Contents
From the President......................................................... 1
Cherry Schrecker: Transatlantic Voyages......................... 3
RCHS Conference Announcement (August 2008, Umeå, Sweden): Perspectives from the Periphery...................... 4
Andreas Hess: Liquid Memory?....................................... 5
Latest Member Publications........................................... 8
Miscellaneous: Newly updated List of Members, New
Dublin Account, etc................................................... 8

Letter from the President

Last time I might have threatened some RCHS members by announcing that I would use the prerogative of my presidency by writing regularly on the subject of “Avoiding bullshit in the history of sociology”. I am inclined to keep my promise but want to repeat the invitation to all of you to contribute your own observations or to express discontent or formulate criticism. Today I would like to start at the very core of how we do history. Most historians of sociology have a special relationship with their subject. It would not be an exaggeration to call it a love relationship. If someone spends years of his professional life focussing on a particular subject it is almost unavoidable that the researcher develops a special relationship with it. One might start by chance or out of curiosity but sticking to one subject for years necessarily changes one’s attitude. However, sticking to the one subject works out only if one develops a special relationship that others, often through mere coincidence or personal luck, have possessed in the first place. The latter might start their research or write already out of a feeling of responsibility towards their subject. The subject appears as underrated by others or is held in high esteem by the researcher because he or she did have a special relationship with the (mostly) passed-away subject. Widows (almost never widowers) are quintessential lovers in the history, not only of sociology. Think of Marianne Weber and her Gefährten rhetoric. However, mainly due to the
The changing character of intimate relationships the number of surviving companions willing to write the biography of their late partners has diminished over the last decades. The place of the widows has been taken by admirers, former disciples, beneficiaries, etc.

The crucial point here is the complete reversal of the textbook mode of selecting subjects or cases. Whereas we teach our students that they should start with a research question which should be the result of exhaustive reading of the appropriate literature, some of our fellow historians start with a predefined fixation to a particular individual. Closely related to such an approach is the selection of a subject which consists of a larger group of individuals. Histories of departments, schools, nations are in a similar way often predefined by the special relationship of the researcher to his/her place of origin. Usually Austrians (you could insert any other country) write the history of sociology in Austria, often labelled Austrian sociology. As in the case of widows, being a compatriot can have some advantages; at the same time it can have as many disadvantages.

I have not done a count recently but I am sure that the majority of the publications in history of sociology are of this type. At the same time well-informed histories of research methods, technical advices, like SPSS, modes of doing research in larger groups, the socio-economic backgrounds of sociologists after the classics, diffusion of ideas, the alienation from institutions, the study of ‘mini-

institutions’ such as projects, sabbaticals, etc. are lacking.

There are two other shortcomings related to this selection pattern: lack of comparativeness and the change of the attitude in long-time relationships. True, comparative research is a minority program in sociology for several reasons, but the non-existence of any kind of comparative perspective seriously devalues most of the history of sociology contributions.

Perhaps even more important is what Everett Hughes (who at least to my knowledge never wrote a piece of history of sociology) observed: experts tend to hate their clients - even more so the longer they are in their jobs. Curiously, historians of sociology pretend never to hate their subjects. Parricide is rare. Are we somehow better persons? I doubt it. Big revelations are the prime business of biographers. But where are the big disclosures in our literature? Either we are not long enough working on our subject or some ‘bourgeois’ shyness or weird reluctance of fully engaging with it has survived in our tribe. Or are we only hiding our feelings better than commissioned biographers of presidents, entrepreneurs, celebrities, etc.?

Christian Fleck

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Transatlantic Voyages

The conference Transatlantic Voyages was held at the University of Nancy on the 31st of May and 1st of June. Organised by the research laboratory LASTES in collaboration with the laboratory Cultures et Sociétés en Europe, Strasbourg (UMR 7043) and the Goethe Institut, Nancy, its aim was to discuss Atlantic crossings made by people and ideas and to evoke the effects of these journeys on sociological theory and practise in Europe and America.

More than thirty sociologists and students of sociology from both sides of the Atlantic attended the conference which was held in both French and English. It became thus in itself a vehicle for exchange between the two continents and the object of a considerable journey for some of those present.


Others spoke of exile, particularly around the time of the Second World War, concerning particular named sociologists or as a more general theme. More recent developments in sociology in the aftermath of the War up until the present time were also presented and discussed. These included institutional change, exchange and co-operation, and the development of theoretical approaches, concepts, national sociologies and disciplinary areas. The difficulties concerning communication and exchange between diverse sociological traditions and cultures were also a point of interest and debate.

The conference was an occasion to meet fellow researchers, many, but not all of them members of ISA, AISLF and the AFS, and to visit la belle ville de Nancy.

Cherry Schrecker
ISA-RCHS Interim Conference:

**Perspectives from the Periphery**

**Umeå University, Sweden, August 21-24, 2008**

What are the relations between the centre and the peripheries within sociology and other social sciences? Complex power patterns of cultural translations and of exchange give rise to different types of peripheries. This conference will look at social, disciplinary, geographical and temporal peripheries and their influences on the discipline. Other contributions to our knowledge of the history of sociology are also welcome!


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The following suggestions for sessions have already been made:

- Christian Fleck and Andreas Hess: Coming to Terms with the Red Past: Sociology and Communism
- Meletis Meletopolous: Sociology and High Schools
- Hedvig Ekerwald: Peripheries and Gender; Sociological couples
- Christian Fleck: Methodological Problems in the History of Sociology
- Christian Fleck: Didactic Issues in Relation to Methodology of the History of Sociology

For further suggestions for sessions and paper submissions please contact the RCHS secretary: a.hess@ucd.ie
LIQUID MEMORY?

On March 20, the biggest German daily, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, published an article in which Bogdan Musial, a Polish historian, revealed that the renowned sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, one of the prophets of postmodernism and author of such sociological bestsellers as “Legislators and Interpreters”, “Modernity and the Holocaust” and “Liquid Modernity”, once worked as an agent for the Stalinist Military Secret Service. Citing files from now accessible Warsaw archives, the article further reveals that Bauman (code name “Semjon”) participated in political cleansing operations of allegedly political opponents in Poland between 1944 and 1954. The Polish files also show that Bauman was praised by his superiors for having been quite successful in completing the tasks assigned, although he also seems, as at least one note suggests, not to have taken any major part in direct military operations because of his “semitic background”. However, to be promoted to the rank of Major at the youthful age of 23 must have been quite an achievement. As the author of the Frankfurter Allgemeine article further points out, Bauman remained a faithful member of the party apparatus. The party soldier Bauman continued to serve the CP propaganda machine by writing books, for example, on such enlightening topics as “The role of democratic centralism in the work of Lenin” (1957) until the anti-Semitic Gomulka troika of the PCP came to power, leading to Bauman’s expulsion from the party and forcing him to leave Poland in 1968. Certainly, Musial’s article in the Frankfurter Allgemeine was not the first one to discuss the Bauman files. The FAZ article took the lead from last year’s Polish debates when the journal Ozon published a report filed by Piotr Gontarzyk, a researcher then working for the Polish Institute of National Remembrance. It should not come as a surprise that the revelations about Zygmunt Bauman’s past are so passionately debated in continental Europe. Despite their troubled and chequered national pasts the German and Polish readerships and publics nowadays are very astute and critical when it comes to the brown and red pasts of their public intellectuals (probably more red in Poland’s case and possibly more brown in Germany, although examples of the other color can also be encountered in the case of the former GDR). This awareness and the new inclination of following the ethics of political responsibility is actually a result of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The public’s eye in continental Europe differs considerably from countries such as Britain and Ireland which were never under the spell of either Fascism or Stalinism. In the latter two cases it is still possible to read the lamentations of an unreconstructed communist like the historian Eric Hobsbawm, celebrating the Stalinist line taken during the Spanish Civil War (as in The Guardian a few weeks ago) – and for him to get away with it.

Be that as it may, in Germany - which seems to have become the centre of the current debate - every major paper has now commented on the news of the discovery of the Bauman files. In the Süddeutsche Zeitung of March 21, Thomas Urban argues that although the archives leave no doubt as to the fact that Bauman was a member of the military
secret service, very little is actually known about Bauman’s exact role in the post-war Stalinist operations in Poland in which, as Urban points out, at least 50,000 people are estimated to have died, most of them civilians. The Süddeutsche noted that Bauman has actually confirmed that he had indeed been a member of the secret service; however, as the paper’s commentator points out the sociologist had remained silent as to his actual deeds and level of involvement. Thomas Assheuer in the liberal weekly Die Zeit (March 29) goes further by suggesting that we need to take a closer look at the relationship between the man and his work. There are indeed plenty of enlightening passages to discover in Bauman’s sociology, particularly if and when one is interested in the question of how individual ambivalence and organised irresponsibility are related. Assheuer stresses that in this respect Bauman’s work may indeed have ironically set the high standards by which his life is now being judged.

Assheuer makes an important point here, although his comment still must leave critical readers puzzled and wondering. Surely, any sensible person will agree that a one-sided trial by media needs to be avoided and that the man himself should be given a chance to respond or comment. However, it is also a fact that up to this point Bauman has only confirmed that he had been a member of the military secret service; as to his further involvement in the Stalinist purges he has remained staunchly silent. The second point I would like to make here relates to the strange silence of many of his admirers (or shall we say ‘followers’?). Particularly in Britain and Ireland there exists now a celebrated pop-sociology and industry to which the type of sociology that Bauman promotes certainly belongs. The uncritical followers and customers of such trends are usually quite outspoken when it comes to the wrongs of post-modern society or liquid modernity but they seem to be utterly at a loss when it comes to its ethical and political dimensions. Particularly when addressing the questions of the normative dimensions of critical judgement and responsibilities these uncritical admirers suddenly turn into obedient types and remain remarkably stumm. This is a reaction that certainly resonates with Bauman’s notion of ‘liquid identity’: one can justify any action or lack of action as one goes along.

This brings me to my third point: Maybe readers have not fully realised that Bauman’s sociology is actually a structural argument in disguise. In Bauman’s system, much as in the work of most critical theorists, everyone becomes a victim of society. In such a sociology culprits and perpetrators, if they are indeed encountered at all, appear always as banal and as somehow innocent human beings. As Bauman once said in an interview, had he encountered Eichmann in person and without knowledge of his crimes he would have probably found him to be a likable person. (Die Tageszeitung, 29 April 2006). The point about such a sociology is that there seems to be no such thing as individual choice or responsibility anymore. If all is liquid, so is morality. In this context it might well be, as Thomas Assheuer has argued, that the contemporary work of Bauman sheds light on his past. However, a closer reading of Bauman’s work also reveals that it is always the anonymous structures and larger entities that shape
the individual. Individuals become just mere executors of decisions that modernity and bureaucracy force upon them. In terms of ethics, Bauman’s sociology may turn out to be a very cynical sociology indeed. If everybody is a victim, we are either all innocent or all equally guilty. If political catastrophies like the Holocaust or the Gulag are merely the results of that abstract entity called modernity nobody is to blame. Instead of the International Court at The Hague we could actually have a sociological congress where its participants reflect endlessly on what went wrong in society.¹

Postscript

The text above was first presented as a short paper for a round table discussion on ‘public intellectuals’ at the last BSA conference (14 April 2007). A shorter and edited version of it appeared a day before the BSA round table discussion, in The Irish Times. Since then two more critical comments have been published. The first, in the Wiener Standard, was written by Christian Fleck, the president of the Committee on the History of Sociology of the International Sociological Association; the second, an equally critical comment, appeared in the Neue Zürcher Zeitung. Finally, on April 28, The Guardian published a long article (an entire page) based on a recent interview with Bauman.

In this interview Bauman dismisses the Musial article (which The Guardian wrongly attributes to the Polish journal Ozone) as being a lie and reporting only half-truths, but also as being indicative of a right-wing conspiracy of which Günter Grass and Bauman himself have become the latest victims. That in Bauman’s view papers known for their critical journalism such as Die Zeit, the Süddeutsche Zeitung, the Irish Times, the Neue Zürcher Zeitung and the Frankfurter Allgemeine are actually taking part in a right-wing witch-hunt, led or inspired somehow by the current Polish government, is quite remarkable. Although he does not refer directly to Bronislaw Geremek - Poland’s former Solidarity activist and Foreign minister had been threatened with removal from his European parliament seat for not signing a disclaimer in which people holding public office must now declare that they have never collaborated with any former part of the Polish Communist Party apparatus - Bauman probably sees his case as similar to that of Geremek, despite all the evidence suggesting that one has to differentiate sharply between the two.

Last but not least, in the part of the interview that actually deals with Bauman’s Stalinist past, it turns out that there are indeed a few comments which call for more detailed explanations. Yet, Bauman remains as evasive as ever. Instead, Guardian readers are lectured on all the achievements of Bauman as a social critic who has always argued that modernity has made it more likely that individuals have less freedom to decide – as if that explained or even justified...
Zygmunt Bauman’s past decisions and actions. However, the worst part of the interview must be the passage where the Fourth Division of the Polish Exile Army is seen as the best political option available at the time. It is communist party memory gone mad. Good to know that modern European history books do not rely too much anymore on such party gospel and on the one-dimensional and fluid memory of participants like Zygmunt Bauman.

Andreas Hess

Latest Member Publications:

Hans Henrick BRUN: *Science Values and Politics in Max Weber’s Methodology* (New Expanded Edition), Aldershot (Agate) 2007. A new introduction of 55 pages has been added to the 1972 original, which has in addition been totally overhauled, including translation into English of all German quotations.

Christian FLECK: *Transatlantische Bereicherungen: Zur Erfindung der empirischen Sozialforschung*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft, 2007 (450 pages). This book looks at the emergence of empirical social research in the United States. In particular, this study looks at the support that the Rockefeller Foundation gave to those European refugees who had a social science background and who wanted to pursue their career in America.

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Please note that the updated RCHS list below was put together on the basis of four lists: (1) the latest available ISA-RC08 list from ISA Central Headquarters (Madrid); (2) the last RCHS Secretary’s list of RCHS members (Charles Crothers); (3) a more exhaustive list that the current RCHS President, Christian Fleck, had on file (but excluding all those members who had not been heard of since the end of 2002); and (4) a list of names from the ISA congress in Durban.

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