

# Zygmunt Bauman

## New Frontiers and Universal Values

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"Many Cultures, One Humanity". It's a beautiful frame for thinking in our contemporary liquid order and very complex, very difficult, very risky, very dangerous world. A frame where our thinking, our concern with our own lives and the lives of people around us is placed between these two extremes. Many cultures is the reality. One humanity is an ideal destination, purpose, task. Many cultures is the past; that is what we inherited from millennia of human history. One humanity is the future, first predicted by Immanuel Kant who wrote more than two hundred years ago about the universal unification of humankind. Few people read his predictions. Recently Kant's little book about the future of mankind was rediscovered and suddenly everybody became interested, which is a very good sign because it shows the awareness, the consciousness that unity of mankind is on agenda. A topical issue, and growing in stature.

There is one invisible third element between many cultures on one side and one humanity on the other. Invisible but necessary. The middle element is the border. Border is what separates and at the same time connects cultures. These days, we are obsessed with borders. That's a paradox, a logical paradox, but not *psycho*-logical. A logical paradox, because in our fast-globalising world borders become less and less effective. They lose their effectiveness and therefore their practical importance. But as they lose their importance, they acquire more and more significance and tend to be over-saturated with meaning. It doesn't stand to reason... Psychologically, however, this is hardly paradoxical, since the less successful we are in keeping intact the borders we have drawn, the more obsessive we become in drawing them again and again. We are indeed obsessed today with drawing borders. The less they are effective, the more we are obsessed. Why? What is the reason?

The great Norwegian anthropologist Frederik Barth pointed out that borders are not drawn to separate differences. It is exactly the other way round. It is because we have drawn the border that we actively seek differences and become acutely aware of their presence. Differences are products of borders, of the activity of separation.

We all belong to the human race. We are all humans. But each one of us is unique, unlike all others. Differences are infinite. If we look around us, we won't find another person exactly like us. There are not two identical human beings on the whole planet. Somehow, most of these differences do not bother us. They don't stop us from interacting. We overlook or dismiss them as unimportant. Only some differences, on some occasions, suddenly jump into our attention, bother us, prompt an urge to do something, to make different similar, to keep distance from it, to eliminate the differences or the people and carry them. The whole attitude and action are highly selective. First a border is drawn and then people start looking for the justification of this border being put in this place, and then differences on two sides of the border are noted; they acquire enhanced significance, since they justify the border and explain why it should be kept intact.

That's the beginning of the answer. The next step would be to ask: what sort of differences are becoming important because of the borders we tend to draw and guard today? With what kind of borders are we now so obsessed in present?

Our present obsession with borders is the product of the hopeless hope that we can actually insure ourselves against all sorts of risks and dangers, that we cut ourselves off from threats vague unnamed threats, with which the world we live in seems to be saturated. To put it in a nutshell, one could say that our obsession with borders today comes from the hopelessness of our hopes, from the fact that we are desperately trying to find *local* solutions to *globally* produced problems, though such solutions don't exist and cannot be found. There can be only global solutions to global problems. But such global solutions are, thus far, beyond our reach.

All historically created tools of collective action are local. They reach as far as the borders of the nation state. We don't have any effective tools of collective action above this level. The point, though, is that real power, power to do things and have them done, has evaporated from these local institutions. In our

increasingly globalised world there is local politics without power and global power with no politics – politically unconstrained power. After two or three hundred years of modern history, of very close, sometimes friendly, sometimes stormy, cohabitation of power and politics inside the nation state, there has been a divorce. We are forced therefore to use the only tools of effective collective action we have, which are local tools, in the hope that they will somehow protect us from the uncontrolled, unbridled and impenetrable dangers from the global powers we do not control. We suffer uncertainty, fears, nightmares, which emanate from the processes over which we have no control, of which we have only very partial knowledge, and which we certainly are, we fear, too weak to master.

It all boils down to the vague feeling of insecurity. Imprecision of threats leads to the over-burdening of borders with the task they cannot fulfil. They are expected to reduce or eliminate insecurity on whose sources we have no power. When I speak of 'insecurity', I have in mind a wider phenomenon, grasped better in the German term *Unsicherheit*. In order to translate fully the meaning of *Unsicherheit* into English, three words are needed: uncertainty, insecurity and unsafety. The French word *précarité* also grasps the complexity of our fears: the experience of walking on a wobbly soil, of frailty and undefinable duration of our conditions, that shows itself in virtually every aspect of our lives.

The companies to which you have dedicated many years of your working life suddenly disappear, go bankrupt, or are swallowed by bigger companies, together with the jobs they offered you. Demand for your skills – you work very hard to get them, to learn them and you get a very high class diploma from your university, to testify that you have them – suddenly disappears. Different kinds of skills are in demand instead, skills of which you have no inkling, and you have to start from scratch because all you have learned before is no longer of use.

Human relationships are also frail, transient, easily breakable. They are "until further notice", no longer "until death do us part". They last as long as the satisfaction they bring to the partners. And if your partner is the first to be dissatisfied, you are going to find yourself alone. You know that and, therefore, having a relationship, relating to others becomes an ambivalent, traumatic experience. In this liquid and unpredictable world of ours, we badly need dedicated friends, firm commitments, certainty that a caring hand be stretched to us in case of trouble: we need reliable bonds with other people more than ever before. On the other hand however, for the same reason of the world's liquidity, we may fear, consciously or subconsciously, that if we enter too firm a commitment, if we tie ourselves to another person unconditionally and forever, our bonds may prove not an asset but a burden. When new opportunities come, we won't be able to use them.

In whatever direction you look, it's always the same story. Everything changes. We don't know what is the moving force behind these changes. The causes, we suspect, are hidden far away, in the global space, which we can't really see through somewhere there and of which we don't know how it operates though we suffer the consequences of its operation. Our frantic activity of drawing borders is aimed against this insecurity.

Since the world out there is insecure and we cannot defuse the dangers it emanates, let us lock ourselves up and fence ourselves off its morbid impacts. Let us surround ourselves by closed-circuit television, by immigration officers on the borders, the specially trained dogs, which will put every moving person under suspicion and draw every passenger through the checks meant for criminals and terrorists. Let us buy and fix more secure locks for our doors. Let us hire more armed guards to guard the part of town where we live and keep strangers away. These sort of things, we hope against hope, may stop the oozing insecurity we so deeply feel at the outer border of our country or local community, at the threshold of our home, and prevent it from seeping inside. It's, I repeat, a vain hope. It won't stop companies and jobs from vanishing. It won't stop our savings for old age suddenly disappearing. It won't save demands for skills from evaporating. It won't make human bonds stronger and more reliable.

When I was a student, that was half a century ago, I was taught Jean-Paul Sartre advice to construct and abide through the whole of life by a *projet de la vie*, a whole-life project for the whole of life. Once you have such 'project for life', it was pointed out to me, you will know exactly what to do, step by step, today, tomorrow, next month, the next year and the year after. There is a predesigned, steady, consistent way leading to your ideal image that you want to make into reality.

For my younger colleagues, such advice seems laughable... Who is planning now for the rest of one's life? Luc Botanski and Eve Chiapello, two very perceptive French sociologists, wrote a book, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, in which they characterise the contemporary world as *cité par projets*. *Cité* (it means in French a

polis, society, community – any integrated collectivity of humans) is held together by a network of projects. We move from one project to another. Each project is short term, none guarantees success for life. The researchers of contemporary labour conditions warn “you are as good as your last project”. And the memory of your last project, or your last success, doesn’t last long. Achievements do not accumulate. You need to keep moving from one project to another. Life is cut into a series of ‘non sequitur’ episodes only poorly connected.

Another thing I learned as a student came from one of the founders of my discipline, Emil Durkheim: those fleeting, floating, ephemeral pleasures, are too volatile, capricious and short-lived to build a happy life of them, but, *fortunately*, he said, there is the everlasting, permanent, stable, solid reality above you – society – which outlives you and your short-term pleasures, so you can make your life happy and meaningful by investing in that lasting, indestructible totality. I heard this first fifty years ago, and since then I lived through three or more different kinds of societies, not because I moved places, but because societies moved places. The only stable element that seem to have connected these stages of my life was precisely that laughably short, individual, bodily and mortal life which Durkheim dismissed.

All this contributes to the explanation of our obsession with borders, and also to the explanation why that obsession is unlikely to achieve its alleged purpose – to eliminate the fear of insecurity that eats into our social life. In the midst of the Second World War, Franklin Delano Roosevelt painted a beautiful vision of the world once and for all liberated from fear. We have not come as yet anywhere near such a world. We are very much at the beginning of the road.

It has been suggested by Alain Peyrefitte that the spectacular advances of the modern era were due to three kinds of trust. First, our trust in ourselves: if I learn the right kind of skills, if I think very carefully, if I stretch myself properly, I can do it. Then trust in other human beings: human beings, collectively, can do it just as each of us can, they are rational beings who will join efforts to create a decent world in which all of us may live. And finally the trust in institutions, social institutions: in the time dividing the plan and its implementation, they won’t change, they will stay the same. I can therefore think ahead, far ahead. I can rely on the institutions and the rules of the game that this great society created and protects. All three kinds of trust are today much less common; they have been put under big question marks. I can’t trust unreservedly my skills and knowledge that age so quickly and I can’t be sure that I’ll prove able to withstand the adverse tides of unknown and unpredictable changes. Of trust in other people, as the border obsession vividly shows, there’s little left. And, obviously, lost is the trust in the longevity of the social institutions once they started changing so very quickly, without notice and sometimes in a very unpleasant way. Today, orphaned trust is seeking desperately a safe haven where to cast anchor – and can’t find it. It is a wandering trust, a trust without attachment or home, without a reliable address.

If we are serious about tackling the issues that haunt the planet we inhabit, if we want, among other things, to cure or at least to mitigate our obsession with borders, separating, segregating, and the ensuing enmities, we have to do something about the foundation stone of all those problems: we have to reduce, if not eliminate altogether, fear and insecurity.

I would try to exemplify the rather general observations and suggestions referring to the experience of contemporary urban life; most of us, after all, spend the whole of our life in cities. More than half of mankind lives in the cities today and the rest of mankind, which does not live in the cities yet, is being very rapidly urbanised or coming under the influence of city lifestyle.

Cities in which more than half of mankind live today, spend most of their lives, are the places on which the outcomes of the chaotic and uncontrolled globalisation processes converge. Three of the outcomes are particularly important in shaping the conditions of insecurity that mark contemporary life.

First, our cities are the dumping grounds for the globally produced problems: pollution of water or air, warming up of the planet, these are global products, side effects of the chaotic nature of the globalising process. But it is the municipal authorities and the city residents that have to worry about making air for breathing and water for drinking, and defend the living conditions in the city themselves against the dangers arising from climatic changes. The massive migration of people around the world, the rising numbers of homeless economic migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, is also a product of globalising processes; they all end up inside the city in their search for bearable life conditions, and providing such conditions becomes a task falling on the shoulders of the city and its residents.

Second, it is the city that turns into the principal battlefield where freedom and security, two paramount values indispensable in a life worth living, meet, struggle, and seek reconciliation.

Third, city turns today into the main laboratory in which local solutions to global problems are sought, designed, experimented with and put to test; at the same time however, city offers the type of surrounding most conducive to the acquisition of skills, the arts, abilities and habits that may help enormously in confronting, tackling and possibly resolving those global issues exactly where they ought to be handled – on the global scene. Cities are laboratories where the ways and means of human peaceful cohabitation, cross-cultural dialogue and understanding are developed.

Cities were always the places where strangers lived together. It is in fact the definition of the city: the place where strangers live together permanently while keeping their differences and without stopping being strangers. Each time you walk from home to your working place or to a shop or a cinema, you meet hundreds of people who are complete strangers to you and who will remain strangers after your meeting. For this reason, city life always evoked contradictory sentiments. One contradiction was between what may be called 'proteophilia' and 'proteophobia'; another between 'mixophilia' and 'mixophobia'.

The names 'proteophilia' and 'proteophobia' refer to the mythical Proteus, to whom ancient poets ascribed the wondrous ability to change at will and endlessly his identity and his look. Proteus has since become a symbol for rapid, drastic, radical change. The term 'proteophilia' suggests love, desire and enjoyments of change. Cities offer such variety, constant change, opportunity of adventure – this was always the magnetic attraction of the city. Countryside people ran to the city seeking escape from the dull routine, tedium, boredom of the village life where everybody knew everybody else, and everybody knowing everybody else meant that no one surprised anybody any longer and there was little hope of an unexpected that could break the steady repetition of the same. As a mediaeval German expression put it, *Stadtluft macht frei*: the air of the city makes you free. That means that you can choose between so many different interesting things that may happen there. On the other hand, however, living amidst the flow of changes generates also an opposite reaction: of proteophobia. One feels endangered and threatened. One doesn't know what may happen and what to expect. One couldn't know whether the same shop will still be there at the same corner when you come next time; when you visit a supermarket, the chances that you'll meet twice the same shop assistant are minimal, the chance that you'll speak for the second time with the same technical adviser of the company from which you bought your car or your television set or of your Internet provider is virtually non-existent. It is a fluid world. And so the experience of living in the city is likely to send contradictory signals and remain ambivalent. And ambivalence tends to cause a lot of anxiety.

Similar things could be said of mixophilia and mixophobia. Mixing with strangers has its pleasures – it may be exciting and hugely enjoyable. That's why so many people go to bars, discothèques, restaurants and other public places. You see people who are different and act differently. You go through interesting experiences. You learn something on occasion. On the other hand, being surrounded by strangers may be an off-putting and even frightening experience. Many people know the moments of fright that overwhelmed them when they found themselves suddenly in a crowd, surrounded by strange faces. They knew no one there. When you visit unfamiliar places, you want to insure themselves against such moments; as a tourist, you are careful to keep to the narrow and well protected paths provided for the tourists' use. You don't mix with the local population. If you meet the local people, they are mostly the waiters, hotel maids and bazaar traders.

The two pairs – mixophilia/mixophobia, proteophilia/proteophobia – stand for the two, already briefly discussed, values: freedom and security. The values of freedom and security are both important for a complete, meaningful and relatively happy human life. The problem is, however, that while they need each other company they are difficult to reconcile, to balance – and often clash and come into conflict with each other. Seventy years ago Sigmund Freud, in his book on *Civilisation and its Discontents*, explained the unhappiness of the civilised people of his time by the fact that they surrendered too much of their individual freedom of choice for the sake of more security. If Sigmund Freud wrote his book today, he would probably restate the conflict between freedom and security, *but* he would reverse the causes of unhappiness and say that the unhappiness of contemporary men and women comes from the fact that they surrendered too much of their security in order to get more and more freedom. The further you move in one direction, the more painfully you feel that the other value is missing. City is the territory where people try, over and over again, to strike the right balance between the two values.

There is a tendency to expand the realm of freedom by providing the cities with more public spaces where strange people can meet and engage at least in a temporary interaction, talk to each other, sometimes

strike a friendship and establish more or less durable relations with each other. This is, we may say, mixophilia and proteophilia in action – and more freedom results. On the other hand there is a tendency towards keeping a distance, building walls, drawing borders, spatial separation. It is most pronounced in the United States of America, but visible more and more in European countries. A tendency to divide the city into a collection of voluntary and involuntary ghettos. On the one hand, “gated communities”, where people who can afford it hide themselves in a closely guarded territory, surrounded by armed guards on the watch for twenty-four hours a day and keeping the strangers out. If you can't afford to buy yourself into a gated community, at least you buy better locks to put on your door, burglar alarms and closed-circuit television to keep strangers away, or you join the local ‘neighbourhood watch’ vigilante group to keep strangers away. And there are ever spreading involuntary ghettos, into which people are dumped without being asked, not because they want it but because they are not allowed to go out. When applied to some particularly ‘rough’ districts of the city, the expression “no go area” means different things to people outside and the people inside. For the first, it means “I'd rather not go in”, “I'll keep away”. But for the people who are inside “no go area” means “I *can't* go out”, “I'm not *allowed* to get out from here”.

In his prophecy of the imminent war between civilisations, Huntington implies that sharply different civilisations cannot be reconciled. They can't live in peace together. In every city, including Barcelona, this very general and abstract statement, this prophecy of doom of Samuel Huntington, is however translated into the experience we collect from meeting, face to face, specific people. They indeed look different, behave differently, they dress differently but they are nearby, close to you, in proximity. Sometimes they live in the same house where you live. You meet them in various capacities, not as the walking embodiments of the imminent war of civilisations, but as shopkeepers, waiters, workers, co-workers in the same factory where you are employed, next door neighbours, parents of schoolfriends of your children, and they are slowly yet surely transferred from the abstract category of ‘alien civilisation’ into the category of individual human beings. The ability of living together is put to the practical test and, imperceptibly, your fears of the ‘great unknown’ begin to evaporate. The frightening aliens turn to be just ordinary human beings, desiring the same things you do and fearing the same things you do. Some of them are nice. Some of them are nasty. And so are all other people. All people are either nice or nasty.

City is a laboratory where the art of daily and peacefully living with difference is practised and developed. Translated or transferred from there into the planetary space, that art and associated habits may help to develop the kind of abilities which we need so much in order to find common language and engage in a dialogue between different populations, nations, races, civilisations of the planet. The task we confront may cease to look so awesome, so overwhelming; it may gradually, yet steadily, be transformed into a realistic purpose, which is within our power to achieve. On the other hand, as Richard Sennett, one of the most insightful sociologists alive today, pointed out when studying the American experience, the tendency to ‘purify’ our surroundings and confine it to people ‘like us’, to move solely among ‘similar people’, is a way to avoid looking deeper into each other. It is an escape from facing up to difference. And he also found out that the more there is of segregation, the more uniform the environment, the less its inhabitants are able to face up to the reality of human differences. A vicious circle, indeed.

Madeleine Bunting, a brilliant English journalist, wrote in *The Guardian* after Spain people's reaction to the outrage of the terrorist act at the Madrid railway station, that it was enormously encouraging; a truly humane reaction, so different, so promising. What Bunting said in the article called “Thank You Spain” is that the images that we have seen in Madrid and other Spanish cities offer two alternative scenarios for what the city might mean in the twenty-first century: a place of *terror*, where the stranger is to be feared and distrusted? Or, the determined *solidarity* of strangers? Bunting admired and praised “a sea of hands waving hastily scribbled messages with one word that says everything: this one word was ‘No’. ‘No’ to the terror, that means ‘yes’ to solidarity.”

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