Soviet Union with his parents when the Nazis invaded Poland. In ‘The Poles, the Jews and I’ - an unpublished memoir written for family members in 1987 - he recalled the encroaching threats of fascism and antisemitism:

We read of the mounting physical violence – of the beatings of Jewish students in the universities, of mini-pogroms in the rising number of rural areas and small provincial towns, of self-styled fascist troopers marching through the Jewish shtetls while watched rather apathetically by the police not particularly eager to be involved[[4]](#endnote-4)

Recollected also are the bombs which fell onto Poznań until the family left on one of the last trains on the night of the 2nd September, 1939. They were pursued by planes which, as Bauman recalled, ‘flew over so close that I can bet I saw the malicious grin on the face of the pilot’. When German soldiers rode into Włocławek, where the train had stopped, Zofia Bauman cut bits of her son’s pyjamas into stars to be affixed to his coat: ‘the signs of our Jewish distinction, now officially recognised by our new rulers’[[5]](#endnote-5). In October, they arrived at the Soviet border, and fortuitously missed evacuation to Ostrów Mazowiecka, where the first wartime massacre of Polish Jews occurred.

‘I escaped that part of the world’ Bauman reflected upon learning of Janina’s experiences in the Poland he had left behind (MH: vii). His wartime experiences were those of a refugee then those of a combatant. Remembering marching back towards Poland as a 19-year-old soldier in the First Polish Army, he noted that ‘my first sight when my battery entered Lublin was Majdanek … - one of the most horrible extermination camps the Nazis built in occupied Poland. The corpses were still lying around in heaps, their recycling begun yet unfinished’ (Bauman, 2020:31; see also Wagner, 2020a:93).

After the war, he threw himself into the project of re-creating a devastated nation, now under Soviet control. He became a committed communist and served in a military position – and his role in the administration remains a source of controversy in Poland today – until discharged in 1953. Then, he turned to sociology, lecturing at the University of Warsaw after gaining his first post in 1954. Initially, he was inspired by Marxist-Leninism and passionately supported the communist regime (Bauman and Wiatr, 1953: 69-99). Over time, however, his position changed, his growing disagreement with the Polish United Worker’s Party’s policies playing a significant role (Tester 2004: 43-46). Under the influence of figures like Julian Hochfeld, Stanisław Ossowski, and Antonio Gramsci (see Wagner 2020a, 171-190; Bauman 2008: 231-240; Tester 2004, 34-43), Bauman developed in his sociological work a Marxist-humanism, within which a philosophical anthropology of praxis is central (Bauman 1967: 399-415, see also Brzeziński 2017: 61-80). It was founded on an ‘activistic image of man’, consciously distinct from the ‘mechanistic image’ of orthodox Marxism, behaviourism and structural functionalism which sees the human as a ‘reactive being … determined by outer forces or inner drives’ (Bauman, 1967:13). The activistic image of man, by contrast, emphasises human action as creation, continuously engaged in the structuring of the world, a process that he terms *culture* (Bauman 1973)*.* Human behaviour, it transpires, is at best only partly predictable and manageable. In this context, it is worth emphasizing that as early as the late 1960s, Bauman clearly criticized all attempts to create a perfectly ordered social world. He not only considered them unattainable, but argued that they also deprived individuals of creative agency and moral responsibility (Bauman 1966: 145-162; 1966: 451-464). This latter issue was of particular importance in his later analysis of the Holocaust.

Bauman’s ‘revisionism’ had long made him a target of state surveillance and, in the wake of the Six Day War, his Jewishness was deemed incompatible with his Polishness. Janina’s second memoir, *A Dream of Belonging* (1988), recounts the dramatic struggles of post-war Poland which led to their expulsion as part of an anti-Semitic and anti-revisionist campaign in 1968, known today as the ‘March events’ (Stola 2006, 175-201; Eisler 1998, 237-252). It was the first time, he said, that his own Jewishness had been brought to the forefront of his self-identity (Bauman, 2004b:11-12), extraordinary given the childhood experiences recounted in his memoir. Zygmunt, Janina and their three daughters – Anna, Irena and Lydia (the last of whom contributes to this volume) escaped into exile in Israel. Here, he wrote a prototype of the ‘Jewish writings’ (Cheyette, 2020) which would occupy him in the late 1980s and of which *Modernity and the Holocaust* is a part. It’s English title ‘The End of Polish Jewry’ (Bauman, 1969) does not quite carry the same weight as the title of the Polish manuscript in the Janina and Zygmunt Bauman Papers, ‘Endlösung 1968’[[6]](#endnote-6).

Bauman could no longer believe in large-scale ideational projects of redemption, be that Soviet communism or nationalism, not least Israeli nationalism (Bauman, Hafner 2020:37-38). In a 1971 piece published in *Haaretz*, he opined that the country stood at a crossroads between demilitarisation and further militaristic entrenchment and, if it proceeded in the latter direction, it would have devastating consequences for the region:

The time has come to harness all of our energy towards the discussion, experimentation and planning required so that we are not caught by peace unawares, not ready to win the battle to build a society as we had learned to vanquish enemies at war. We will do our future a disservice if we adhere too closely to priorities rooted in the past[[7]](#endnote-7).

This was, he said, the only prediction he ever made that came true (Bauman, Hafner 2020:37).

In 1970, Bauman received an invitation to take up a lectureship in Leeds, an industrial city in the north of England. He accepted and, upon arrival, he assumed head of the Department of Sociology that was first established at the University of Leeds in 1946. In his inaugural lecture at Leeds, Bauman (Bauman, 1972: 67-83) began by noting that the most intimate and private biographical details of the professional sociologist cannot help but be entwined with the biography of the discipline itself. His biography, it is clear, propelled him towards the sociological arguments presented in *Modernity and the Holocaust* and, in turn, these biographically-informed arguments were turned towards the fundamental precepts of sociology. The book is an exemplary work of *hermeneutic* sociology in that it extends to an object of investigation and returns with the consequences for sociological investigation, in the manner of the hermeneutic circle or ‘spiral’ (Bauman preferred the latter term).

Knowledge of the past, Bauman held, can never be completed. The questions that we ask of the past are always conditioned by the approach from some spatio-temporal *hic et nunc.* As he wrote at the end of the 1970’s in his *Hermeneutics and Social Science*:

Whatever the hypothetical ontological status of an event, it becomes historical because of our effort to reach it, to grasp it, to understand it, and thereby to incorporate it into our present. All these efforts are actuated by our present interests rather than by true or alleged intrinsic peculiarities of the event itself. Therefore, the changing shape of history as we know it, as it is given to us at any time we think of it, is to be traced back not so much to the logic of happenings ‘in themselves’, but to our present-day preoccupations (Bauman, 1978:43).

What were the ‘present-day preoccupations’ that, Bauman held, changed the meaning of the Holocaust for sociology and which turned it into a window?

Intellectually, the Holocaust occupied a central place in a cluster of events and processes which put paid to the high era of ‘order-building’ modernity. Bauman’s is among those social theorists of modernity which critically reflect on the historicity of the concept itself, and also the teleological and progressivist assumptions that persist in various forms in accounts of modernity and modernisation. Crucially, this condition was diagnosed from the vantage point of a novel condition, that of postmodernity: modernity shorn of its illusions and promises. *Modernity and the Holocaust* is thus a keystone of the ‘postmodern turn’ in the social sciences and humanities (Susen, 2015).

Another preoccupation can be located at the intersections of biography and history. *Modernity and the Holocaust* was published shortly after the Bauman’s were permitted a return to Poland in 1988 (Bauman and Mieszczanek 1989: 160-173). *Modernity and the Holocaust*, and the redemptive idea of Europe to which it referred and in which it gestated, was written therefore at a particular stage of exile. Zygmunt Bauman, of course, shared this exilic experience with Janina. Her *Winter in the Morning* is much more explicitly set within Polish history. As Joanna Tokarska-Bakir argues in this volume, Bauman largely sidesteps the issues of Polish antisemitism and local participation and collaboration in genocide despite his momentary allusions to important discussions such as in Jan Błoński’s article ‘Poor Poles look at the Ghetto’ (Błoński 1988:341-355, see: Bauman 1988: 294-301).

We can also locate the writings of Janina and Zygmunt within a broader cultural process of Holocaust memorialisation. As Griselda Pollock details in her chapter, they were avid consumers of filmic representation and documentation of the Holocaust. References to Lanzmann’s *Shoah, Schindler’s List* and the *Holocaust* television series are present across *Modernity and the Holocaust*, an authorial positioning in the movement that Pollock has termed ‘from trauma to cultural memory’[[8]](#endnote-8).

### The Argument

The broad arguments of *Modernity and the Holocaust* are by now familiar. For Bauman, the Holocaust was not the antithesis of modern society, a reversion to barbarism or a deviation from or pathological form of modernity. ‘The Holocaust’, he argues, ‘was born in our modern rational society, at the high stage of our civilization and at the peak of human cultural achievement, and for this reason it is a problem of that society, civilization and culture’ (MH: 7).

But the relationship between genocide and modernity is not a straightforward one. A complex historiographical argument sits at the centre of Bauman’s book. The Holocaust was a unique event produced by a concatenation of ordinary features of modernity, an emergent phenomenon resultant from the contingent entanglement of historical threads hitherto unconnected. The course that Bauman steers between singularity and universality evokes a major influence on the work, Hannah Arendt, who wrote in the second volume of her *Life of the Mind* that:

A thing may have happened quite at random, but, once it has come into existence and assumed reality, it loses its aspect of contingency and presents itself to us in the guise of necessity. And even if the event is of our own making, or at least we are one of the contributing causes … the simple existentialfact that it now is as it has become (for whatever reasons) is likely to withstand all reflections on its original randomness. Once the contingent has happened we can no longer unravel the strands that entangled it until it became an event – as though it could still be or not be (Arendt, 1978: vol 2, 138)

This historical frame may be seen as a post-hoc summation of her narrative approach in her monumental *Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt, 2017 [1951]). This workwas driven by a skepticism towards the ‘belief in historical causality’, in ‘causes that inevitably led to certain effects’, preferring to think of the appearance of totalitarianism as a political evil that arose from the contingent entanglement of a multiplicity of processes. Totalitarianism appeared to Arendt in the image of ‘a crystallised structure which I had to break up into its constituent elements in order to destroy it’, an image which troubled the historiographical imperative ‘to save and conserve and render fit for remembrance’ (Arendt, 2018 [1958]: 157-158).

What were the constituent elements that Bauman tied together as the conditions of possibility for the Holocaust? Most enduringly, Bauman identified bureaucratic organization and rationalization. Navigating between the intentionalist and functionalist positions in the historiography of the Holocaust, Bauman argued that ‘the space extending between the idea’ of *Endlösung* ‘and its execution was filled wall-to-wall with bureaucratic action’ (MH:105). Bureaucratic action and the complex division of labour splits up the overall task into a huge range of smaller tasks, thus fragmenting the *end* into a proliferation of *means*. Technical responsibility is substituted for moral responsibility. In the process the objects of bureaucratic action are dehumanised, reduced to a set of quantifiable measures. The ever-increasing distance, Bauman argued, between an act and its consequences – a fundamental institutional dimension of modernity – leads to a dangerous demoralisation or *adiaphorisation* of action.

This process was propelled by the logic of biopolitical management of a population assailed by pollutants. This was memorably metaphorised – with due credit to Ernest Gellner (1983) – as the state seeing society as akin to a garden, split into healthy plants that the gardener wishes to nourish and encourage and unproductive or harmful weeds which must be kept separate, even destroyed if necessary. The vector of such separation and splitting was scientific racism and the destructive potential was actualised in conditions of social crisis:

Periods of deep social dislocations are times when this most remarkable feature of modernity comes into its own. Indeed, at no other time does society seem to be so formless – ‘unfinished’, indefinite and pliable – literally waiting for a vision and a skillful and resourceful designed to give it a form. At no other time does society seem so devoid of forces and tendencies of its own, and hence incapable of resisting the hand of the gardener, and ready to be squeezed into any form he chooses ... Genocide arrives as an integral part of the process through which the grand design is implemented. The design gives it the legitimation; state bureaucracy gives it the vehicle; and the paralysis of society gives it the ‘road clear’ sign’ (MH:114).

It is indeed, as Larry Ray argues in his contribution to this volume – and what was earlier emphasised by, *inter alia*, Yehuda Bauer (2001: 68-92) – a weakness of Bauman’s interpretation of the Holocaust that the middle-range elucidation and analysis of the social dislocation and political tumult in which the Holocaust was enacted is largely elided. There are only tentative allusions to the crises of the interwar period, and surprisingly few mentions of the fascist distortion of modernity with its reversion to palingenetic and organicist nationalism, or the entanglement of evil in economic relations and rationales. For a book so clearly influenced by Hannah Arendt, it is surprising that there is little mention or substantive engagement with theories of totalitarianism or, as some have noted, with the history of colonial-imperialism[[9]](#endnote-9) (Rattansi, 2017). The effect is that genocide becomes the potential of the modern state or modernity *per se* rather than a particular political form that the state takes in a set of generative historical conditions.

Bauman, for his part, claimed that *Modernity and the Holocaust* is not a book about the Holocaust in any straightforward sense. It is rather a book about modernity, defined as a zeal for *order.* Modern genocide – if one can extend Bauman’s thesis (and this is a moot point) – is powered by a future-oriented, intellectualistic vision of order that involves the elimination of a population who have been categorised as an obstacle to the building of that order. This central tenet of his argument is mis- or under-represented surprisingly often. As he wrote in response to what he saw an unfair critique from the Holocaust historian Ian Kershaw:

I can’t truly comprehend, let alone to explain, why such a great and scrupulous scholar as Ian Kershaw had inverted and deformed my thesis. What I argued in *Modernity and the Holocaust* … is precisely that modern technology and modern science and practice of management enabled the Holocaust to happen. I never suggested that they were the causes of the Shoah …

But what Kershaw overlooked in addition (at any rate gave no sign that he didn’t) was another, in my view decisive, link connecting the Holocaust to modernity and the paramount ‘enabling factor’: The modern ‘we can do it therefore we will do it’ posture, ambition and determination to surrender the world to the demands of comfort and convenience however defined, and whatever are the moral transgressions which the meeting of such demands would require[[10]](#endnote-10)

In short, there is a tendency to read *Modernity and the Holocaust* as a gloomy sort of Weberian sociology of organisations and one misses, in this reading, its combination with the cultural sociology of praxis that Bauman had been developing since at least the late 1960s. Premonitions abound in works like recently rediscovered *Sketches in the Theory of Culture* (2018 [1968]), seized in 1968 in the event of exile[[11]](#endnote-11), and *Culture as Praxis* (1973). In the former he pointed out totalising cultural systems use different defense mechanisms against all ‘otherness’, including, for example, ‘(…) the utilization of the institution of taboo, [and] efforts aiming towards cultural repression or psychical annihilation’ (Bauman 2018 [1968]: 116). In the latter he developed these analyses in relation to J.P. Sartre’s (1992) thoughts on the term *le visqueux* – meaning ‘viscous’ or ‘glutinous’, but also ‘vile, offensive and vulgar’ – and Mary Douglas’ (1966) anthropology of the phenomenon of ‘dirt’, and analysed how individual beings or entire social groups that are characterised by this categories are subjected to various forms of social oppression. Each of these sources were later used by Bauman as an analytical framework for his reflections on the attitude towards ‘strangers’ and ‘otherness’ in his analyses of modernity (e.g. Bauman 1997: 7, 8, 26, 27).

The relationship between Bauman's theory of culture and his analyses of the Holocaust is well illustrated in his book *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Bauman 1991a). Bauman argued there that the marginal – symbolised, qua Simmel and Schutz, in the figure of ‘the stranger’ – is always a product of cultural praxis, the ambivalence-generating human propensity towards order-building via the structuration of the world which became an obsession at the onset of modernity. The archetypal, though by no means the only, stranger or marginal was the Jew. Antisemitism, for Bauman, does not simply mean ‘resentment of Jews’ or ‘inter-group enmity’. It does not spring from the meeting of two territorially-established groups who live in each other’s midst. It has its roots in *allo*-semitism: ‘the practice of setting the Jews apart as people radically different from all the others, needing separate concepts to describe and comprehend them, and special treatment in all or most social intercourse – since the concepts and treatments usefully deployed when facing or dealing with other people or peoples, simply would not do’ (Bauman, 1995:207; see also Bauman, 1997). Antisemitism, furthermore, is not simply heterophobic – a fear of the different. It is *proteophobic*, a response to something that simply does not fit the orderly structure of the world and brings such order into stark question. The object of the former, however detestable, make sense in the schema of an orderly world of friends and enemies, us and them, established and outsiders. The Jew, the archetypal stranger, makes a mockery of all of these distinctions.

Bauman also emphasises the importance of Judaism as a counter-image to Christianity, in long-term historical perspective, as the chaos to its vision of order:

I suggest that the allocentrism endemic to Western civilisation is to a decisive extent the legacy of Christendom. The Christian Church’s struggle with the inassimilable, yet indispensable, precisely for its inassimilability, modality of the Jews bequeathed to later ages two factors crucial to the emergence and self-perpetuation of allosemitism. The first factor was the casting of Jews as the embodiment of ambivalence, that is of dis-order; once cast in this mould, Jews could serve as a dumping ground for all new varieties of ambivalence which later times were still to produce. And the second was the abstract Jew, the Jew as a concept located in a different discourse from practical knowledge of ‘empirical’ Jews, and hence located at a secure distance from experience and immune to whatever information may be aroused by daily intercourse (Bauman, 1995: 213)

The conceptual Jew, he memorably put it, channelling Sartre and Douglas, ‘has been historically construed as the universal ‘viscosity’ of the Western world’ (MH: 40)

Spatial separation and exclusion of Jews represented the search for a *solid* social order. Camps and ghettoes were the spaces where violence and cruelty were concentrated and intensified in sealed boundaries. These spaces figure prominently in Bauman’s discussions of the *Judenräte* and the *Sonderkommando*, where bureaucratically administered oppression compels the oppressed to act in the service of their own oppression. A series of chapters in the present volume by Dominic Williams, Maria Ferenc and Paweł Michna address these most controversial arguments of Bauman’s book.

Bauman understands genocide, like Raul Hilberg (1961) from whom he drew significant inspiration, as a *process.* The oppressed group is singled out and dealt with in a separate bureaucratic structure, eradicating the possibility of solidarity with other oppressed groups and giving the impression to the group that there is nothing outside of this structure and they are thus compelled to adapt to it. They are *spiritually* separated, associated with vermin and disease, and are thus figured as an affront to the hygienic body. This separation is supplemented legally by the creation of separate legal frameworks for the oppressed group, in this case the Nuremberg laws. It ensures that other groups within the society rest assured that the oppression will not touch them and crucially *distances* them from the target of genocide. This distancing produces *indifference* – *more dangerous than hatred*. It leads to the creation of ‘a world without neighbours’ (MH: 128).

It is notable that Bauman stays away from the kind of reconstruction of this world without neighbours in the camp or ghetto that we see elsewhere, such as in the testimony of Primo Levi (1988) or Charlotte Delbo (1995) for instance, or indeed Janina Bauman (1986), or in a more conventionally academic sense the famous final chapter of Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism* (2017 [1951]) and later works like Wolfgang Sofsky’s *The Order of Terror* (1997). His focus is on the elite and bureaucratic organisational machinery of the modern genocidal state, figures whose privileged position took them away from the human laboratories that were the ghettos and the camps, phenomenological worlds unto themselves. It also elides the forms of agency exercised by the victims in the most inhuman of conditions. Bauman takes us to the gate of the camp, to the walls of the ghetto, but that otherworld unto which these opened up is left alone. In this sense, implicit in his argument is a sense that barbarism can reside in modernity, decivilisation in civilisation, irrationality in rationality.

And morality can reside amidst mass immorality. Bauman was mystified and disarmed by those figures who chose to save life at risk of their own lives. These figures – and the evil rationality that they defied – called for a reformulation of the moral foundations of sociology. Bauman saw it that morality has been given a marginal or subsidiary role in prevailing sociological discourse. The scientific pretensions of sociology have led to the degradation of the kind of teleological language in such notions as purpose and will. Morality was thus given a secondary status, seen as ultimately derivative from *society*. This notion, embodied by Émile Durkheim (1982), saw society is a morality-producing factory serving the needs, via the production and imposition of norms, of social integration. Indeed, one of the very reasons that the Holocaust has been so marginalised by sociologists – that it was put to the side to be dealt with by specialists outside of the major frameworks of sociological analysis – was because the Holocaust profoundly challenged the notion that morality is identical with social discipline and with law: ‘In the aftermath of the Holocaust, legal practice, and thus also moral theory, faced the possibility that morality may manifest itself in insubordination towards socially upheld principles, and in an action openly defying social solidarity and consensus’ (MH:177). Cruelty is not born of a breakdown or absence of social structure but it is rather a possibility of that structure: ‘*inhumanity is a matter of social relationships*’ (MH:159).

Whilst legal systems may well be relative, and potentially put to sinister and cruel ends, the ability to act morally – to make a *choice* between courses of action that the actor is then *responsible for* - is an anthropological universal. Moral capacity and compulsion is an ‘existential modality of the social’ – not societal – sphere and is ‘conceivable only in the context of coexistence, of ‘being with others’, that is, a social context; but it does not owe its appearance to the presence of supra-individual agencies of training and enforcement, that is, of a societal context’ (MH: 179). Responsibility is a property of sociality, an intrinsic feature of any relationship. It is not, as Bauman put it later in his *Life in Fragments* (Bauman, 1995: 1), that human beings are intrinsically good and thus corrupted by social arrangements. It is rather that, because any social arrangement is indeterminate, people make choices between different courses of action and are subsequently *responsible* for the choice. The universality of the choice posits responsibility at the root of what might be termed a Baumanian philosophical anthropology. Evil is a possibility of sociation. Modern societies develop complex mechanisms in which responsibility can be deferred and this is their inherent danger: ‘the organisation as whole is an instrument to obliterate responsibility’ (MH: 163).

Bauman’s Holocaust sociology had led to a very dark place – the corruptibility and potentially evil effects of all societal structures and institutions – and Emmanuel Levinas was a light, the hope:

To Levinas, ‘being with others’, that most primary and irremovable attribute of human existence, means first and foremost *responsibility* … My responsibility is the one and only form in which the other exists for me; it is the mode of his presence, of his proximity (MH:182).

Responsibility is unconditional. We cannot choose not to choose. The choice can only be deferred.

A further chink of light was found in the defence of the pluralisation of power and authority, also discussion in the first chapter of *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Bauman, 1991a: 51-52). Authority is pluralised via checks and balances, alternative concentrations of power. When authority is diffused it significantly reduces the chances of cruelty. Plurality (as with genocide) is also a possibility of modernity itself which – because it is a possibility and not an inevitability or intrinsic property – is vulnerable. Danger approaches in the form of the genocidal situation when the pluralism of political power is degraded: ‘Pluralism is the best preventative medicine against morally normal people engaging in morally abnormal action’ (MH:165), and ‘the voice of individual moral conscience is best heard in the tumult of political and social discord’ (MH:166).

### Bauman after Modernity and the Holocaust

Bauman returned to the issues discussed in *Modernity and the Holocaust* in many of his works from the end of the 20th century and the 21st century (see e.g. Bauman, 1993b: 23-33, 1998a: 33-38, 2009: 78-109). He was especially attentive to questions of remembrance, and maintained a critical vigilance against the ‘banalization’ of the Holocaust and argued against untenable comparisons and analogies. As part of the postmodern turn, Bauman held that the age of Western proselytization was over, and so too was the era of the ‘gardening’ state. Cultural pluralism had become part of everyday life. The world, he reported in the 2000 afterword to the second edition of *Modernity and the Holocaust*, is no longer turned into humankind’s garden *tout court* but instead ‘has split into innumerable little plots with their own little orders’ (MH: 219). ‘Order-building’ genocides and ‘final solutions’ are unlikely in the new phase of liquid modernity. Indeed, ‘the strategy most widely deployed and most keenly desired in our liquid modern era is to stave off the possibility of any ‘solution’ turning ‘final’’ (Bauman, 2010a:107).

Bauman was thus significantly challenged by large scale genocidal violence committed after the publication of *Modernity and the Holocaust.* Arne Johan Vetlesen, in this volume, draws on his longstanding critical engagement with Bauman in his chapter on the case of Bosnia. Jack Palmer likewise considers the possibilities of extending Bauman’s arguments to the case of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. These events occurred in regions of the world often figured as outside or behind the modern, mediated with recourse to familiar tropes of reversions to barbarism and aeonian tribal animosities. Against such positions, Bauman would later argue (often with reference to Vetlesen) that such events were expressions of modernity rather than its opposite. But he made a sharp distinction between the Nazi and Stalinist ‘societal’ genocides which adhered to the logic of ‘order-building’ and the ‘communal’ genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda which expressed a logic of ‘neighbourly imperialism’. Both are ‘offshoots of the modern condition’ (Bauman, 2009: 103-104). There were crucial differences between them, however, including in the modality of violence:

In stark opposition to the societal type of categorical murder as exemplified by the Holocaust, the emphasis in genocidal acts inspired by community-building is on the ‘personal’ nature of the crime, on killing in broad daylight, with the murderers known by face and name to their victims and the victims being the murderer’s kith and kin, acquaintances and next-door neighbours (Bauman, 2009: 105)

It is curious, then, that he neglects the significant ‘communal’ aspects of the Nazi genocide, as demonstrated in works like Jan T. Gross’s *Neighbours* (Gross, 2000), or in the writings of Joanna Tokarska-Bakir (as outlined in her chapter in this volume). Bauman never satisfactorily responded to the opening of national archives in central and eastern Europe after the fall of communism which shed light on the ‘Holocaust by bullets’ in the inter-imperial zone which Tim Snyder termed the ‘bloodlands’ (Snyder, 2010). Where he did later address cruelty inflicted in proximate physical distance, he referred to cases like My Lai and Abu Ghraib, the focus not so much on the bureaucrat-murderer distanced from physical killing but on ordinary men and women turned cruel in neo-colonial wars (Bauman, 2011).

In these later reflections, Bauman emphasized that some of the phenomena that led to the emergence of the Holocaust are still present in contemporary, ‘liquid’ phase of modernity (Bauman, 2000a). He identified new, dangerous forms of adiaphorisation derived from the culture of individualism rather than instrumental rationality (Bauman 1993a, 2000b: 83-96, 2001: 95). The phenomena of social stigmatization and exclusion, which in solid modernity were related to ethnic or religious criteria, occur in different guises. In this context, he devoted considerable attention to the exclusion of ‘flawed consumers’, the criminalised poor, refugees and asylum seekers, and other groups regarded as ‘outcasts’ (Bauman 2004). Revealingly, in correspondence with the Norwegian criminologist Nils Christie, he wrote that:

When I wrote *Modernity and the Holocaust*, I thought I was reopening a close chapter only to close it up again. It transpires now that there are further chapters – and such as it will resist ending for a long time to come… I scribbled other pieces which I hope would address your worries as well as mine. One on the fate of refugees on our planet suddenly disclosing that it is full and continuous, and another about the changed nature of wars[[12]](#endnote-12)

His concern for and identification with refugees occupied him until his death, in the midst of the worst refugee crisis since the Second World War, an echo of his own experiences (Bauman, 2016; Wagner, 2020b). His emphasis on the threats emerging in liquid modernity has been accompanied by the need to develop sensitivity to social suffering, as well as institutional solutions capable of reducing them (Bauman 2017).

Bauman was also fiercely critical of the ‘sanctification’ of the Holocaust. He understood very well that the narrative memorialisation of historical experiences of trauma plays a significant role in the construction of particularistic and exclusivist collective identities. The work of ‘cultural trauma’, to refer to Jeffrey Alexander’s influential idea to denote ‘when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness’ (Alexander, 2016:4) does not always move in the direction of universalisation. More often than not, it congeals into what A. Dirk Moses termed, after Mircea Eliade, the ‘terror of history’ whereby ‘current events are depicted as reincarnations or perpetuations of the traumatic, often genocidal, experience’, which in turn leads ‘to pre-emptive or anticipatory self-defence’ (Moses, 2011:96-97). With more than a nod to his experiences in Israel, Bauman lambasted ‘hereditary victims’ of the Holocaust who maintain ‘a vested interest in the hostility of the world, in fomenting the hostility of the world and keeping the world hostile’ (MH: 239) On the contrary, ‘the present-day significance of the Holocaust is the lesson it contains for the whole of humanity’ (MH:206). As he put it elsewhere, ‘the mission of the Holocaust survivors is *salvation of the world from another catastrophe*. For this purpose, they need carry witness to the hidden, yet all the same very much alive and resilient gruesome and murderous tendencies’[[13]](#endnote-13), that lurk in the everyday.

### Modernity and the Holocaust as Heuristic: The Active Dystopia

Keith Tester, who passed away in January 2019, called Bauman a ‘sociologist of possibility’ (Tester, 2004) and noted how, especially in his writings of the 1970s, he articulated a sociology that sought to legitimise ‘the status of ‘the possible’ in valid knowledge’, as he put in in his work *Socialism: The Active Utopia* (Bauman, 1976a: 33). Sociology, Bauman insisted, ought to remind us that things could be otherwise, that what exists is but one possibility among many. But this entails no normative evaluation. Here, Bauman follows two of his major influences, Hannah Arendt and Cornelius Castoriadis. Arendt’s concern with natality, the human capacity to ‘begin anew’ (Arendt, 1958), applied as much to her analyses of totalitarianism and concentration camps as novel and unprecedented phenomena as it did to the American Revolution or the Greek *polis.* Cornelius Castoriadis likewise held that ‘creation does not necessarily – nor even generally – signify ‘good’ creation or the creation of ‘positive values’. Auschwitz and the Gulag are creations just as much as the Parthenon and the *Principia Mathematica*’ (Castoriadis, 1991:161).

With its constant allusions to the ongoing *possibility* of the Holocaust – as distinct from its inevitability, probability, plausibility, and so on – *Modernity and the Holocaust* might be seen as an exemplary exercise in the ‘active dystopia’. Fiercely critical of the notion that the Holocaust was the inevitable *telos* of modernity, and hostile to the trivialisation of the Holocaust resultant from its appropriation and extension to more quotidian forms of discrimination, Bauman nevertheless maintained that we continue to ‘*live in a type of society that made the Holocaust possible, and that contained nothing which could stop the Holocaust happening*’ (MH: 88)

Bauman was trying to understand modernity and its possibilities from the vantage point of its most acute crisis of humanity. As he argued in his essay *Towards a Critical Sociology* (1976b), the event of crisis offers a vantage point for asking questions of normality and for scanning the possibilities immanent in a particular configuration at a given time. In our own time of crisis, genocidal events remain a *possibility.* This poses significant questions – again, Arendtian questions – for sociology, concerning the way in which sociology is uncapable of coming to terms with events that fall outside of its linguistically constructed universe. As Bauman wrote:

The deployment of sociological language entails the acceptance of the world-picture this language generates, and implies a tacit consent to conducting the ensuing discourse in such a way that all reference to reality is directed to the world so generated. The sociologically generated world-picture replicates the accomplishment of societal legislating powers. But it does more than that: it silences the possibility of articulating alternative visions in whose suppression the accomplishment of such powers consists (MH:213).

Bauman is not calling for *prediction*, and he was sceptical about the predictive and managerial ambitions of the social sciences. In this sense, Bauman even *implicates* social sciences in practices of modern genocide. The alliance between the modern state and ‘legislative’ intellectuals who see populations as inert matter to be moulded according to the vision of a grand design contains significant potential for violence against those defined as alternative to that design (Bauman, 1987). Modern genocide, as Bauman saw it, is a huge project of social engineering, an outgrowth of the mastery over nature and society. The role of the arts and of cultural analysis becomes very important here, as Max Silverman writes in his chapter on *Modernity and the Holocaust* as a ‘concentrationary’ work, a reference to a project on concentrationary memories that he established with Griselda Pollock in 2007 (See Pollock & Silverman, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2019). This accounts for the frequent references in Bauman’s works to the dystopias of Kafka, Huxley, Orwell, Houellebecq and Saramago. Such creative works – like *Modernity and the Holocaust* - tease out tendencies within the present and reflect them back to us. They perform the function of what Hans Jonas called, in *The Imperative of Responsibility*, the ‘heuristics of fear’ (Jonas, 1985:26). Sociologists’ objections to Baumanian gloominess (Rattansi, 2014) and to categories like that of ‘the concentrationary’ for their lack of concrete specificity neglect the necessity for vigilance and attentivity to the cruelty embedded in everyday life. Overawed by scientific pretensions to predict based upon the analysis of precedents, we are blindsided by the possibility of the unprecedented.

The argument developed here also has consequences for the memorialisation of the Holocaust and in particular confronting the problem of complicity. In her essay, ‘The Future of Auschwitz’, published in *Judaism and Modernity,* Gillian Rose troubles hard and fast distinctions between innocent and guilty in Holocaust memorialisation. Memorialising the Holocaust today, we ought not only ‘identify herself in infinite pain with “the victims”’ or ‘engage in intense self-questioning: “Could I have done this?” but ought to pose the question collectively: “How easily could we have allowed this to be carried out?”’ (Rose, 2017 [1993]:35-36).

Such a question pertains to the entangled facets of the present crisis of humanity, chief among them the human destruction of nature and their own conditions of life. Bauman recognised this, though he was in general curiously subdued on environmental and ecological questions.[[14]](#endnote-14) The Holocaust was, he argued, a terrible extension of human rational-mastery over nature, humanity and nature conceived in binary separation. As he wrote in his Amalfi lecture:

It is true that the realm of *techne*, the ream of dealings with the non-human world or the human world cast as non-human, was at all times treated as morally neutral thanks to the expedient of adiaphorisation’. Human rational-mastery has increased to such an extent that it runs the risk of transcending nature’s self-healing capacity (MH: 217).

Here, there is a possibility for a Baumanian ethics for the Anthropocene, as Jon Catlin suggests in his chapter in this volume. This is an:

ethics of distance and distant consequences, an ethics commensurable with the uncannily extended spatial and temporal range of the effects of technological action. An ethics that would be unlike any other morality we know: one that would reach over the socially erected obstacles of mediated action and the functional reduction of human self (MH: 220-221).

And thus it is apt to approach the text today as a window onto the social, political, economic and ecological crises of our present. As people fleeing conflict, environmental degradation and economic immiseration are blocked, expelled and left to down; as the self-appointed defenders of human rights separate families and detain indefinitely in remote camps; as anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and vandalism rise, entangled with other forms of racism; as democratic institutions designed to protect human plurality are put under severe strain and the institutions of global normativity are hollowed out; as the [planet warms](https://www.ucsusa.org/global-warming), wildfires burn and floodwaters rise; and indeed as the memory of the Holocaust [recedes](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/27/one-in-20-britons-does-not-believe-holocaust-happened) … *this* is perhaps the most significant way in which *Modernity and the Holocaust* speaks to us today: To direct us to consider the possibilitiesfor barbarismlatent in contemporary expressions of cruelty and dehumanisation, and to remind us, as Zygmunt Bauman wrote, that ‘*the unimaginable ought to be imagined*’ (MH: 85). Bauman’s book remains such a window from which such imaginative feats may draw inspiration.

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1. Information on The European Amalfi Prize for Social Sciences can be found on a website: <https://web.uniroma1.it/disp/en/events/european-amalfi-prize/prize> (access: 01.08.2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Bauman presented his critique of totalitarian communism and at the same time contrasted it with his own vision of socialism in the book *Socialism: The Active Utopia* (Bauman 1976a). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Letter from Zygmunt Bauman to Juan Corradi, 29th June 1987. In Janina and Zygmunt Bauman papers, MS 2067/B/5/2. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Bauman, ‘The Poles, the Jews, and I: an investigation into whatever made me what I am’, typescript, 1987, p. 14. In Janina and Zygmunt Bauman papers, MS 2067/B/1/4 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. ‘The Poles, the Jews, and I’, p. 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Typescript in Janina and Zygmunt Bauman papers, MS 2067/B/2/3/1. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. ‘על ישראל להתכונן לשלום’ [Israel must prepare for peace], *Haaretz*, 8th August 1971, p. 6. We are grateful to Maya Johnson for translating this article from Hebrew. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. This is the title of a module that Pollock established in the School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies at the University of Leeds, around the time of the publication of *Modernity and the Holocaust* and partly in response to it. For an example of this historical frame as employed in her work see Pollock, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. This argument requires some nuancing. In his discussions of scientific racism in the second and third chapters, Bauman clearly intimates that the practice of eugenics spans over the connected, genocidal histories of modern anti-Semitism, the dehumanisation of disabled peoples’, and the violent totalising ambitions of colonial-imperialism. He also foregrounds some more contemporary developments in Holocaust studies which seek to elucidate the colonial dimensions of the Nazi genocide itself (e.g. Zimmerer, 2005; Baranowski, 2011). To take one example: ‘At first the Nazi bureaucracy saw the conquest and appropriation of quasi-colonial territories as the dreamt-of opportunity to fulfil the *Fuhrer’s* command in full: *Generalgouvernment* seemed to provide the sought-after dumping ground for the Jewry still inhabiting the lands of Germany proper, destined for racial purity ... Gradually yet relentlessly, the thousand-year *Reich* took up, ever more distinctly, the shape of a German-ruled Europe. Under the circumstances, the goal of a *judenfrei* Germany could not but follow the process. Almost imperceptibly, step by step, it expanded into the objective of a *judenfrei* Europe (MH: 16). See also Bauman’s contribution to the 2013 scholar’s forum in *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust* on the theme of ‘The Holocaust: A colonial Genocide?’ (Bauman, 2013) and the discussions of colonial-imperialism in *Wasted Lives* (Bauman, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. ‘INTERVIEW Avner Shapira’, digital file in Janina and Zygmunt Bauman papers, USB 19, 5-6 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Although the book *Sketches in the Theory of Culture* was prepared to be released in 1968, its publication took place half century later (Bauman 2018). The book was to be destroyed by the decision of the Polish authorities in 1968, as a part of the repressions against Bauman in the time of March events. It survived in one, incomplete manuscript only, that was found a few years ago in Warsaw. After the reconstruction done by Dariusz Brzeziński, it was published with the afterword, written by Zygmunt Bauman (Brzeziński 2018: vii-xxv) [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Letter from Zygmunt Bauman to Nils Christie, 21st January, 2002. Digital file in Janina and Zygmunt Bauman archive, disk file 124 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. ‘On Jews and Israelis’, digital file in Janina and Zygmunt Bauman papers, USB 12, 2 (editors emphasis) [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. One of the very few papers in which Bauman wrote explicitly about the issue of the climate change is his introduction to Polis edition of Harald Welzer’s book *Climate Wars: What People Will be Killed For in the 21st Century* (Bauman 2010b: 5-13). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)