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Izabela Wagner, *Bauman: A Biography*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020. 510 pp. £25. ISBN 9781509526864 (hbk)

In some of his later work, Zygmunt Bauman invoked notions of ‘fate’, arguing that the use of this term in common language was, in effect, a stand-in for the sociological concept of ‘structure’, with its tendency to make some outcomes more likely than others (Bauman 2008). For Bauman, when we narrate our biography we will perhaps inevitably reach for such a notion to explain outcomes which seem specially chosen for us. Reading Wagner’s excellent biography of Bauman, I found myself considering fate, in both the Baumanian and the lay sense. For example, do we owe it to fate that Bauman, recommencing his studies in post-war Poland, had initially wanted to return to the study of maths and physics, but upon discovering he had to take an entrance exam which clashed with his military work, ended up doing sociology instead (p. 143)? Was he indeed fated to be a sociologist and, as one of the chapter titles of this book has it, become a ‘global thinker’? What role did fate have to play in the fact that in 1970, as Bauman is working unhappily in Israel, the then Vice Chancellor of Leeds University, Lord Boyle, expressed concern at a lack of Marxists in the social sciences departments, leading to the head-hunting of not just Bauman but his friend Ralph Miliband (p. 318)? What might have happened had Bauman not gone to Leeds or been looking for a job at a time when VCs did not seek the recruitment of Marxists? Or, more significantly for Wagner’s biography, what of the fate of a Polish Jew born at the time of Bauman? Could those two attributes, or being Polish and Jewish, ever sit alongside each other peacefully? It is this final question which provides the key orientation point of Wagner’s study of Bauman and, in attempting to answer it, Wagner provokes new insights into Bauman’s work.

Bauman lived a long and, especially in his later years, incredibly productive life, which makes choices of what to cover in a biography difficult. Wagner has made two key choices here. Firstly, there is no significant discussion of Bauman’s work in this text. Books and research interests are mentioned, but such mentions are brief and used to explain or extend the discussions of Bauman’s life. The second is that Wagner focuses heavily on Bauman’s life before his arrival in the UK – this does not occur until page 314. Both of these are inspired choices. Bauman’s early life has been largely unexplored in the English-language literature to date, partly due to Bauman himself. Bar some brief late career reflections Bauman would offer a similar response to the one he offers Wagner when they first meet, that his life was typical and not particularly interesting (p. 3). He was only half-right. Following the tradition of Everett Hughes, Wagner sees Bauman’s innately interesting life as narrated by conflicts of status, with his status as Jewish often, against Bauman’s wishes, becoming his ‘master status’. In this sense, Bauman’s fate was a similar, perhaps even typical, one to many Polish Jews of his era, though with particular, dare we say interesting, elements.

Chapters 1-11 cover, in a chronological format, Bauman’s life in Poland. Here Wagner relies heavily on an unpublished autobiographical sketch from Bauman as well as, in the later period, Janina Bauman’s, Zygmunt’s first wife, book (Bauman, J. 1988) on their Polish life together. She combines these with interviews and a scrupulous use of the Polish archives. The clash of Bauman’s status – of being Polish and Jewish – shapes his life from the start; as Wagner notes, the local papers of Poznan on the day of Bauman’s birth discuss how the

advancement of Poland depends on ‘closing rank’ against the Jews (p. 7). Bauman is born to broadly petit-bourgeois parents, his father, the son of a shopkeeper, is fated for the same life. Unfortunately, he is exceptionally unskilled at it and having lost his money Bauman’s dad attempts suicide by jumping into the river. He is fished out by scouts – the local papers speak of how a *Jew* attempted suicide only to be saved by *Polish* scouts (p. 17). This clash continues into his schooling, Zygmunt, the only Jew in his school, is bullied mercilessly. Wagner tells the story of a young boy unable to sleep before checking outside the door to ensure there are no bullies in wait and who, upon falling asleep, will have nightmares about those same bullies. Despite this he succeeds, being one of the few Jews to gain entry to the *gymnasium*. There he is subject to the new segregation rules which require Jews to stand at the back of the classroom on a ‘ghetto bench’, while the ‘Poles’ sit. He is still top of the class or would be if a Jew was allowed to get the highest marks.

Chapter 3 traces the story of the Baumans’ fleeing from Poland with the arrival of the Nazis, a journey with a number of incredible serendipitous escapes from the advancing troops (that question of fate returns once more). Settling initially in Belarus and later in Russia as the troops advance Bauman discovers a new life. Whether this is at the school he attends, and excels at, or his brief period working at a railroad factory he experiences a new world free of racism and rich in comradely solidarity. It is here that his embrace of communism begins. He is eager to become a soldier upon turning 18 and volunteers for the Polish Red Army.

His time in the Army sets up what will become the most controversial part of Bauman’s life. During the war, he quickly becomes a Political Officer, charged with giving talks to his troops and the citizens of reconquered town on the glories of the future Soviet Poland. Upon victory, Bauman’s unit is chosen to become the Internal Security Corps (the KBW in Polish) of the new state. Here, in Chapter 5, Wagner discuss Bauman’s three years as an informant for the security police, the selective leaking of which did immeasurable harm to Bauman’s reputation in Poland and elsewhere. Through a careful examination of the evidence in the archives Wagner provides a largely convincing exoneration of Bauman, arguing that his signing up as an informant was impossible to avoid in his case and upon doing so, he provided information only when pressured and which even his handlers admit amounted to nothing but political gossip. His time as an informant comes to an end by the wishes of the KBW since he is so useless to them.

The first signs of the re-emergence of Bauman’s clashing status and eventual fate occur in 1953 where on the day of the ‘discovery’ of the Doctor’s Plot, Bauman is summarily dismissed from the army. The pretext is his dad’s visit to the Israeli embassy to enquire about migration but clearly resentment from comrades at a Jew’s rise to the rank of Major at the age 25 played a significant role. From here, Bauman moves to academia and Chapters 8-9 trace his rapid rise in the sophisticated internationalisation Polish sociological field at this point. Bauman becomes associated with the work of Julian Hochfeld and develops a name as a ‘revisionist’. Partly due to this, he becomes an object of state surveillance, being monitored as early as 1959 – with ‘Zionism’ listed as the explanation – and with full-time surveillance by 1962 (p. 230). Bauman, to his credit, continues to publish his ‘revisionist’ views and supports colleagues and students experiencing the worsening political situation. Things reach their peak in 1968 where, with antisemitism adopted as an official policy, Bauman resigns

from the party and quickly becomes a public hate figure with his name, which, as Wagner notes, was conveniently Jewish, being spat out by the Polish leader of the day, Gomulka, as a traitor. The Baumans resolve to leave and, following the illegal requirement by the Polish state to give up their citizenship, they become exiles.

Chapter 12 traces Bauman's first home after exile, Israel. Here he finds the sociology, dominated by the functionalism of Eisenstadt and with a strong link to the Labour Party, unwelcoming. He also feels alienated from the emerging forms of Israeli nationalism making a move inevitable. From this point, the book covers Bauman's remaining years via a mix of thematic and chronological topics. Chapter 13 discusses his arrival in Britain, his being a head of department and his approach to PhD supervision. Chapter 14 focuses on his way of working. Here Wagner has some important points about the nature of theoretical work, arguing against, in Bauman's words, the notion of the theorist as an 'old wolf' who 'works alone' (p. 335) and instead highlighting the many connections and collaborations Bauman was part of. Finally, Chapter 15 discusses Bauman's marriage to Janina, his immense grief at her passing and his second marriage to Aleksandra Jasińska-Kania. This chapter also traces the return of Bauman as an object of antisemitism in Poland. Following the selective publication of the accusations concerning Bauman's time in the KBW in 2006 he faces increasing resentment during his trips back to Poland. A renewal of his doctorate is denied in 2007, a lecture is interrupted by Neo-Nazis in 2012 and in both 2013 and 2014 Bauman, now a man approaching 90, is approached in the street by hooligans and harassed. He vows never to return to Poland. Wagner ends with a Conclusion where she highlights once again this conflict of status and an Appendix where she discusses how she worked on the book.

It is rare that one says of an academic book that it is a page-turner, but this book is such a case. Partly, this is due to Bauman's life, which, despite his protestations, was incredibly interesting, but it is also due to Wagner. She brings these events to life not just through her prose, but her skilful deployment of archival resources to enrich this story (for example, the incredibly detailed and sociologically sophisticated reports of Bauman's lectures from the agents monitoring him and looking for material). As already mentioned, it is not a text where one will gain understanding of Bauman's work, but for anyone interested in the history of communist Poland, Polish sociology, intellectual careers or the fate of East European Jews, it is a valuable contribution.

What though, of its value for understanding Bauman's work? I would suggest there are three key things we can learn about his work from this book. Firstly, there has in recent years been an emerging debate on Bauman's 'whiteness' and how this imbues his sociology with problematic, Eurocentric views. This claim of Bauman's whiteness was difficult to sustain before publication of this book and should be rejected outright now. This is where Wagner's focus, and her deployment of Hughes' concept of master status, is so valuable. We see a lifelong conflict between Bauman's claims of being a Pole and a Jew. Wagner ends on somewhat of an optimistic note, saying Bauman was able in some ways to craft a new master status, that of being 'Zygmunt Bauman', however the story that comes over here was one in which Bauman's master status was, in most cases, decided for him. To imagine such a person as assigned in some clear and unproblematic way to a dominant, white, racial grouping, is a fundamental misunderstanding not just of his life, but also of the history of Jews in Europe.

This links to the second point, much of the understanding of Bauman's work and reception has focused on the period after 1972 and, in so doing, has reflected the position of his primary interpreters in either Western Europe or Australia. This book encourages us to reckon with the period before this as of central importance in how Bauman is seen and in which he forges his sociological outlook.

The final lesson from this book returns us to Wagner's discussion of Bauman's collaborations in working. She discusses the role of editors, peers in conversations and publishing houses in helping create that body of knowledge and style of writing we attach to 'Zygmunt Bauman'. One person comes out as the most significant collaborator, Janina Bauman. While Janina's debt has been acknowledged, most notably by Zygmunt himself, in inspiring Bauman to write *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Wagner goes even further here, seeing Janina's memoir of the Holocaust, *Winter in the Morning* (Bauman, J. 1986) as the ethnographic 'thick description' which acts as a companion piece to Zygmunt's theorising in creating a joint contribution (pp. 349-51). Beyond this, Janina was Bauman's first reader, editor and (sometime) translator. As Wagner correctly highlights, this role is central to any academic. Wagner writes in her appendix of how, not being a 'Baumanist' but rather being a fan of Janina's books, she had originally known of Zygmunt as 'Janina Bauman's husband' (p. 403). I suspect this outsider status helped her develop this point concerning Janina's significance.

As I read this book, I couldn't help but think that while Wagner often cites Zygmunt's bravery during his time in Poland she herself has taken up quite a brave task. As already mentioned, Bauman's position in the KBW remains a live political issue in Poland – in 2016 a picture of him was burned by a far-right group campaigning for Poland's exit from the EU (p. 394). In this context her discussion of Bauman's time in the KBW and claim that 'In short, there is nothing in the available documents that indicates Zygmunt Bauman was a communist criminal' (p. 132) while convincing to this reader, is likely to face considerable contestation, and not just in Poland, by those not willing to be convinced any different. We owe her a debt for doing this work in spite of such a possibility.

In ending, I would like to draw a link between this book and another. In 1991 Jaff Schatz published a book entitled *The Generation: The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Communists of Poland*. Discussing a cohort slightly older than Bauman, it traced a similar story of a generation who turned to communism in the hope of creating a new Poland, free from the racism they experienced, but who hopes were eventually dashed. Bauman (1990:175) wrote an early review of the book and praised it as an 'exceptional achievement' which with its 'intricate weaving of biography and history' chimed with his vision of sociological hermeneutics which eventually led him to consider the questions of fate which come through so strongly in this text. Bauman (1990:175) argued the great virtue of Schatz's book lay in keeping 'the sociological ear pressed close to the ground where history is made'. I would suggest the same virtue can be found in Wagner's excellent study.

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Matt Dawson  
University of Glasgow, Scotland  
Matt.dawson@glasgow.ac.uk