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## **Whiteness, Judaism and the Challenge of the Postcolonial critique: A Response to Rattansi**

*Matt Dawson, University of Glasgow*

I wish to start by extending my thanks to Ali Rattansi for engaging with, and responding to, my article ‘The War Against Forgetfulness: Sociological Lessons from Bauman’s Writings on European Jewry’ (Dawson 2020) and to Peter Beilharz as Editor of *Thesis Eleven* for providing space for our debate.

I must confess though that I was somewhat confused upon reading Rattansi’s response. The reason for this is that Rattansi seems to imagine my article is intended to be an extended critique of his book *Bauman and Contemporary Sociology: A Critical Analysis* (Rattansi 2017). Therefore, he rebukes me for not discussing his critiques around Bauman’s maleness and ignorance of gender (which, it should be noted, are critiques offered more broadly in scholarship on Bauman, see for example Branaman 2007), his discussion of consumerism, or the English riots of 2011. But, my article was never intended to be an extended critique of Rattansi’s book. Rather it was an attempt to respond to a set of literature which, in claiming Bauman as ‘white’, suggests that this ‘whiteness’ imbibes his sociological project and automatically creates a ‘Eurocentric’ worldview. Of course, in my doing so, I refer to Rattansi’s work most frequently since his book contains the most prominent example of these arguments, however it is not his argument alone and in my article I cite other instances of this. If I were to write an extended response to all of Rattansi’s claims, and therefore in effect provide that extended critique of Rattansi’s book, this would take us beyond the scope of my original article and would be challenging in the space available to me here. Therefore, in what follows rather than respond to these broader points of Rattansi’s argument, I will pick up on this question of whiteness, Judaism and the challenges offered by the postcolonial/decolonising critique.

To begin, I would like to draw a link between Bauman and another Jewish sociologist all too-often considered to be ‘white’ now, Émile Durkheim. What Rattansi in his responses shares with much of the literature on Durkheim’s Jewishness is a desire to reduce this to an individual question of identification. Much as Pickering (1994) sees Durkheim’s Jewishness as concerning factors such as how often he visited a synagogue or moved in Jewish circles – an ‘enigmatic’ question of little importance to sociology – Rattansi’s dismisses the importance of Judaism to Bauman’s life given a) he never identified or wore the clothes of

the East European *Ostjuden*; b) he saw himself as more of a Pole, sociologist and socialist; c) his being uncomfortable in Israel; and d) his obtaining a significant position in British sociology.

Seeking to dismiss the importance of antisemitism on the basis of individual identity is a surprisingly unsociological approach to this question. In short, processes of racialization pay little attention to how people identify but instead *assign* individuals to racial groups. As Strenski (1997), in his discussion of Durkheim's Jewishness puts it, it doesn't matter too much how an individual views their own Jewishness, antisemitism can *make* someone Jewish. This was true for Durkheim and also in the case of Bauman. Rattansi cites Bauman's identity as Polish and a socialist, but what is notable here is that, as Bauman himself put it, he had to 'win and prove' his Polishness (Bauman and Obirek, 2015: 108) a victory which was never experienced; he remained Jewish. Victory was even more elusive due to the strong connection drawn between socialism and Judaism in Poland (Schatz 1991). Therefore, Bauman's Jewishness meant his attempts at alternative identities were rejected and he remained an object of antisemitism. Despite his struggles with Jewishness, he was read as Jewish. This reaches its pinnacle in the purge of 1968 where his life and liberty were at threat.

Following this, it should be noted that I did not claim Bauman was part of the *Ostjuden*, rather I used Bauman's discussion of this group to highlight how claims of 'Eurocentrism' can overlook questions of internal racialisation in Europe (a point expanded on by Virdee 2014). Since at one point in his book Rattansi chides Bauman for supposedly overlooking the peculiarities of Western and Central Europe, I am assuming he has some sympathy with this view (Rattansi 2017:64). However, it is very clear Bauman's position as Eastern European impacted his sociology, I cite in my article his resistance to claims of 'Westernisation' in Eastern Europe for example (Bauman 1972). It is not clear to me what Bauman being uncomfortable in Israel says about his Jewishness. However, the claim that Bauman's obtaining of a significant position in British sociology shows the insignificance of Jewishness to his life is a surprising suggestion. Once again, this seems a strangely unsociological claim, akin to claiming to Barack Obama becoming US President suggests he wasn't subjected to racism. As Bauman (1998) reminds us, the strength of antisemitism rests in its ability to see one's position of power as a marker of Jewishness. In this context, I cite the testimony of Zygmunt and his first wife Janina that they experienced antisemitism in Britain; in the latter's words, life in the UK meant 'living with antisemitism' (see Dawson 2020: 99). Again here

we can see a link to Durkheim, the supposedly ‘assimilated’ Jew who becomes one of France’s most prominent Professors yet still experiences antisemitism, up to being called a secret German spy in the French Senate (Fournier 2013:703-5).

This then leads to a point from Rattansi concerning Bauman’s discussion of racism. He claims that I did not understand his argument when he critiqued Bauman’s views on the English Riots. I did however understand it (as with the point around gender, this is a common critique of Bauman, see for example Solomos 2011), what I was instead highlighting was an implicit suggestion in Rattansi’s book that Bauman’s focus on antisemitism as racism is part of the problem, since it is ‘in keeping with his continuing Eurocentrism’ (Rattansi 2017: 98). Here I fear we are danger of creating hierarchies of racism. Bauman very well may be guilty of underplaying race in discussions of consumerism and the English riots but this does not suggest a sociologist who is somehow oblivious to race and racism.

I have drawn some links between Bauman and Durkheim here in order to make a broader point. Rattansi ends his response with the call to decolonise sociology and critical theory. Leaving aside the question as to whether Bauman is best categorised as belonging to the school of critical theory (a claim I disagree with, especially if, as Rattansi argues, this is defined in the lineage of the Frankfurt School), this is a goal I share great sympathy with and nowhere in my article do I suggest otherwise. What I call for instead is, reflecting the strength of the postcolonial critique, to pay careful attention to the racialised positions theorists, not just Bauman but others such as Durkheim, occupied. Rather than a dualistic position of ‘the white Eurocentric’ theorist and the not, this calls for careful attention to the processes of internalised race-making within Europe. Indeed, given the continuing significance of antisemitism in the current day, such an understanding can perhaps help us understand contemporary racisms more effectively. This is not to say that Bauman’s sociology is flawless, none is, but rather to more carefully delineate the field of critique.

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**Matt Dawson** is a senior lecturer and currently Head of Sociology at the University of Glasgow with research interests in social theory and the history of sociology. He is the author of *Social Theory for Alternative Societies* (2016, Palgrave Macmillan) and *Late Modernity, Individualization and Socialism: An Associational Critique of Neoliberalism* (2013, Palgrave Macmillan) as well as coeditor of *Stretching the Sociological Imagination: Essays in Honour of John Eldridge* (2015, Palgrave Macmillan). He is currently working on a book provisionally entitled *The Political Durkheim*.