
Jack Palmer and Dariusz Brzeziński (Eds.), *Revisiting Modernity and the Holocaust: Heritage, Dilemmas, Extensions.* Routledge, 2022 [Book review]

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Abstract: This is a review of the book entitled *Revisiting Modernity and the Holocaust: Heritage, Dilemmas, Extensions*, edited by Jack Palmer and Dariusz Brzeziński.

Keywords: Zygmunt Bauman; Holocaust

This outstanding book (Palmer & Brzeziński, 2022b) is based on conferences in Leeds and Wrocław in 2019 to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of Zygmunt Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Reviewers and other readers of the book have the unfortunate advantage over the editors and contributors (including Bryan Cheyette, whose "Afterword" is effectively a long review essay) of encountering it after 24th of February 2022, a date which will surely go into history along with 9/11 (11th of September 2001). This gives an added poignancy to phrases such as those quoted in their chapters by Jack Palmer and Lydia Bauman. Palmer quotes a survivor of the Rwanda genocide on the murder of her father: "He was good to them and everyone used to say so, but *when things changed* they all came to kill him" (Palmer, 2022, p. 134; emphasis by author). Lydia Bauman recalls a childhood memory of her mother Janina, as they waited to see the doctor, entertaining her with stories of her own childhood. "Having painted this idyllic picture of her early life in Poland, my mother ominously added – '*and then the war broke out and everything ended*' – just as the doctor's door opened and we were called in, a new sense of dread and apprehension left hanging in the air" (L. Bauman, 2022, p. 146; emphasis Bauman's).

By the end of February it had long become clear, if it was ever in doubt, that Ukrainians were not going to welcome the Russian invaders, with the consequence that victory for Russia could only mean the expulsion or murder of most of the Ukrainian population. With a new potentially genocidal war at the centre of Europe, Zygmunt Bauman's warnings in *Modernity and the Holocaust* that this could happen again are

chillingly borne out. It is therefore entirely appropriate that this retrospective view includes two major themes.

One is the location of the Holocaust in the context both of the premodern history of antisemitism (Joanna Tokarska-Bakir)¹ and of subsequent genocides. Arne Johan Vetlesen, who had debated these issues with Bauman, and Jack Palmer discuss the Bosnian and Rwandan genocides respectively. Both stress the theme of proximity, though with Vetlesen concluding that Bauman may be charged with “mistaking the bureaucratic design for the reality” (Vetlesen, 2022, p. 118) and Palmer (2022, p. 128) making the complementary argument that the killing of neighbours was made possible by an achieved level of state organisation and bureaucratic administration that extended deep into the lives of individuals. Contrary to representations of the genocide then and now, mass killing was also organised with a stratified and hierarchical division of labour and was construed instrumentally as a task, replete with concerns for efficiency, orderliness and security.

The other theme is a certain relativisation of the Holocaust’s industrial dimension in the light of more recent historical research, including notably victim/survivor memoirs of which that by Bauman’s wife Janina (J. Bauman, 1986) remains one of the most important. Cheyette (2022, p. 237) quotes the US historian Timothy Snyder (2010, p. xiv): “the Jews killed in the Holocaust were about as likely to be shot as to be gassed”.

Several chapters in the book explore the experience of victims in camps and ghettos. Dominic Williams problematises Bauman’s account of the Judenräte and the Auschwitz-Birkenau Sonderkommando, exploring the interplay of rationality and emotion. Paweł Michna explores the role of the Judenrat in the very different context of the Łódź ghetto, which produced material, including highly innovative graphics, for use in industry. Maria Ferenc discusses the Warsaw ghetto, questioning Bauman’s use of the term “cooperation”, where “obedience” might be more appropriate (Ferenc, 2022, p. 77).

The editors (Palmer & Brzeziński, 2022a, p. 13) point out that in 2009, Bauman had used the striking phrase “neighbourly imperialism” to refer to the more face-to-face genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda. The term also however fits the geopolitical aspect of the current “special military operation”, in which Ukrainian and other post-Soviet neighbours were supposed to be subjected to a kind of maternal “tough love” to bring them back into line. This is not in itself genocide, but it should be remembered that the Holocaust, as well as an end in itself, was combined with a broader Nazi strategy to rule over western Europe and to enslave or colonise Slavic Europe, including at least the western part of the USSR. The failure of the latter aim did not prevent the Nazis’ persistence with the former. Götz Aly and Susanne Heim, in a book first published in 1991 and which notes its complementarity with Bauman’s, as well as with elements of Hannah Arendt’s analyses, explores this context in detail. Focussing on the input of

1 See also, for the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Aly (2021).

technocrats who enthusiastically served the Nazi leadership, Aly and Heim traced the underlying population policy which preceded the Nazi regime but blended with its racial doctrines (Aly & Heim, 2002, p. 485). Ukrainian grain was to be diverted to western Europe (p. 489) and the surplus population of the western USSR left to starve, with the longer-term goal of replacing it with colonists (p. 416).

What then remains of *Modernity and the Holocaust*? Both terms are problematic. As several contributors stress, Bauman could not foresee later developments in Holocaust research, which put in question the aspects of his argument which draw, perhaps too heavily, on Max Weber (the distance between perpetrators and victims, bureaucracy, rationalisation). A more specific question, which in a sense pervades the book, is why, having been impelled by Janina's book to write his own (as he noted in the preface), he did not follow up her initiative more closely. This question is addressed in Lydia Bauman's poignant memoir and most fully by one of Bauman's biographers, Izabela Wagner (see Wagner, 2020), who argues "that it was too early for Zygmunt in the late 1980s to include the survivor's voice" (Wagner, 2022, p. 170) and that the two books should be read "as *complementary*" (Wagner, 2022, p. 169, emphasis Wagner's). Griselda Pollock stresses the combined influence of Janina Bauman's memoir and Hannah Arendt's earlier analyses, as well as of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (which the Baumans viewed on television in 1986) and suggests, more speculatively, that Bauman was "using sociological analysis to deflect the passions his viewing aroused in him". More ominously, she continues, "If the Holocaust became possible through a rationality identified with modernity [...] then we moderns have no defence before it as a process" (Pollock, 2022, p. 185). My conjecture, for what it's worth, is also that he chose a kind of division of labour, in which his self-consciously sociological account complemented and did not (as indeed it could not) compete with hers. Normally Bauman would be one of the last people to fetishise sociology, but tackling a historical topic without full access to historical resources he stressed his sociological identity.

Max Silverman (2022, p. 218), drawing on longstanding French work and a joint research project with Griselda Pollock, goes so far as to suggest that "despite its title, *Modernity and the Holocaust* is not, primarily, about the Holocaust", but rather about a broader "concentrationary" aspect of twentieth century history. It is true that the Soviet Gulags were not *designed* as death camps, however many people died in them, though the Holodomor in Ukraine is widely recognised (and remembered) as a genocide. Jonathon Catlin, too, locates *Modernity and the Holocaust* in a "Frankfurt" critique of "Enlightenment catastrophism" which emphasises "the permanent possibility of catastrophe," including the now inevitable climate catastrophe which is well underway (Catlin, 2022, p. 214).

Jack Palmer usefully compares Bauman's concept of modernity with the Polish Israeli sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt's, drawing on their correspondence in the Bauman papers. There are not just multiple modernities, but multiple modern genocides, of

which Bosnia and Rwanda are examples. As Eisenstadt wrote in a 1988 letter to Bauman, "there developed in modernity the strong tendency not to face frontally the problem of primordial identities [...]" (Palmer, 2022, p. 135) Globalisation was not yet a slogan, but Bauman (Z. Bauman, 2000, p. 192) later argued, it "appears to be much more successful in adding new vigour to intercommunal enmity and strife than in promoting the peaceful coexistence of communities" (as cited in Palmer, 2022, p. 134).

Larry Ray, like Cheyette, provides an overall assessment of *Modernity and the Holocaust*, restating his view, largely shared by readers of the book, that "Bauman's concept of modernity is too one-dimensional and that bureaucratic obedience might not be as central to understanding the Holocaust as he imagines" (Ray, 2022, p. 25; see also Ray, 2018, pp. 199–220). He also addresses among other issues the "German question" posed by Norbert Elias (1996). If Bauman avoided the term "fascism", as Palmer and Brzeziński note (Palmer & Brzeziński, 2022a, p. 2), perhaps in reaction to Marxist orthodoxy, we still need to ask why other European countries (including Poland) were differentially susceptible to it and why it took its particular Nazi form in Germany and Austria (Ray, 2022, p. 27). While in Poland a number of authors see Germany (and Russia) as uniquely pathological and threatening, a broader framework is possible too. This was certainly Bauman's view; as Jack Palmer notes, when he received the Amalfi prize (Z. Bauman, 1991, p. 137),

he explicitly writes that the book both gestated within and spoke to a "shared European heritage", across east and west. Bauman's orientation to and embeddedness within a "common European experience" makes clear his divergence from *Sonderweg* readings of European history, in which Germany took a uniquely twisted path, distinct from European modernity proper, and which contained the propensity for genocidal anti-Semitism. (Palmer, in press)

Cheyette concludes (Cheyette, 2022, p. 242), "[b]y locating structural forms of oppression as a potential 'extreme' *within* modern civilisation, *Modernity and the Holocaust* remains as relevant today as it was in 1989". This very important collection is sadly, in 2022, equally timely.

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Jack Palmer, Dariusz Brzeziński (red.), *Revisiting Modernity and the Holocaust. Heritage, Dilemmas, Extensions*. Routledge, 2022 [recenzja książki]

Abstrakt: Jest to recenzja książki zatytułowanej *Revisiting Modernity and the Holocaust. Heritage, Dilemmas, Extensions*, która ukazała się pod redakcją Jacka Palmera i Dariusza Brzezińskiego.

Wyrażenia kluczowe: Zygmunt Bauman; Holocaust



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