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The War Against Forgetfulness: Sociological Lessons from Bauman's Writings on European Jewry

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**Abstract:** This paper argues against assigning Zygmunt Bauman to the category of a 'white', 'European' theorist and the tendency to speak of an undifferentiated 'Eurocentrism'. To argue this, I return to a set of articles by Bauman which reflected on the history of European Jewry. These encourage us to place Bauman in a historical and social context in which he is best identified as emerging from the racialized and classed politics of East European Jewry. Bauman traces how this group were made the outsiders of the assimilatory project of West European Jewry then, as Jewish socialists, were victims of the political anti-Semitism of Communist regimes. Not only does this encourages us to be critical of the claims that he spoke from an elite 'White European' position, it also has further lessons for sociology which, in its own 'war against forgetfulness', has tended to impose simplistic racialized and political categories onto theorists.

**Keywords:** Anti-Semitism; Eurocentrism; European Jewry; Socialism; Zygmunt Bauman

This paper is a response to how Bauman is coming to be categorised and remembered in sociology, especially in his adopted home of Britain. I want to push back on an emerging claim that Bauman can be unproblematically placed in the category of the 'white European' theorist. This claim is often made not just to indicate his supposed position as part of an elite grouping but also to suggest this eliteness automatically imbues his sociology. In Bauman's case this can be found in claims that his work contains an 'imperialist gaze' (Rattansi 2017a:65) as part of a more general 'White, European' gaze (Rattansi 2017b) which is 'blind to issues of...racialisation' (Rattansi 2017b:148) or reflects a Eurocentric view of the world which contains 'sanctioned ignorance' concerning other perspectives (Mayblin 2017). This is then seen to hinder Bauman's understanding of the world where his unwillingness to 'name the metropole' as a centre of power means he has 'no coherent way of *explaining*' the divide between the global rich and poor (Connell 2007:60) due to its 'Western view' of who counts as 'we' (Jay 2010:100). Such claims reflect a broader critique concerning the representativeness of the sociological canon, whereby sociology is criticised for its reliance on 'Northern' theory as 'an ethno-sociology of metropolitan society' (Connell 2007:226). In so doing, it is claimed sociology has historically practised a form of 'segregation' where some, white, theory is valorised and others dismissed (Bhambra 2014). The result of this is that sociology embodies 'Eurocentrism', which amounts to 'a way of seeing *and* not-seeing' in

which certain, white, voices are recognised and others ignored (Alatas and Sinha 2017:5). This privileging of white, European writers who then reproduce colonial assumptions is said to be so pervasive that ‘much mainstream sociology can often appear to be whiteness studies in all but name’ (Bhatt 2016:399). Such claims are indicated in the suggestion that Bauman:

remains trapped in a narrow Eurocentrism which considerably diminishes his capacity for understanding and explaining the contemporary world...there is a powerful sense in which, in Bauman’s thinking and voluminous writings, there is an unwitting collusion with imperial power (Rattansi 2017b:275)

In pushing back against this claim I want to revisit a period of Bauman’s work often overlooked, his writings on European Jewry (though, as we shall see, the all-encompassing term ‘European’ is insufficient here). The articles and book chapters which make up this period of Bauman’s work have, if the metrics are to be believed, been only infrequently read or cited. While of course Bauman is well known for writing *Modernity and the Holocaust* and his discussion of the stranger – the latter most notably found in the one book I include in this period, *Modernity and Ambivalence* – the writings I discuss below are exemplary pieces of historical sociology which, in reflecting upon the diverse positions of Jewish people across Western and Eastern Europe, also discuss how ‘Europe’ and the modernist drive within the continent, can be theorised. In this sense, Bauman is part of a group who finds Jews ‘good to think with’ when theorising modernity (Goldberg 2017). My claim will be that not only do these writings encourage us to rethink the scope of Bauman’s sociology, they also force us to reckon with what we do when we call a theorist ‘white’ or ascribe them to the categories of ‘white’ or not, ‘European’ or not, exactly the separation resting behind many of the aforementioned claims concerning the problems of ‘Eurocentric, white’ sociology.

Before I do this, it is appropriate to provide a note concerning the purpose of this discussion in relation to Bauman. There has already been significant debate about the extent to which Bauman’s biography impacted his sociology. As indicated above, many have seen Bauman’s position as a ‘white’, ‘European’, even ‘imperialist’ figure as shaping his sociology negatively. A more positive perspective came from Smith (1998:43) who commented on how Bauman had been ‘skilfully exploiting the privileged vantage point of the outsider’ in his discussion of modernity. From the other side of this debate, Davis (2008:34) has been critical of the tendency of ‘*reducing* social theory to biography’ by seeking to claim Bauman’s sociology was a result of, contingent upon, or improved by his life circumstances.

My argument here is slightly different. Needless to say, as I will highlight below, some of the material discussed in this paper bears directly on Bauman's biography; indeed, there is nothing he wrote which is more directly related to his life circumstances than the essay 'Assimilation into Exile: The Jew as a Polish Writer' (Bauman 1996). However, my purpose here is not to show how Bauman's biography led him to the conclusions he draws in his writings, for better or worse. Instead it is to show how the *content* of these writings encourages us to reflect on the biography of not just Bauman, but other Jewish social theorists who at best were able to claim only a 'probationary whiteness' (Jacobsen 1998:176). As part of this, I will suggest that rather than being part of the 'White, European' gaze, Bauman can more accurately be aligned with the group of the 'racialized outsiders', who were subject to the internal racialisation processes within Europe (Virdee 2014). In saying this, my goal is not to replace one racialised reading of Bauman – the 'bad' white and Eurocentric theorist – with another – the 'good' racialised outsider. Bauman's position as a racialised outsider in and of itself makes his claims no more accurate than his being unproblematically 'white' would. Instead, such a categorisation makes us aware of the danger of reading theory via the imagined racialised position of the theorist; even if this is fruitful in a particular case, doing so requires a careful attention to historical context. Following this, I also hope to suggest the example of European Jewry reminds us that uncritically using the phrase 'Eurocentrism' – with its tendency to take Western Europe as the meaning of 'Europe' – is, to use Deutscher's (2017:61) words concerning the desire to understand Eastern Jews via Western assumptions, 'to see with distorted vision and embark on an inquiry that will lead you nowhere'.

The title of this paper, *The War against Forgetfulness*, comes from the title of one of the papers Bauman (1989a) published in this period. In the Conclusion, I will return to this piece and what its claim concerning 'forgetfulness' has to offer to sociology today.

### *Assimilation and its Discontents*

A major theme of Bauman's writings is the 'assimilatory drive' of Jewish people in Western Europe, with a special focus on Germany. For Bauman, reflecting what Traverso (2013) termed 'Jewish Modernity', the promise of modernity became the way that Jews in Western Europe sought their liberation. Modernity promised liberation due to its claims of universality since 'universality is the warcy of the underprivileged. Modernity promised to strip everyone of their parochial clothing, liberating them by reducing them to pure human essence' (Bauman 1988a: 50). This, of course, was very appealing to a group marked out historically by their

‘parochial clothing’ yet lacking the dressing room of the nation-state in which this clothing would be appropriate. Therefore, West European Jews increasingly sought to invest themselves in the mission of modernist culture. Consequently, for Traverso (2013) Jews increasingly, for better or worse, came to be identified as the ‘avant-garde’ of modernity. As Bauman (1988a) notes, this was especially the case in Germany where Jewish intellectuals and cultural workers set themselves up as arbitrators of the extent to which the Enlightenment project had been realised, fulfilling the role of the *philosophes* of Enlightenment toleration (Grell and Porter 2000). Often this involved highlighting the extent to which ‘post-Enlightenment society [was] living according to principles contrary to the declared ones’ (Bauman 1988a: 54). Consequently, this project of assimilation took on a particular classed position, to quote Bauman, ‘whatever else it might have meant, assimilation was a middle-class project’ (Bauman 1988a: 64).

This assimilatory project then produced its own responses, beyond Zionism. One of these was the emergence of a distinctively Jewish Socialism. Given the increasingly bourgeois position of those Western European middle class ‘assimilated’ Jews, for the working class ‘loyalty to traditional Jewish culture was a breeding and battleground of class struggle, and class resistance against Jewish capitalists involved a defence of Jewish language, beliefs and customs’ (Bauman 1996:576). This produced a rich history of distinctively Jewish forms of socialist thought. As we shall see below, these forms of Jewish socialism also relied upon processes of racialisation; for now, it is enough to note how forms of socialism emerged in places such as Poland (Schatz 1991), Russia (Frankel 1981) and England (Fishman 2004) which took distinctive Jewish forms. This was true not just in the use of language, customs and organisation, but also in the sense that ideas and practices were shaped by the particular class positions and opportunities open to Jews in each context. In doing so, these socialist ideas also drew upon a history of Jewish messianism which was able to expand in the neo-romantic context of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Löwy 2017). As Bauman put it Jewish socialists:

saw in socialist society the fullest implementation of the same redemptive, Messianic drive of Judaism that has been swept under the carpet by the joint efforts of official orthodoxy and the rapidly ‘gentilizing’ capitalist elite. It was in the name of the Jewish redemptive tradition that power was to be wrenched from the doubly treacherous hands (in *both* class *and* national senses) of the Jewish bosses (Bauman 1988a:74-75)

Therefore, while opposed to the bourgeois assimilation project, by seeking to create a new society in which the liberation of Jews was achieved via the liberation of humanity, Jewish socialism became ‘a radical assimilation option’ (Riga 2012:58).

Alternatively, the opposition to assimilation could produce the particular intellectual figure of what Deutscher (2017) once termed the ‘Non-Jewish Jew’, who sought to take the universalist nature of Judaic thinking beyond Judaism as a contribution to human emancipation. For Bauman, one of his greatest inspirations, Freud, was the prime indicator of this tradition which, opposed to the assimilatory drive, went ‘against seeking universality by erasing one’s own identity and giving up what was unique in oneself. It proposed, instead, to raise one’s individuality to the level of universal value: to give, rather than give up’ (Bauman 1991:79).

Nevertheless, for Bauman, the bourgeois assimilatory project became the dominant project of West European Jewry from the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century up to World War II. Its failings however, quickly became clear. Modernity, with its need for the figure of the ambivalent ‘stranger’ against whom to define its ordering mission, re-created the phenomenon of ‘allosemitism’: marking out Judaism as an object of difference (Bauman 1998). As Bauman (1998) notes, while this object could be seen as the avant-garde, Jews could also be seen to be holding back modernity. This was the case in France where reactionary opinion associated Jews with the revolution while radical opinion saw them as the group standing in its way (Goldberg 2017:18-24). It was the desire to dispense with such allosemitism that drove the assimilatory project. But, the fact allosemitism, a form of ambivalence, helped to shape modernity meant the project was doomed to fail:

The very zeal with which the Jews tried to rid themselves of whatever the native elites declared to be the mark of an alien, was itself forged into the brand of Jewishness. With a twisted logic which to its victims looked more like a witch’s spell...When Heine and Börne excelled as *journalists*...journalism as such became a symbol of Jewishness – a Jewish invention for all, a Jewish retreat for some, a Jewish conspiracy for the most hostile among native opinion-makers (Bauman 1991:120)

The assimilatory drive of middle-class Western European Jewry began to mark out its holders precisely because of its eager ‘assimilatory zeal’ (Bauman 1988a: 53). As Bauman notes, modernity could absorb traditional Jewish communities living separately, according to orthodox customs, but it had more difficulty with the ‘boundary-blurring mobility’, the ambivalence, of the carriers of the assimilatory mission (Bauman 1988a: 54). All attempts,

from whatever end of the political spectrum, to further the assimilatory mission ended up rebounding on those proclaiming them:

The Jews became astute philosophers of the liberal creed, fiery preachers of socialist utopia and fearless warriors of communist revolution. Only to find out that the ambivalence they tried to escape had the awesome properties of quicksand: the faster they ran, the deeper they sank... The nationalists promptly announced the principled liberalism and unprincipled communism alike to be a Jewish plot to uproot the well-rooted (Bauman 1993a:30)

Meanwhile, since the secularising urge of modernity had closed off conversion, with its assumption that allosemitism was based on sin, as a means of assimilation, modern notions of racism, and that 'the nation is a commonality of fate and blood – or not a nation at all' (Bauman 1991:121) came increasingly to mark out antisemitism. Jewishness increasingly came to be identified with a 'look' which no amount of assimilation could remove (Jacobsen 1998).

It is at this point that Bauman reminds us of the importance of separating out Western and Eastern European Jewry. Reckoning with the failure of the assimilatory project to overcome allo-, and its resulting anti-, Semitism, those in the West invoked modernist logic in the creation of an ordered hierarchy of worth. In order to show the value of the assimilatory project, that some Jewish people *had* assimilated:

some Jews had to become 'unworthy' and all affinity and intercourse with them regarded as shameful and stigmatising. Really *Jewish* Jews were seen as saboteurs of what otherwise would surely have been a successful venture. They were blamed for the all-too evident, yet stubbornly denied, failure of assimilatory efforts (Bauman 1988a:60)

These 'Really *Jewish* Jews' were identified as coming from the East, captured in the figure of the *Ostjuden*:

In the folklore of assimilation, the *Ostjuden* were not allowed an identity of their own. Instead, their image was patched together out of the concerns and nightmares of the assimilating Western Jews. They served as a huge refuse bin of human characteristics into which all that nagged the conscience of the Western Jew and filled him with shame was dumped (Bauman 1991:132)

As Bauman details, it is easy to find catalogues of the refuse dumped into the figure of the Eastern Jew by those seeking assimilation in the West. This included: their uncleanness, their tendency to steal, their lack of culture, their old-fashioned clothes, their superstitions, their

barbaric language, their lack of forward-thinking masculinity; in short, their lack of what made modernity civilised and worthwhile. Much like the figures of colonial relationships, the *Ostjuden* was ‘the filthy, ignorant and immoral savage left over from pre-civilised times’ (Bauman 1989b:18-19). A perfect example of this, as Bauman notes (1989b:18), came in England where the migration of Russian and Polish Jews into the East End of London was met with hostility not just by politicians (including those on the Left, see Virdee 2014:32-55) but by the middle class, assimilated Jews of established Anglo-Jewry (Fishman 2004). Given the successes of assimilation in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, notably via increased civil rights, these *Ostjuden*, with their uncivilised manners, superstitions and radical ideas, were a threat to this mission; they were seen as ‘substandard’ and a reminder of the ‘shameful past’ (Bauman 1996:575). This played out in the events of 1889 where, following labour organisation in the East End against the sweating industry and unemployment, the Chief Rabbi came out in favour of the sweating industry, questioned whether unemployment existed and blamed the dangerous ideas of imported ‘Eastern’ socialism for the disturbances (Fishman 2004:163-184). As we see here, those driving the assimilatory project were, by nature of their opposition to the *Ostjuden*, clearly imagining themselves carriers of the Enlightenment spirit. Consequently, in 1904 there was great relief when a way was found for English Jews to express their solidarity with their Eastern co-religionist suffering exploitation, but to also ensure they didn’t actually have to encounter them, when a company offered to transport them directly to America, with no stopover in London (Bauman 1989b:18).

Meanwhile, in Germany, efforts were made to remove the embarrassing mark of the *Ostjuden*. For example, social settlements were established, claiming to provide educational opportunities to new Jewish migrants from the East, but in reality to encourage a Western, middle class way of acting by removing all that was seen to mark out the *Ostjuden*. This included the ‘jargon’ language of Yiddish, an overly Talmudic education and the efforts of Polish Rabbis who, it was claimed, taught their charges how to beg (Wertheimer 1987:143-161). Tragically, as Bauman notes, resting behind this was the idea that it was only German modernity that offered emancipation to those assimilating Jews; their attempt to ‘re-educate’ their co-religionists, itself a fundamentally modernist solution, rested on the belief that ‘the truth of the German spirit would eventually out, whatever the tensions’ (Bauman 1990a:77).

Therefore, in this period, what it meant to be Jewish in Europe was at the very least split between West and East<sup>1</sup>. Antisemitism was undoubtedly a common factor, but the way this was experienced, partly due to the role of West European Jewry in drawing upon racialized



tropes of the East, was different. It was also fundamentally a classed project, with the West increasingly developing a Jewish bourgeoisie, against the proletarian/peasant Jewish class of the East and its ready recruits to Jewish socialism. In so doing, East European Jews drew upon the ‘messianic-universalist’ tradition of Judaism which was stronger in Central and Eastern Europe than the West (Schatz 1991, Löwy 2017). Meanwhile migration, especially as the result of the pogroms across the Romanov Empire, meant these two groups increasingly, though not wholly, had to live alongside each other, with Germany as the meeting point (Gay 1978, Wertheimer 1987). This then produced different orientations, most notably in the difference in forms of emancipatory thought between West and East (Löwy 2017). While in the West emancipation was seen to occur at an individual level, with Jewish faith being purely a private matter, in the East emancipation was seen to reside with a group marked out by their own distinct attributes (Traverso 2013). It was their orientation away from the pretences of being part of any distinct group, their disgust with the *Ostjuden*, that allowed assimilating Western Jews to demonstrate their allegiance to modernity. As Bauman put it a ‘disgust lived as the sign of refinement’ is also ‘a disgust seen as the price of joining the good society’ (Bauman 1989b:17). This was the world that the Polish Bauman was born into in 1925.

### *The Holocaust and After in the East*

Of course, the major tragedy of the assimilatory project lay in what we now know came next: the *Shoah*. While Bauman suggests elements of the project would live on in some forms of Zionism (Bauman 1990a:78-79) this certainly bought an end to its advocacy in Western Europe. Those who had survived from the West – primarily, as Bauman (1989b) notes, the previous advocates of the assimilatory project who could ‘pass’ as Aryan, or who had the money and connections to escape to safety – were able to redirect their class-based interests elsewhere. The same was not true in the East, particularly in the country Bauman experienced and discusses in most depth, Poland.

Prior to World War II, Poland had a Jewish community of 3.4 million people, the second largest in the world at that point (Bauman 1969:5). In this period, 1/7<sup>th</sup> of all Jews globally lived in Poland and they accounted for 10% of the Polish population, with only Ukrainians (14%) as a bigger minority (Schatz 1991:24). While there had been some initial assimilatory efforts (Lichten 1986) by the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Polish Jewry had a very particular class and social position. To be exact, 78.6% of Jews worked in petty trade, primarily being self-employed in fields such as light industry, tailoring, shoemaking, carpentry and baking, primarily in urban

areas. Given that Jews also made up 21.5% of Polish professionals, this initially suggests a broadly economically advantaged position, with rough numbers in 1931 of 100,000 bourgeoisie; 2,000,000 petty bourgeoisie; working class 700,000; intelligentsia 300,000. However, these numbers betray what was an economically disadvantaged group. 50% of Jews lived in poverty and in some rural areas over 90% relied on welfare. Their categorisation as 'petty bourgeois' and self-employment as petty trade was a necessity driven by the policy of not hiring Jews in factories and the closures of many fields of employment to them. For example, Jews were only 1.8% of those employed in public service. Therefore, despite their objective classification, this was primarily a very economically deprived group, living in worsening conditions as Jewish industries closed and unemployment grew throughout the 20s and 30s (Schatz 1991:24-27).

This inevitably produced a certain radicalism, with the Bund emerging as a radical replacement for traditional support structures (Guesnet 2001). The appeal of such radical politics was furthered by the anti-Semitism of the Right and Centre and encouraged by the response of the traditional Left. While at certain crisis points the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) fought against anti-Semitism the overriding attitude was one of animosity, based initially upon the claim of the Bund's 'Russian' origin and denial of Polish nationhood, followed by the attempts of the PPS to curry favour with the anti-Semitic Peasant's Party in its attempt to appeal to ideas of Polish nationalism (Zimmerman 2001, Wróbel 2001). This ensured that the Polish Communist Party (KPP) gained a significant following among Jews attracted by its internationalism, aided by the links between the Polish messianic tradition and Marxism. Bauman partly emerged from this tradition, speaking of how communism offered a messianic vision of 'a Poland free from poverty and hatred, from big and small humiliations inflicted by one man upon another' (Bauman and Obirek 2015:110). Despite being illegal, the KPP counted a membership of roughly 40,000 in the mid-30s, of which Jews were no fewer than 22% of members and, in some areas, accounted for up to 60% (Schatz 1991:96).

The war had a devastating impact on Polish Jewry, with only 250,000 people surviving (Bauman 1969:5). Those who survived had a particular composition. They had done so either – as in the case of Bauman's future wife, Janina Levinson – by using what small bourgeoisie advantage they had been able to gain prior to the war and by a significant amount of luck or – like Zygmunt and his family – by fleeing to the Soviet Union, hardly itself a guarantee of salvation (Schatz 1991:150-151). Each case however shared a common perspective. While gentile Poles 'saw little difference between the two enemies [Nazis and the Soviets]. For the

Jews, the difference was one between life and death. Horrified, the Poles watched the enthusiasm with which most Jews greeted the Red Army' (Bauman 1996:584). Due to this, and their nation's strong history of Jewish socialism, Polish Jews who had survived the Holocaust found themselves disproportionately represented in the administrative functions of the emerging Communist state and its intellectual class. Bauman, of course, was in both groups at different points<sup>2</sup>.

This then had two impacts for Polish Jewry. Firstly, Jewish people came to be identified as the betrayers of the Polish cause. As Bauman put it:

modern Polish nationalism, with its programme of cultural homogeneity and its struggle for a *Polish state* which was to become a *state of the Poles*...offered an escape and a shelter against that threatening ambivalence of which the Jews had now become the prime examples. Note that Russians or Germans, by far the more threatening enemy by any standard came second to the Jews as a negative support of the budding Polish national identity. They were enemies all right – but too *unambiguously* hostile for the purpose. Only the Jews were truly fit to exemplify in a clearly visible form 'the other' of the national identity, that chaos against which national unity promised to defend (Bauman 1996:582)

This can be seen in the continuation of post-war violence. Between the end of the war and the summer of 1947 approximately 1,500 Jews were killed in assaults that took place in 155 localities across Poland (Schatz 1991:207). Consequently, while Communism had, in theory, raised anti-racism to state policy, the over-representation of Jewish people within the state hierarchy and the emerging opposition to Israel on the basis of an 'anti-Zionist' position meant that:

The few who survived easily recognised in postwar Poland the all-too-familiar atmosphere of surveillance and vigilant censorship. Now, to be sure, they were not charged with the crime of Jewishness. The accusation was rephrased and reworded to suit the changing circumstances. Sometimes they were resented simply as the carriers of an unspecified 'alien spirit'. At other times as 'cosmopolitans'. Or 'Zionists'. Or 'Communists'. Or 'Russian helpers' (Bauman 1996:589)

This backdrop of the re-articulation of anti-Semitism as linked to the anti-Polish and/or anti-Communist 'spirit' of the Jewish people is then of course central to the anti-Semitic purge of 1968<sup>3</sup>. What distinguished the 1968 purge for Bauman was its status as a 'purely political phenomenon, in which the Jews are playing the part of a scapegoat to attract the whole

accumulated aggressiveness and frustration of the embittered and disillusioned mass' (Bauman 1969:4). The Communist state dealt with the crisis tendencies found in what Bauman terms 'second-generation socialism' (Bauman 1972) by evoking the enemy of 'international Judaism' and thereby forcing a significant number of those who had survived the Holocaust into exile. Furthermore, as Bauman (1971) notes, anti-Semitism was not simply a governmental policy. The Party had to deal with the political frustrations towards communism, while ensuring its continued hegemony. Meanwhile, the opposition also had to rally support while not being openly anti-Soviet. In each case, since one cannot speak of anti-Sovietism, anti-Semitism was encouraged (Schatz 1991:282-312). The result of this, and other, purges was to open up new state position and resources for gentile Poles, while assuring Polish nationalism was placated by treating the Jews as 'the essentially alien, exotic curiosity' (Bauman 1988c:26) standing in the way of Polish nationhood.

Of course, Bauman was one of the most prominent victims of this, with his name announced on TV by the President as an enemy of the nation. Those Jewish people left in Poland – mostly the old without qualifications (therefore not competitors for state administrative positions) and the young – were suddenly forced to see themselves as 'Jewish', rather than the Poles they had, with the initial encouragement of the Communist state, come to think of themselves as (Bauman 1969). Their small number however produced a distinctively Polish anti-Semitism 'in the absence of Jews' (Bauman 1996:585). This continued with the emergence of Solidarity where the Party once more tried to stoke anti-Semitism as a cause in its own defence (Hirszowicz 1986) and continues today in the policies of the governing Law and Justice party. Meanwhile, the Polish Jewish Communists, like Bauman, forced into exile had to reckon with suddenly being reminded of their Jewishness – of suddenly being 'persons-to-count' (Bauman 1997:158) – having sought in Communism the possibility of a world which transcended this (Schatz 1991)<sup>4</sup>.

### *The Legacy of this Period and Bauman's Place within It*

I now want to turn to two legacies from this period outlined in Bauman's work which are important for sociology today. The first is the continuing relation between West and East European Jewry. As Bauman notes, when East European Jewry is remembered – and this is a conflicted legacy in countries such as Poland unwilling to face up to historical guilt (Bauman 1988c: 28) – it continues to be framed by its negation to the bourgeois West European Jewish figures of modernity many, such as sociologists, tend to celebrate:

In Western Europe, but above all in America, the fading memory of eastern Jewish history serves as a benchmark against which one's own progress is measured: 'look – that was the bottom from which we have pulled ourselves'. The deeper the bottom, the more towering seem the present heights. The last service the lost tribes are called to render is to offer their history as the backcloth of misery on which the riches and the honours of the western descendants may shine in all their splendour... Those millions of Jews who still populate East Europe have been so far acknowledged by western Jewish opinion solely as the people clamouring to escape; relevant concerns and duties of solidarity are by and large reduced to the slogan 'let my people go' (Bauman 1989b: 15, 23)

I would suggest this manifests itself in sociology not via a distinction between East and Western Europe, but by denying any distinction. Instead, the tendency is to speak of 'Europe', and its production of social theorists, Bauman hardly being alone in his Jewishness, as if there were one European position. The very phrase 'Eurocentric' implies this unity of voice. As Bauman encourages us to remember however, at least for European Jewry, this is simply not possible to sustain. During modernity it was split into two, with an imagined hierarchy intersected with a class *and* racialized politics. It is of course the case that each side of this divide had their own experience of anti-Semitism but we should maintain an awareness of how East European Jewry had their own class and racialized experiences. Given this, it is perhaps unsurprisingly that some of Bauman's earliest pieces after his exile and arrival in England begin, much as postcolonial scholars would today, with a critique of 'Western' scholars for trying to impose their own categories on 'the East', as in the case of seeking to show 'how close' the East must be to the Western norm (Bauman 1972:217-218).

The second point brings me to Bauman himself. As I have indicated at various points throughout, the story Bauman traces of European Jewry, its split between East and West, its class and racialized politics and its eventual fate in Poland is, at the same time, the story of Bauman's life up to, and I would suggest beyond, his exile<sup>5</sup>. Bauman notes that those in his position had similar experiences:

Treated as aliens by the Polish public, Polish-Jewish writers found their retreat and shelter in the Polish language. Here, they felt at home. As the home stood in the midst of a social desert, they lavished on it all their otherwise unspent emotions. The language benefitted, though its benefactors did not. Most of the latter perished as Jews, and were only posthumously upgraded to the rank of Poles – in recognition of their martyrdom rather than of their creative lives (Bauman 1996:589)

Such writers, exiled and excluded from their home, ‘burdened the Word with all their unfulfilled hopes, promises received but not kept, and first and foremost with their dreams of a world of moral purity’ (Bauman 1996:596), a description which, if it fits anyone, fits the poetic sociology of the Levinas-inspired Zygmunt Bauman. Late in life he commented on how, as a Jew, he ‘had to win my Polish identity and “prove” my right to it – albeit I realised quite soon that this calvary was never to end and would need to be continued till my death, and probably beyond’ (Bauman and Obirek 2015:108). Alas, so it remains in the anti-Semitic and anti ‘Communist’ Poland of today where Bauman is a useful figure of condemnation precisely because he was forced into exile and therefore was seen to have abdicated his Polishness (Bucholc 2016:60).

To assign such a figure unproblematically to a dominant racial social group is both a fundamentally ahistorical claim that overlooks the particular position from which Bauman came and implies that some forms of racism are more significant than others. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a social theorist who had written as much as Bauman did on the racialisation of Jewish people in Europe about any other racialized grouping being criticised similarly. For example, in his criticism of Bauman’s ‘narrow Eurocentrism’ and ‘white’ perspective Rattansi (2017b) engages in no discussion, and demonstrates no awareness, of the writings I have discussed in this piece; bar a short discussion of *Modernity and Ambivalence*, which is framed as ‘an extended footnote to *Modernity and the Holocaust*’ (Rattansi 2017b:88). He then goes on to claim that ‘in keeping with [Bauman’s] continuing Eurocentrism; the only minority he evinces any sustained interest is the Jewish diaspora’ (Rattansi 2017b:98). Not only is it difficult to see how an interest in the Jewish diaspora makes one ‘Eurocentric’, the implication here seems to be that Bauman is not being a ‘true’ scholar of race by focusing on Jews and anti-Semitism. This is not to deny, as Rattansi (2017a) argues, that certain elements of Bauman’s work may marginalise the significance of race but it is to say that it does not make a thinker ‘blind’ to race, or suggest a ‘neglect’ of race, as Rattansi (2017b:210) claims.

Instead, rather than including Bauman within problematically simplistic dualisms, following an early suggestion from Smith (1998) of Bauman’s status of an ‘outsider’ I would go one further and suggest, following Virdee’s usage, that Bauman belongs to the group of the ‘racialized outsider’, who are defined against the ‘dominant conception’ of a national formation and often marked by their ‘participation in subaltern conflicts’ (Virdee 2014:164). It is to this grouping that Bauman belongs. This does not mean his work is without flaw, or that we should simply accept Bauman’s claims because of his biography or his positioning. But, it does mean

any critique on what he has to say should not fall back on the trope of his ‘whiteness’ or ‘Eurocentrism’.

### *The War against Forgetfulness and Sociology*

As mentioned in my introduction, I take the title of this paper from a piece published by Bauman in 1989. Unlike anything else in his oeuvre, this is a short photo-essay published, like many papers of this period, in *Jewish Quarterly* and inspired by a book entitled *Time of Stones* by a Polish photographer, Monika Krajewski. Over a period of ten years, starting in the late 70s, Krajewski photographed Jewish cemeteries across Poland, in their various states of disrepair. Discussing the photos, some of which are reproduced in the text, Bauman reflects on how they indicate a ‘popular movement...aimed at the rescuing of Jewish history and culture from oblivion’ a history ‘waiting to be dug out and repossessed by its rightful descendants’ (Bauman 1989a:47). This was the ‘war against forgetfulness’ being played out in Poland, a war that had a deadline beyond which things would be forgotten, as the stones of the graveyards increasingly turned to dust.

I would suggest sociology has its own war against forgetfulness when it comes to how we categorise and remember writers. We should be constantly on guard against a tendency we are becoming increasingly guilty of, imposing racialized categorisations onto individuals and groups without an awareness of their historical, social and political positioning. As argued above, writers on Bauman have been too ready to assign him to a category of ‘whiteness’ which it is difficult to see he was ever truly granted<sup>6</sup>. This reaches its apotheosis in Rattansi’s critique where he accuses Bauman of being ‘imprisoned’ in his ‘white’ ethnicity, which was probably a surprise to someone forced to flee into exile precisely because he wasn’t seen as ‘white’ (Rattansi 2017b:14). Bauman is hardly alone in suffering this fate, for example, Connell’s critique of ‘Northern Theory’ assigns a whole group of Jewish writers, subject to ‘probationary whiteness’, including Bauman, Durkheim<sup>7</sup>, Levi-Strauss, Marx, Negri and Simmel to this category without considering whether their being Jewish may have impacted their position (Connell 2007:1-68). Such claims ‘neglect the role of Jews in Europe and America as an internal other’ (Goldberg 2017:5). It also lessens sociology, removing a key component of its project: the recognition of contingent and historically transforming processes of social positioning, racialisation and political formation.

A similar problem can be found in the claims from Rattansi (2017b: 96) that Bauman cannot fully appreciate the causes of anti-Semitism since he doesn’t recognise how the ‘Oriental’

position of the Jew placed them in the position of the colonial subject against the imperial West. While in some cases this was true it is only part of what Bauman (1991:181) termed the ‘contradictory assimilatory pressures’, namely that ‘the ambiguous image of the Jew...sometimes resembled but at other times differed from representations of colonial subjects’ (Goldberg 2017:6). In Bauman’s (1998:150) terms, the ambivalence of the Jew was in their role as pariah *and* parvenu. Therefore, seeking to collapse this relationship into one simply of imperial master and colonial subject (see, for example, Mayblin et al. 2016:72), hinders more than it aids our understanding. A significant contribution of the postcolonial project has been its call to recognise the importance of finely grained historically shaped forms of power and racialisation which continue into the current day. We leave ourselves poorer if we respond to this call by, when discussing social theorists, overlooking the particular forms of internal racialisation and class politics which shaped anti-Semitism across Europe (Virdee 2019).

Winning the war against forgetfulness in contemporary sociology requires the kind of rich historical sociology Bauman – ironically perhaps later a theorist seen to embody the problematic ‘presentism’ of contemporary British sociology (Inglis 2014) – produced in this period. But, it also requires more of *us* as critical readers of social theory. Substantive engagement with the work and claims of social theory should always take prominence over simplistic claims of the theorist’s elite social position.

### Notes

1. It could be argued this split between Western and Eastern Europe is itself too simplistic since it overlooks the special circumstances of Jewish Central Europe. Discussed most notably by Löwy (2017), this produced a unique intelligentsia who, with the German focus on *kultur* against *zivilization*, emphasised a romantic and messianic libertarian critique not found in the East and West. While Bauman does at point acknowledge the particular position of Central European Jews (for example, Bauman 1991:109) they are usually defined in opposition to the dominant West/East split. There are, I would suggest, two reasons why Bauman relies on a dichotomous split. Firstly, as we shall see in the next section, his analysis is also shaped by the division between Communist and Capitalist Europe, a split which he argues has then shaped how European Jews are remembered. Secondly, his focus on the proletarian nature of Jewish socialism makes his class focus slightly different from the intellectuals who make up Löwy’s study; though he shares some similar thoughts on Walter Benjamin (cf. Bauman 1993b). In this sense, Bauman is closer to an approach which defines the proletarian/peasant Jews of Central



and Eastern Europe as part of a common 'Yiddishland' marked by similar practices and social positions (Brossat and Klingberg 2016). Germany then is conceived of as the meeting grounds for these groups in Bauman's work (Bauman 1989b). For the purpose of our discussion, Löwy is a useful reminder of my central argument: that it is difficult to speak of an undifferentiated Europe which could birth a 'Eurocentric' position.

2. While the especially strong ideological appeal of communism to Polish Jews should not be underplayed (see Schatz 1991), we should never forget how appealing communism was to a whole generation just coming to terms with the horrors of the Holocaust; the USSR could be seen as the source of their salvation. As Bauman puts it, many in this period were driven simply by the idea of a 'normal life, whatever "normal" might mean' (Bauman and Obirek 2015:148).
3. Bauman suggested similar processes of rearticulating anti-Semitism were central to the emergence of a 'New' Right during the period of perestroika in Russia (Bauman 1988b)
4. Throughout this section I have frequently cited Schatz's (1991) magnificent text on the generation of Polish Jewish Communists born around 1910 and therefore older contemporaries of Bauman. It is perhaps worth noting in this context that Bauman reviewed this book and spoke of it in very positive terms as 'a praiseworthy example of sociology in action' and as a 'laboratory' for his own sociological hermeneutics method given its 'textbook pattern of the intimate weaving of biography and history' (Bauman 1990b:175). See both Cheyette and Davis in this special issue of Thesis Eleven for more on these themes.
5. By settling in Leeds, Bauman continued a historical trend in a city whose Jewish community had expanded greatly by the emigration of Polish Jews a couple of generations earlier. Though this earlier generation had less engagement in socialist, and more in Zionist, politics (Krausz 1964:31).
6. One possible response to my argument is that even if we accept Bauman's 'probationary whiteness' in the context of Poland, once he came to Britain he effectively 'became white' due to his elite position and since racism in Britain during this period became increasingly based on colour. However, this argument is not especially convincing. Not only does it seem to suggest Britain is free of anti-Semitism, but it also doesn't match Bauman's experiences. As his wife Janina made clear, living in Britain also meant 'living with antisemitism' (J. Bauman 2007). Indeed, Zygmunt spoke of how in Britain he was 'an immigrant, a newcomer, an alien' where, even after gaining citizenship 'neither my students nor my colleagues ever had any doubt I was a foreigner' (Bauman 2004:9). This is not to claim the extent and ferocity of anti-Semitism in Britain from the 70s onwards was equal to that of Poland, such a claim is obviously untrue. It is to claim that being 'probationary' whiteness there is always the possibility, well known to its subject, of it being taken away or not fully recognised. As Bauman (1997) notes, while some lucky new arrivals to a country get to be called 'exiles', most are simply 'foreigners' or

‘immigrants’ and, at points, both are likely to experience the xenophobia which comes with this position.

7. Durkheim is a particularly egregious case here. To take just one example of how Durkheim was denied ‘whiteness’: during World War I, despite having published two substantial pieces of anti-German propaganda and with his son serving and dying on the frontline, Durkheim was openly accused in the French senate of being a German agent and attacked in the press as a ‘Boche with a pasteboard nose’ (Lepenies 1992:78). As Goldberg (2017) suggests, the context of France at the time would not allow Durkheim to be anything but Jewish, as Durkheim indicated in his own discussion of anti-Semitism (Durkheim 2008:322).

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