Zygmunt Bauman has identified as a continuous interest of his work: ‘the working class, standing for the downtrodden or the underdog, for suffering in general. For a long time there was the sign of an identity between the two: the working class as the embodiment of suffering’ (Bauman 1992a: 206). The interest can be traced back to the passion that led Bauman to fall into line with the Communists in their stated desire after the war to rebuild Poland as a nation of human dignity and without social suffering (that is, as a place where moral evil had been overcome). It also points forwards to Bauman’s discussions of such themes as ambivalence, globalisation and community, where there is a realisation that while the working class historically might be the pre-eminent signifier of social suffering, the contemporary human condition is one in which the working class has been replaced by other signifiers of the perpetration of evil great and small; Jews, refugees, the excluded (see also Bauman 1986).

The meaning of being downtrodden has also changed. The old model working class experienced the oppression of grinding material want, but while poverty remains an inescapable issue, it is not the only form of suffering that needs to be taken into account. Indeed it is an important principle within Bauman’s work that poverty is about much more than the objective condition of being without the means of subsistence. Bauman upholds a relative definition of poverty, which means that his work can never, ever, imagine an actuality where social suffering has been overcome once and for all. The best that can happen is that the threshold of suffering is pushed lower and lower. Of course, and as Bauman has said, some people are in
poverty because they struggle to meet subsistence needs: ‘But there are many others who are “poor”, and bound to remain such, because what they possess is pitiful by comparison with what is on offer, and because all limits have been removed from their desires’ (Bauman 1988a: 96). The conceit on the part of the powerful that the problem of poverty has been overcome thanks to policy initiatives is one more common sense that needs to be unmasked by critical sociology.

But even if the content of poverty is relative and can change, the offence to human being that it represents is invariant. The offence of poverty can never be dismissed, and it demands special attention, special condemnation: ‘Poverty is not one humiliation among many socially caused humiliations…It is a “meta-humiliation” of sorts, a soil on which all-round indignity thrives, a trampoline from which “multiple humiliation” is launched’ (Bauman and Tester 2001: 154).

To accept that such poverty is inevitable or necessary is to naturalise it and, thereby, also to confirm the common sense contention that this is simply the way that things are (or, more insidiously, that this is simply the way that things are for some people, but rarely for ‘us’). Bauman’s work unavoidably leads to the contrary position that the social suffering of poverty must not be accepted in this way, that its humanly produced causes must be uncovered and turned into something that is spoken about, transformed and politicised. For example, Bauman has argued that in the present the poor and impoverished are kept firmly out of sight (and therefore out of the minds of the affluent). They are ‘Exempt from human community, exempt from public mind’ (Bauman 1998a: 93). What Bauman’s work seeks to do is nothing less than put the sufferers of poverty back into the public mind. It is precisely this position that Bauman pursues in a number of his books (most notably in the little book on globalisation, Bauman 1998b. See also Bauman 2002b). It is also a position that has always been defining of the seriousness of moral purpose that typifies Bauman’s work.

This ethical position points to a political affiliation. Bauman is quite clear that he is a socialist. ‘I am indeed a socialist’, he has said (Bauman and Tester 2001: 153). It is the concern of this chapter to explore precisely what this socialist identification means and entails for Bauman’s work.

The point is that Bauman is not simply pinning onto his work a badge of party membership. His definition of socialism mitigates