

Seeking shelter in Pandora's box

Or: fear, security and the city

Zygmunt Bauman

'Progress' has reached a point at which it engenders mounting fear and insecurity. As a response, Zygmunt Bauman argues, we seek substitute forms of satisfaction that appear to guard us against danger. One such substitute is the Sports Utility Vehicle (considered at greater length in Eduardo Mendieta's contribution to this issue). These fears and the attempt to escape them are increasingly played out in cities. In the massive urban agglomerations of 'the developing world' such progress takes the form of an increasingly gross and exploitative imbalance between town and country which creates severe problems that were once, though not once and for all, addressed with extreme difficulty, in the cities of 'the developed world'. Cities, in a sad reversal of progress, have now reached the point where they are characterized, instead of by the one-time external wall that protected residents against external enemies, by a multiplicity of internal walls protecting some residents against others within the city. What is needed, though, is not more privatized spaces but more public spaces in which the city and civilization can be rebuilt.

"In the absence of existential comfort, we have now come to settle for safety, or the pretence of safety"—write the editors of *The Hedgehog Review* in their introduction to the special issue dedicated to fear (2003, V(3), pp. 5–7).

The ground on which our life prospects are presumed to rest is admittedly shaky—as are our jobs and the companies that offer them, our partners and networks of friends, the standing we enjoy in wider society and the self-esteem and self-confidence that come with it. 'Progress', once the most extreme manifestation of radical optimism and a promise of universally shared and lasting happiness, has moved all the way to the opposite, dystopian and fatalistic pole of anticipations: it now stands for the threat of a relentless and inescapable change that augurs no peace and respite but continuous

crisis and strain—and forbids a moment of rest; a sort of musical-chairs game in which the moment of inattention results in irreversible defeat and in the no-appeal-allowed exclusion. Instead of great expectations and sweet dreams, 'progress' evokes insomnia full of nightmares of 'being left behind', of missing the train or falling out of the window from the fast-accelerating vehicle.

Unable to slow down the mind-boggling pace of change, let alone to predict and control its direction, we focus on things we can, or believe we can, or are assured that we can, influence: we try to calculate and minimize the risks that we personally, or those nearest and dearest to us at the moment, may fall victims of the uncountable and undefinable dangers which the opaque world and its uncertain future hold in store. We are engrossed in spying out 'the seven signs of cancer' or 'the five symptoms

of depression', or in exorcizing the spectre of high blood pressure and high cholesterol level, stress or obesity. In other words, we seek substitute targets on which to unload the surplus fear that has been barred its natural outlets, and find such makeshift targets in taking elaborate precaution against cigarette smoke, obesity, fast food, unprotected sex or exposure to sun. Those of us who can afford it, fortify ourselves against all visible and invisible, present or anticipated, known or yet unfamiliar, diffuse but ubiquitous dangers through locking ourselves behind walls, stuffing the approaches to our living quarters with TV cameras, hiring armed guards, driving armoured vehicles (like the notorious sport utility vehicles (SUVs)), wearing armoured clothing (like 'big-soled shoes') or taking martial arts classes. "The problem", as David L. Altheide suggests, "is that these activities reaffirm and help produce a sense of disorder that our actions precipitate" (Altheide, 2003). Each extra lock on the entry door in response to the successive rumours of foreign-looking criminals on the rampage, each next revision of the diet in response to a successive 'food panic', makes the world look *more* treacherous and fearsome and prompts *more* defensive actions—that would, alas, do surely the same. Our fears have become self-perpetuating and self-reinforcing. They have also acquired momentum of their own.

A lot of commercial capital can be garnered from insecurity and fear—and it is. "Advertisers", comments Stephen Graham, "have been deliberately exploiting widespread fears of catastrophic terrorism to further increase sales of highly profitable SUVs" (Graham, 2004). The gas-guzzling monsters grossly misnamed as 'sport utility vehicles' that have already reached 45% of all car sales in the United States (US) are being enrolled into urban daily life as 'defensive capsules'. The SUV is a signifier of safety that, like the gated community into which it so often drives, is portrayed in advertisements as being immune to the risky and

unpredictable urban life outside. Such vehicles seem to assuage the fear that the urban middle classes feel when moving—or queuing in traffic—in their 'homeland' city.

Like the liquid cash ready for any kind of investment, capital of fear can be turned to any kind of profit—commercial or political. And it is. Personal safety has become a major, perhaps even *the* major selling point in all sorts of marketing strategies. 'Law and order', increasingly reduced to the promise of personal safety, has become a major, perhaps *the* major selling point in political manifestoes and electoral campaigns. Display of the threats to personal safety has become a major, perhaps *the* major asset in the mass-media ratings war (adding yet more to the success of both the marketing and the political uses of fear capital). As Ray Surette puts it (Surette, 1992), the world as seen on TV resembles 'citizen-sheep' being protected from 'wolves-criminals' by 'sheep dogs-police'.

All that cannot but affect, indeed revolutionize, the conditions of urban living, our perception of city life and the hopes and apprehensions we tend to associate with the urban environment. And when we speak of the conditions of urban life, we speak in fact of the conditions of humanity. According to current projections, in two decades or so two out of every three humans will live in cities, and will never have heard names like Chongking, Shenyang, Pune, Ahmadabad, Surat or Yangon which will stand for more than 5 million people congested into a conurbation—just as other names, like Kinshasa, Abidjan or Belo Horizonte, now associated more with exotic holidays than with the frontline of contemporary modernization battles. The newcomers to the premier league of urban agglomerations, already nearly all of them bankrupt or near bankrupt, will have to at least try "to cope in 20 years with the kind of problems London or New York only managed to address with difficulty in 150 years".¹ Whatever we know now of the notorious worries and fears that plague the older big cities may well be dwarfed by the adversities which the new giants will need to confront.

Our planet has a long way to go to become Marshall McLuhan's 'global village', but the villages around the planet fast become globalized. Many years ago Robert Redfield, having explored whatever remained of the pre-modern rural world, concluded that 'peasant culture', incomplete and not self-sufficient as it is, cannot be properly described, not to mention understood, unless in the framework of its neighbourhood that includes a township with which the villagers are locked in mutual service and dependence. One hundred years later we may say that the sole frame in which all things rural need to be viewed in order to be adequately described and explained, is that of the *planet*. Including into the picture a nearby city, however big, will not do. Both the village and the city are playgrounds of forces far beyond their reach—and of the processes which those forces set in motion but which no one, neither the affected villagers and the town people nor the initiators themselves, comprehends, let alone can control. The old proverb that men shoot, but God carries the bullets, needs to be re-stated: villagers and city people may be launching the missiles, but it is the global markets that carry them.

In its regular rubric 'Countryside Commentary', *Corner Post* published on 24 May 2002 an article by Elbert van Donkersgoed (strategic policy adviser of the Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario, Canada) under the telling title 'The Collateral Damage from Globalization'.² "Each year we produce more food with fewer people and a more prudent use of resources"—van Donkersgoed observes. "Farmers have been working smarter, investing in labour saving technology and fine-tuning management for quality production." Less and less people are needed to do the job. In the four years to February 2002, 35,000 of them disappeared from Ontario statistics, made redundant by 'technological progress' and replaced by the new and improved (that is, more labour-saving) technology. The point is, though, that according to standard economic textbooks and indeed mundane

logic, such a spectacular advance in productivity should have made rural Ontario richer and the Ontario farmers' profits soar—but there was no sign of rising opulence. Van Donkersgoed spells out the only conclusion that comes to mind: "The benefits of countryside productivity gains are accumulating elsewhere in the economy. Why? Globalization." Globalization, he observes, spawned "a merger and buyout pattern by the firms that supply farm inputs ... The rationale 'this is necessary to be internationally competitive' may be true, but these mergers have also created monopolistic clout" that "capture the benefits of farm productivity gains". "Large corporations", it follows, "become predatory giants and then capture markets. They can—and do—use economic power to get what they want from the countryside. Voluntary exchanges, trading goods between equals, are giving way to a command-and-control countryside economy."

Let us move now a few thousand miles to the east and the south of Ontario—to Namibia, statistically one of the more prosperous countries of Africa. As Keen Shore reports,³ in the last decade the proportion of rural population in Namibia, heretofore mainly a peasant country, has fallen sharply, while the population of Windhoek, the capital, has doubled. The redundant surplus population of the rural areas has moved to the shantytowns that sprouted around the relatively well-off city—attracted by "hope, not reality", since "jobs are now scarcer than applicants". "The sheer number of people coming in, compared to the expansion of the urban economy in Windhoek, would suggest that there must be an awful lot of people who are not actually earning an income"—as Bruce Frayne, an urban regional planner in Namibia and prize-winning researcher from the Queens University of Canada, found out. Rural Namibia goes on shedding excessive labour, while the capital growth in urban Namibia is too small to accommodate the redundant. Somehow, the extra profits promised by the rise of agricultural productivity neither stayed in the countryside nor

have reached the towns. We could, following van Donkersgoed, ask ‘why?’, and like him answer ‘globalization’.

In the parts of the planet on the receiving side of globalizing pressures, “cities have become refugee camps for the evictees of rural life”, observes Jeremy Seabrook,⁴ and then goes on to describe the urban life the evictees from rural life are likely to find: no one gives work. People turn themselves into rickshaw drivers or domestic servants: buy a handful of bananas and spread them for sale on the pavement; offer themselves as porters or labourers. This is the informal sector. In India, less than 10% of people are employed in the formal economy, and this is being reduced by privatization of state enterprises.

As Nan Ellin, one of the most acute researchers and most insightful analysts of contemporary urban trends, points out—protection from danger was “a principal incentive for building cities whose borders were often defined by vast walls or fences, from the ancient villages of Mesopotamia to medieval cities to Native American settlements” (Ellin, 2003). The walls, moats or stockades marked the boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’, order and wilderness, peace and warfare: enemies were those left on the other side of the fence and not allowed to cross it. “From being a relatively safe place”, the city has become however associated, mostly in the last hundred years or so, “more with danger than with safety”. Today, in a curious reversal of their historical role and in defiance of original intentions and expectations, our cities are turning swiftly from a shelter against dangers into the dangers’ principal source. Diken and Laustsen go as far as to suggest that the millennia-old “link between civilization and barbarism is reversed. City life turns into a state of nature characterised by the rule of terror, accompanied by omnipresent fear” (Diken and Laustsen, 2002).

We may say that the sources of danger have moved now into the heart of the city. Friends, enemies and, above all, the elusive and mysterious strangers veering threateningly between the two extremes, mix now

and rub their shoulders on the city streets. The war against insecurity, dangers and risks is now waged *inside* the city, and inside the city the battlefields are set aside and frontlines are drawn. Heavily armed trenches and bunkers aimed at separating, keeping strangers away and barring their entry fast become one of the most visible aspects of contemporary cities—though they take many forms and their designers try hard to blend their creations into the cityscape, thereby ‘normalizing’ the state of emergency in which safety-addicted urban residents dwell daily.

The most common form of defensive ramparts are the ever-more-popular ‘gated communities’ (with the emphasis, in estate agents’ handouts and the residents’ practices, on the ‘gate’, not the ‘community’ bit) with obligatory guards and video monitors at the entrance. The number of ‘gated communities’ in the US has already passed 20,000, while their population has risen above 8 million. The meaning of ‘gate’ grows more elaborate by the year; a Californian condominium called ‘Desert Island’, for instance, is encircled by a 25-acre moat. Brian Murphy built a house for Dennis Hopper in Venice with a bunker-like, windowless corrugated metal façade. The same architect built another luxury house in Venice inside the walls of an old dilapidated structure, covering it first with graffiti to submerge it in the uniformly vandalized neighbourhood.

Designed and contrived *inconspicuousness* is one spreading trend in the fear-guided urban architecture; another is *intimidation*—either by a forbidding exterior whose fortress-like apparition is made even more off-putting and mortifying by the profusion of highly visible checking points and uniformed guards, or by insolent and overbearing ostentation of provocatively rich, garish and garish finery.

The architecture of fear and intimidation spills over urban public spaces, transforming them indefatigably though surreptitiously into closely guarded, round-the-clock-controlled areas. Inventiveness in this field knows no bounds. Nan Ellin names a few of

the mostly American in origin, but widely emulated, devices—such as ‘bum-proof’, barrel-shaped benches combined with sprinkler systems in Los Angeles city parks (Copenhagen went one step further yet, removing all public benches from the Central Station and fining the waiting-for-connections passengers for resting on floors), or sprinkler systems combined with an ear-splitting racket of mechanical music to chase the loafers and loiterers off the surroundings of the convenience stores.

As to the corporate headquarters and department stores, not that long ago major providers, foci and magnets of urban public spaces—they are now keen to opt out of the city centres into the artificial, designed-from-scratch environments, with some mock-urban paraphernalia, such as shops, restaurants and a few living quarters thrown in to disguise the thoroughness with which the main attractions of the city—its spontaneity, flexibility, ability to surprise and offers of adventure (all those reasons for which the *Stadtluft* was deemed to *frei machen*)—have been excised and exorcised. As an example of such symbol-loaded trends, see the Copenhagen sea-front row of imposing yet decidedly un-welcoming, heavily fortified and scrupulously fenced-off corporation offices, meant to be admired from a distance like the blind walls of La Defense, but not visited. Their message is clear and unmissable—those in the service of the corporations inside the buildings inhabit the *global* cyber-space; their physical link to the *city* space is perfunctory, contingent and frail—and the lofty, self-conceited grandiosity of the monolithic façade with but a few carefully camouflaged entry points announces just that. The insiders are *in*, but not *of* the place where their offices have been erected. Their interests are no longer vested in the city in which they happened to pitch their tents for a time; the sole service they demand from the city elders is to leave them alone. Asking for little, they do not feel obliged to give much in exchange.

Richard Rogers, one of the most merited and acclaimed British architects, warned the

participants of an urban-planning symposium held in Berlin in 1990:

“If we suggest a project to an investor he immediately asks: ‘why do you need trees, why arcades?’. Developers are only interested in office space. If you cannot guarantee that the building will amortise within 10 years at the outside then there is no point in approaching them at all.”⁵

Rogers describes London, where he has learned that bitter lesson, as a “politically paralysed city which appears to be almost completely in the hands of the developers”. When it comes to the truly seminal refurbishments of the city space—such as the largest-in-Europe re-development of the London Dockyards—plans were approved with less scrutiny than might be given to “a planning application for an illuminated sign on a fish and chips shop in the East India Dock Road”. Public space was the first collateral casualty of the city losing its uphill struggle to stem, or at least to slow down, the unyielding advance of the global juggernaut. And so, Rogers concludes, “what you basically need is an institution which will protect public space”.

Well, easier said than done ... Where is such an institution to be sought? And, if found, how could it be made capable of rising to the task?

The records of city planning so far, now as much as in the past, are not on the whole encouraging. Of the fate of London city planning, for instance, its incisive story teller John Reader has the following to say:

The social order and distribution of London’s population was changing—but in a way that was not in any way related to what the planners might have envisaged, or thought to be ideal. This was a classic example of how the flow of economy, society and culture can contradict—even invalidate—the ideas and theories that planners have advocated. (Reader, 2004, p. 267)

In the first three post-war decades, Stockholm—a city that accepted and wholeheartedly adopted the great modern and

modernist-minded visionaries' belief that by reshaping the space which people occupied one could improve the form and the nature of their society—came perhaps closer than any other large city to the implementation of the 'social democratic utopia'. Stockholm municipal authorities provided all and every one of its inhabitants not just with adequate accommodation, but with a full inventory of life-enhancing amenities and a fully protected existence. But in a matter of just three decades the public mood, unexpectedly to the planners, started to change. The blessings of the planned order were cast in doubt—ironically, by precisely those (young) people who were born in the space re-shaped with the happier life of its residents in mind. The citizens, and particularly the younger citizens of Stockholm, opted out from the all-predicted, all-taken-into-account, all-provided-for communal accommodation, and jumped headlong into the turbulent waters of private housing markets. The results of their massive escape, as Peter Hall found out, were on the whole unattractive, "with closely packed houses in unimaginative uniform rows, reminiscent of the worst kind of American suburbia"—"but the demand was huge and they sold easily" (Hall, 1998, pp. 875–876).

Insecurity breeds fear, and no wonder that the war against insecurity looms high among the urban planners' list of priorities—or at least they believe, and insist if asked, that it should. The trouble, though, is that together with insecurity, also spontaneity, flexibility, ability to surprise and the offer of adventure, all the main attractions of urban life, are bound to vanish from the city streets. The alternative to insecurity is not the bliss of tranquillity, but the curse of boredom. Is it possible to vanquish fear while eliding tedium? One can suspect this puzzle to be the main quandary confronting urban planners and architects; a quandary to which no convincing, satisfying and uncontested solution has as yet been found, a question to which a fully satisfactory answer perhaps cannot be found, but a question which

(perhaps for the same reason) will go on spurring the architects and the planners to ever more rabid experimentation and ever more daring inventions.

Since the beginning, cities have been places where strangers live together in close proximity to each other while remaining strangers. The company of strangers is always frightening (even though not always feared)—since it belongs to the nature of strangers, as distinct from the nature of both friends and enemies, that their intentions, ways of thinking and responses to shared situations are unknown or not known enough to calculate the probabilities of their conduct. The gathering of strangers is a site of endemic and incurable *unpredictability*. You could put it another way: strangers embody *risk*. There is no risk without at least a residual fear of harm or defeat, but without risk there is no chance of gain or triumph either; for that reason, risk-fraught settings cannot but be perceived as sites of endemic ambiguity which in turn cannot but evoke ambivalent attitudes and responses. Risk-fraught settings tend to simultaneously attract and repel, and the point at which one response turns into its opposite is eminently variable and shifty and virtually impossible to pinpoint, let alone fix.

Space is 'public' insofar as men and women allowed entry and likely to enter are *not* pre-selected. No passes are required, and no registration of comers and leavers. Presence in the public space is therefore anonymous, and so, inevitably, those present in the public space are strangers to each other as well as to the people in charge of the space. Public spaces are the sites where strangers meet, and so they are condensations and encapsulations of the urban life's defining features. It is in the public places that urban life and all that sets it apart from other forms of human togetherness reaches its fullest expression, complete with its most characteristic joys and sorrows, premonitions and hopes.

Public spaces are for those reasons the sites where attraction and repulsion vie with each

other in unstable, continuously and rapidly changing proportions. They are therefore vulnerable places, exposed to manic-depressive or schizophrenic fits—but also the only places where attraction stands a chance of out-balancing or neutralizing the repulsion. They are, in other words, the places where the ways and means of satisfactory urban living are discovered, learned and first practised. Public places are the very spots where the future of urban life (and given that growing majority of the planetary population is made of urban dwellers, also of the planetary cohabitation) is being at this very moment decided.

Let us be precise: not just any public spaces, but only such among them as surrender both the modernist ambition to annihilate and level up the differences and the post-modern drift towards ossification of differences through mutual separation and estrangement. Public places that recognize the creative and life-enhancing value of diversity, while encouraging the differences to engage in a meaningful dialogue. To quote Nan Ellin one more time—“by allowing for diversity (of people, activities, beliefs, etc.) to thrive” public space makes possible integration (or reintegration) “without obliterating differences; in fact, it celebrates them. Fear and insecurity are alleviated by the preservation of difference along with the ability to move freely through the city”. It is the tendency to withdraw from public spaces and to retreat into the islands of sameness that turns in time into the major obstacle to living with difference—through causing the skills of dialogue and negotiation to wilt and fade. It is the *exposure to difference* that in time becomes the major factor of happy cohabitation through causing the urban roots of fear to wilt and fade.

As things go now by their own momentum, we can sense a growing danger of the public realm being reduced, as Jonathan Manning of South-African Ikemeleng Architects graphically put it, to “the unusable space left over between pockets of private space” (Manning, 2004).

Human interaction in this sterile left-over space is limited to conflict between motorists and pedestrians, haves and have-nots, whether this be begging and the selling of goods at traffic lights, collisions between vehicles and jaywalkers, or smash-and-grab thefts and vehicle highjackings. Interfaces between the public realm and private spaces ... are either shop fronts for the selling of goods or elaborate defensive mechanisms to keep people out—gatehouses, walls, razor wire, electric fences’.

Manning concludes his analysis by appealing for:

“a shift in focus to occur from designing private spaces to the design of a broader public realm that is both usable and stimulating ... It needs to cater for variety of alternative uses and to act as a catalyst rather than a hurdle to human interaction”.

(Manning, 2004)

As to Nan Ellin, she sums up her study arguing the need for “Integral Urbanism”, an approach that emphasizes “connection, communication, and celebration”. And she adds: “We now face the task of city-building in a way that nurtures the communities and the environment that ultimately sustains us. It is not an easy task. But it is an essential one”

There cannot be any doubt as to the wisdom and urgency of such appeals. What remains is to face up to that admittedly ‘not an easy’, yet essential task. One of the least easy tasks confronting the fast-globalizing planet, but one that needs to be faced point blank and confronted most urgently. And not only for the sake of urban dwellers’ comforts. As Lewis H. Morgan found out a long time ago, architecture “affords a complete illustration of progress from savagery to civilization” (Morgan, 1878, p. 1).

The ‘progress to civilization’, let me add, which we now come to understand not as a one-off achievement, but as a daily continuing struggle; a struggle never fully victorious and unlikely ever to reach its finishing line, but always emboldened by the hope of victory.

Notes

- 1 See John Vidal's report 'Beyond the City Limits' in the Online supplement of *The Guardian* of 9 September 2004, pp. 4–6.
- 2 Archived on <http://www.christianfarmers.org>.
- 3 See http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-5376-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html.
- 4 See Jeremy Seabrook's forthcoming book *Consuming Cultures: Globalization and Local Lives* (Seabrook, 2004). Here quoted from a fragment entitled 'Powder keg in the slum', *The Guardian* of 1 September 2004, p. 19.
- 5 Here quoted after Reader (2004, p. 282).

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