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Communism and Modernity

The sociological problem thrown up by the March Events of 1968 was that the public issues emphasised by the intellectuals evidently did not connect with the personal troubles experienced by wider social groups. Zygmunt Bauman’s post-exile sociological work commenced with an attempt to make sense of exactly this conundrum. It was an attempt that he pursued through the 1970s and 1980s and it eventually played a crucial part in the emergence and development of his interrogation of modernity. It is the aim of this chapter to discuss Bauman’s reflections on the nature and the fate of actually existing socialism and then to use that material as a way of beginning to open up a consideration of aspects of his understanding of modernity. In this way the chapter covers debates that are of crucial importance in the development of Bauman’s sociology. His discussion of actually existing socialism can be identified as the chronological and thematic hinge between his particular Polish studies and the more general sociological inquiries for which he became known in the late 1980s and 1990s. In short, in order to understand Bauman’s work on the Holocaust, postmodernity and liquid modernity, it is first of all necessary to spend some time with his essays on Eastern European Communism. That is what this chapter seeks to do, first of all by paying attention to the work on actually existing socialism and then by showing how the emergence of the Solidarity trades union in Poland was a point at which Bauman’s language and thought started to change into a more widely recognisable shape, although emphatically building on longer-standing foundations. (To some extent this chapter runs parallel to themes raised in Beilharz 2002b. The title of
this chapter was suggested by a comment in Beilharz’s essay which itself refers back to an essay by Bauman; see Bauman 1992a: 179.)

The lessons of March

If the March Events signified a revolution that failed because the intellectuals as an avant-garde were living too far ahead of other social groups, then the roots of the failure were not tactical. They were sociological. In an essay that had among its aims an attempt to reflect on March and learn lessons from it, Bauman was able to explain why it was that a group of intellectuals took a distance from Party orthodoxy. It was because the Party had trespassed onto ground that the intellectuals claimed as their own and which the forces of actually existing socialism were required to occupy if the promotion of the operative ideology of managerialism and utilitarianism were to be possible: ‘The party had assumed the sole right of initiative in the very same areas of social life that were originally the exclusive, well-nigh definitional, domain of the intelligentsia.’ From the point of view of the intellectuals, the Party was attacking freedom all the time that it sought to influence: ‘The selection and dissemination of cultural values, the formation of opinions and evaluation of social change, the critique of ideology, the articulation of the criteria of moral and aesthetic judgment, and decisions on the content of public education and the “civilizing process”’ (Bauman 1987b: 178). This battle over a common ground meant that conflict between the intellectuals and the forces of actually existing socialism was completely inevitable. The tactics of the conflict revolved around attempts to limit the room to manoeuvre that was available to the other side. For example, the intellectuals sought to exclude the forces of the actual from any discussion of values on account of their tendency towards ossification and therefore the misrepresentation of what it means to be human. Meanwhile, the Party tried to make sure that the intellectuals were stuck in a box labelled ‘enemies of Poland’.

To this extent the conflict between the intellectuals and the Party as the representation and symbolisation of the forces of actually existing socialism was a power struggle, where power consists in, ‘the differentiation of opportunities of action, of influencing events, and of access to appropriate resources’ (Bauman 1974: 129). But what the intellectuals discovered in March was that notwithstanding claims to