Zygmunt Bauman is of course an extraordinary theorist, but I shall discuss here some of the ways in which he may be seen to exemplify a number of typical sites or predicaments.

First, and most parochially, he is one of the clusters of immigrants who fundamentally shaped British sociology and social theory in the second half of the 20th century. They include Stanislaw Andreski, Gi Baldamus, Zevedei Barbu, Julius Carlebach, Percy Cohen, Ralf Dahrendorf, Norbert Elias, Ernest Gellner, Stuart Hall, Karl Mannheim, Ilya Neustadt, Karl Popper, John Rex, Teodor Shanin, Alfred Sohn-Rethel, and Sami Zubaida. Bauman’s age puts him among the younger members of this list, but he settled in the UK much later than most of the others and his rise to prominence also came later, in the late 1970s and 1980s, at a time when a more ‘continental’ style of social theory was becoming more dominant.

Secondly, he is part of a specifically Polish cohort which includes the sociologist Maria Hirszowicz, the philosopher Leszek Kołakowski and the economist Włodzimierz Brus, who were driven out of Poland at the same time and on the same counter-Socratic grounds that they had corrupted students and encouraged their oppositional activity. To this cohort one could add, from an earlier wave of emigration, Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004), who lived in France and the US but whose work was very influential in the UK as well, and Stanislaw Andreski (1919–2007), who founded Sociology at Reading, where Hirszowicz also taught. Thirdly, like Brus, Hirszowicz and Kołakowski, though unlike Andreski, Bauman is part of an ex-communist cohort, joining in Britain an ex–communist left which has been exceptionally important in the country’s intellectual life.

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Of the contemporary European social theorists with whom Bauman might be compared, the most obvious are perhaps Bourdieu, Derrida, Eco, Foucault, Giddens, Habermas and Žižek. Despite the untimely death of three of them, all continue to be central to social and cultural theory in the early 21st century, as well as holding or having held significant roles as public intellectuals. Each is or was firmly grounded in their native or, in Bauman’s case, adopted country, while having a major presence in the rest of Europe.

Bauman has probably been the most reluctant to embrace the role of public intellectual, which accrued largely as a result of his accelerating output of stunningly original and stimulating work in social theory and partly also because of the transformation of Eastern Europe and Russia from the late 1980s onwards. He received the Amalfi European Prize in 1990 and the Adorno Prize in 1998. He is emeritus professor both at Leeds and at Warsaw, and to date has honorary degrees from Vilnius, Prague, London, Bristol and New York.

The comprehensive bibliography in Kilminster and Varcoe (1996) illustrates, at least from the supply side, some main lines of the reception of his work. Initially he writes, not surprisingly, mostly in Polish for a Polish audience (with the exception of some short publications in Israel and the US), though focusing substantially on the United States and Britain, where he studied working-class history in the second half of the 1950s. A brief flurry of publications in Czechoslovakia coincides with the Prague Spring, after which (apart from an article in Yugoslavia) the scene shifts to the West (where the 1989 revolutions and their aftermath later inspire a similar flow of occasional publications).

An earlier Polish work appears in 1971 in Italian translation, setting a pattern for more or less simultaneous publication of his work which may say as much about the openness of Italian publishing as about Bauman’s reputation in that country, high though of course it is. Italy certainly makes a sharp contrast with France, where there appears to be no book in the period covered and only articles in 1967 and 1970 in the Marxist L’ Homme et la Société, followed by another only in 1992, in Michel Maffesoli’s cosmopolitanly oriented journal Sociétés. A German translation of Modernity and the Holocaust appeared with a three-year lag in 1992 (embellished with the supratitle Dialektik der Ordnung), followed by regular translations of subsequent works. In Sweden, Modernity and the Holocaust was translated immediately and this also initiated regular translations there and in Denmark. Towards a Critical Sociology had been published in Brazil in 1977, and Culture as Praxis in Serbian in 1984.