

FLOATING INSECURITY SEARCHING FOR AN ANCHOR

ARTICLE BY
ZYGMUNT BAUMAN

Zygmunt Bauman died in January 2017, just a few months before this edition was published.

The Polish sociologist was one of Europe's foremost thinkers on contemporary society, taking an engaged and passionate approach. His thinking on the discourse around security in the current climate, and his reading of the refugee crisis as a "crisis of humanity", are some of his most significant contributions to modern debates.

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines 'security' as the "condition of being protected from or not exposed to danger"; but, at the same time, as "something which makes safe; a protection, guard, defence". This means, as one of those not common (yet not uncommon either) terms that presume or imply, an organic and so once and for all sealed unity of the condition with the assumed means to attain it (a sort of unity akin to that which for instance is suggested by the term 'nobility').

As the *condition* to which this particular term refers is deeply and unquestionably appreciated and yearned for by most language users, the approbation and regard bestowed on it by the public rubs off thereby on its acknowledged *guards* or *providers*, also called 'security'. Means bask in the glory of the condition and share in its indisputable desirability. This having been done, a fully predictable pattern of conduct follows, just as in the habit of all conditioned reflexes. Do you feel insecure? Press for more public security services to guard you, and/or buy more security gadgets believed to avert dangers. Or: people who elected you to high offices complain of feeling insufficiently secure? Hire more security guards, allowing them also more liberty to act as

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they consider necessary – however unappetising or downright loathsome the actions they might choose.

SOCIAL SECURITISATION

A heretofore unknown term in socio-political discourse – and still unrecorded in its dictionaries available in bookshops – ‘securitisation’ has appeared quite recently in debates other than on ‘hedge betting’ and been quickly adopted in the political and media vocabulary. What this imported term is meant to denote is the ever more frequent reclassification of something as an instance of ‘insecurity’, followed well-nigh automatically by transferring that something to the domain, charge, and supervision of security organs. Not being of course the cause of such automatism, the above mentioned semantic ambiguity makes it no doubt easier.

Conditional reflexes can do without lengthy argument and laborious persuasion. Conditioned reflex stays itself, safely, unreflected upon – in safe distance from the searchlights of logic. This is why politicians gladly resort to the term’s ambiguity: making their task easier and their actions assured a priori popular approval, if not of promised effects, it helps the politicians to convince their constituencies of taking their grievances seriously and acting promptly on the mandate those grievances have been presumed to bestow.

Just one example – picked up off-cuff from the most recent headline news. As *Huffington Post* reported shortly after the night of terrorist outrages in Paris:

French President François Hollande said a state of emergency would be declared across France and national borders shut following a spate of attacks in Paris on Friday evening [...] “It is horrifying,” Hollande said in a brief statement on television, adding that a cabinet meeting had been called.

“A state of emergency will be declared,” he said. “The second measure will be the closure of national borders,” he added. “We must ensure that no one comes in to commit any act whatsoever, and at the same time make sure that those who have committed these crimes should be arrested if they try to leave the country,” he added.

The sights of broken down doors, of swarms of uniformed police officers breaking up meetings and entering homes without their residents’ agreement, of soldiers patrolling the street in the broad daylight – these all make a powerful impression as demonstrations of the government’s resolution to go the whole hog, down to ‘the heart of the trouble’, and to allay or altogether disperse the pains of insecurity haunting their subjects.

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LATENT AND MANIFEST FUNCTIONS

Such demonstration of intentions and resolve is, to use Robert Merton's memorable conceptual distinction, its 'manifest' function. Its 'latent' function, however, is quite opposite: to promote and smooth up the process of 'securitising' the plethora of people's economic and social headaches and worries born of the ambiance of insecurity generated by the frailty and fissiparousness of their existential condition. The above-mentioned sights are after all guaranteed to create the atmosphere of the state of emergency, of the enemy at the gate – of the country and so also my own home – facing mortal danger; and they are bound as well to firmly entrench those 'up there' in the role of the providential shield barring the danger from falling on both.

Whether those sights' manifest function has been successfully performed is, to say the least, a moot question. Acquitting itself brilliantly from their latent function is not, however, left to doubt. The effects of the French Head of State flexing his (and of the security organs he commands) muscle in public were as fast coming as they were exceeding all previous attainments by the current holder of the presidential office, heretofore found by opinion polls as the least popular president in France since 1945. A fortnight or so later, those effects were well summed up under the title "After Paris, Hollande's Popularity Soars to Highest Level in Three Years".

The widespread sense of existential insecurity is a hard fact: a genuine bane of our society priding itself, through the lips of its political leaders, on the progressive deregulation of labour markets and 'flexibilisation' of work and, in the end result, notorious for the growing fragility of social positions and instability of the socially recognised identities, as well as for unstopably expanding the ranks of the precariat (a novel category, defined by Guy Standing primarily as the quicksand on which they are forced to move). Contrary to many an opinion, such insecurity is not just a product of politicians pursuing electoral gains or media profiting from the panic-mongering broadcasts; it is

true, however, that the all too real insecurity built into the existential condition of ever expanding sections of population is welcome grist to the politicians' mill. It is in the process of being converted into major – perhaps even the primary – stuff out of which present-day governing is fashioned.

GOVERNMENTS PROMOTE ANXIETY

Governments are not interested in allaying their citizens' anxieties. They are interested instead in beefing up the anxiety arising from the future's uncertainty and a constant and ubiquitous sense of insecurity – providing that the roots of that insecurity can be anchored in places which provide ample photo opportunities for ministers flexing their muscles, whilst hiding from sight the rulers overwhelmed by the task with which they are too weak to cope. 'Securitisation' is a conjurer's trick, calculated to do just that; it consists in shifting anxiety from problems which the governments are incapable of handling (or are not keen to try), to problems which the governments may be seen, daily and on thousands of screens, to be eagerly and (sometimes) successfully tackling.

Among the first kind of problems there are such major factors of the human condition as the availability of quality jobs, the reliability and stability of social standing, effective pro-

tection against social degradation, and immunity against a denial of dignity – determinants of safety and well-being which the governments, once promising full employment and comprehensive social security, are nowadays incapable of pledging, let alone delivering. Among the second, the fight against terrorists conspiring against ordinary folks' bodily safety and their cherished possessions easily grasps and holds fast the first fiddle: all the more so because of its chance of feeding and sustaining the legitimization of power and the vote-collecting effort for a long time to come. After all, the ultimate victory in that fight remains a distant (and thoroughly doubtful) prospect.

Viktor Orbán's laconic and tremendously catching dictum "all terrorists are migrants" provides the sought-after key to the government's effective struggle for survival – all the more so thanks to the implicitly smuggled suggestion of the symmetry of the link – and so the overlap between the two linked categories. Such an interpretation defies logic – but faith does not need logic to convert and hold minds; on the contrary, it gains in power as it loses in its logical credentials. For the ears of governments wishing to redeem, against all odds, their seriously lopsided and sinking *raison d'être*, it must sound as a horn of a salvage-boat sailing out from the dense, impenetrable fog in which the horizon of their survival struggle has been wrapped.

ORBÁN ET ORBI

For the author of that dictum, the gains were immediate, while outlays all but limited to a 4-metre-high fence along a 177 km border with Serbia. When the Hungarian respondents were asked in the December Medián-HVG poll what comes into their minds when they hear the word ‘fear,’ more people (23%) named terrorism than illness, crime, or poverty. Their overall sense of security had fallen considerably. “The respondents also had to indicate their feelings on a number of statements and mark the intensity of these feelings on a scale of 0-100. For example, “Immigrants pose health risks for the native population” (77 out of 100), “Immigrants substantially increase the danger of terrorist attacks” (77), “Those who illegally cross the borders will have to serve a jail sentence” (69). The statement that “Immigration might have a beneficial effect on Hungary because it would remedy the demographic problems and would add to the labour force” elicited little enthusiasm (24). Unsurprisingly, Orbán’s fence proved enormously popular. While in September 68% of the population approved it, now “87% of the population stand behind Viktor Orbán’s solution to the migrant problem” – and so by proxy, let’s make it clear, to the haunting spectre of insecurity.

We may risk guessing that if coupled with a focus on a specific, visible, and tangible adversary, an intensification of fear is somehow more endurable than are dispersed, floating

fears of unknown origin. It may even prove to be, perversely, a satisfactory experience: once we decide that we are up to the task, we willy-nilly acquire vested interest in its grandiosity: the more it appears awesome and indomitable, the more proud and flattered we tend to feel. The more powerful and scheming the enemy, the higher the heroic statuses of those who declare war on him. No coincidence that an absolute majority of Hungarian respondents approved of the statement “Certain unnamed outside moving forces are behind the mass migration.”

Calling the nation to arms against an appointed (as Carl Schmitt suggested) enemy, gives an added advantage to the politicians in search of voters: it is bound to rouse the nation’s self-esteem and earn thereby the nation’s gratitude – at least of the (growing, or afraid to grow) part of the nation pained by a damaged, eroded, or altogether withdrawn recognition and self-respect, and therefore yearning for some (even if inferior because cumulative and so depersonalised) recompense for the loss of personal dignity.

Finally, the policy of ‘securitisation’ helps to stifle our, the bystanders’, pangs of conscience at the sight of its victims. It ‘adiaphorises’ the migrants issue (exempts them, that is, from moral evaluation), putting those victims, once they have been cast in public opinion in the category of would-be terrorists, outside the

realm of moral responsibility – and above all outside the realm of compassion and the impulse to care. Many people feel – knowingly or not – relieved of responsibility for the fate of the wretched as well as of the moral duty that otherwise would inevitably follow to torment the bystanders. And also for that relief – knowingly or not – many people are grateful.

VICTIMS' FALSE GUILT

One more comment is in order. On top of being morally callous and odious, socially blind as well as to a large extent groundless and intentionally misleading, 'securitisation' can be charged with playing into the hands of the recruiters of genuine (as distinct from falsely accused) terrorists. "A new study by the intelligence consultancy Soufan Group puts the figure at approximately 5000 fighters from EU origins" thus far recruited by Daesh, as Pierre Baussand of the Social Platform puts it (only two attackers in Paris have been identified as non-European residents). Who are those young people fleeing Europe to join the terrorist cohorts and planning to return after receiving terrorist training?

Baussand's well-argued answer is that "the majority of Western converts to Daesh come from disadvantaged backgrounds. A recent Pew Research Center study found that, 'European millennials have suffered disproportionately from their countries' recent economic troubles [...]. In the face of this challenge, young Europeans often view themselves as victims of fate.' Such widespread disenfranchisement across society goes some way to explaining the allure of the sense of importance and control that Daesh instils in its supporters." "Rather than caving in to reactionary, misinformed populist rhetoric such as that of far-right organisations, equating all migrants with terrorists", he warns, "our leaders must [...] reject 'us versus them' stances and the surge in Islamophobia. This only plays into the hands of Daesh, who use such narratives as recruitment tools."

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Reminding us this way that “social exclusion is a major contributor to the radicalisation of young Muslims in the EU”, and having repeated after Jean-Claude Juncker that “those who organised these attacks and those that perpetrated them are exactly those that the refugees are fleeing and not the opposite”, Baussand concludes: “While there is no doubt about the role the Muslim community must play in eradicating radicalisation, only society as a whole can tackle this common threat to us all [...] Rather than waging war on Daesh in Syria and Iraq, the biggest weapons that the West can wield against terrorism are social investment, social inclusion, and integration on our own turf.”

This is, I suggest, a conclusion demanding our close 24/7 attention, and urgent – as well as resolute – action.



ZYGMUNT BAUMAN

was one of Europe's foremost sociologists and a prolific writer on contemporary society.

Some of his best-known works include *Liquid Modernity* (2000) and *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989). He received many honours for his work including the Theodor W. Adorno prize (1998).

