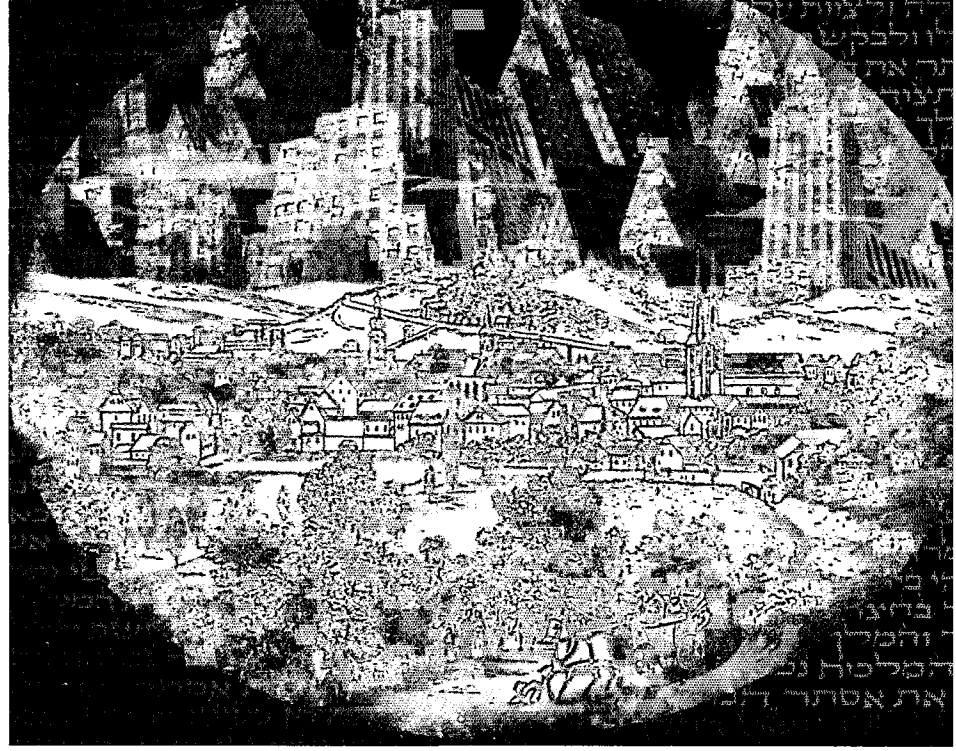
SEPTEMBER 11

The Crisis *of the* Human Waste Disposal Industry



Zygmunt Bauman

A specter hovers over the planet—the specter of xenophobia. Old and new, never extinguished or freshly unfrozen, lit up tribal suspicions and animosities have mixed and blended with the brand-new fear for safety that has been distilled from the old and new uncertainties and insecurities of our liquid-modern existence.

People worn-out and dead-tired by forever inconclusive tests of adequacy, frightened to the raw by the mysterious, inexplicable precariousness of their fortunes and by the global mists hiding their prospects from view, desperately seek the culprits of their trials and tribulations. They find them, unsurprisingly, under the nearest lamp post—in the only spot obligingly illuminated by the forces of law and order: "It is criminals who make us insecure, and it is outsiders who cause crime" we are told, and so "we must round up, incarcerate and deport the outsiders to restore our lost or stolen security."

Throughout the world ruled by democratically-elected governments, it's the "I'll be tough on crime" card that has turned out to trump all others; the winning hand is almost invariably a combination of a promise of "more prisons, more policemen, longer sentences," often tied to an oath that there will be "no immigration, no asylum rights, no naturalization." As Donald G. McNeil put it, "Politicians across Europe use the 'outsiders cause crime' stereotype to link ethnic hatred, which is unfashionable, to the more palatable fear for one's own safety."

This past spring, the Chirac vs. Jospin presidential duel in France degenerated in its preliminary stages into a public auction. Both competitors vied for electoral support by offering ever-harsher measures against criminals and immigrants, but above all against immigrants who breed crime and against the criminality bred by immigrants (as recorded in a piece on Jospin by Nathaniel Herzberg and Cécile Prieur in *Le Monde,* May 5–6, 2002). First of all, though, the candidates did their best to re-focus the anxiety stemming from the electors' ambient sense of *precarité* (the infuriating insecurity of social position intertwined with the acute uncertainty about the future of livelihood) onto their fear for personal safety (the integrity of their bodies, personal possessions, homes, and neighborhoods). On July 14, 2001, Chirac set the infernal machine in motion, announcing the need to fight the "growing threats to safety" in view of an almost 10 percent increase in recorded crime in the first half of the year; he declared he would ensure that a "zero-tolerance" policy became law once he was reelected.

The tune of the presidential campaign had been set, and Jospin was quick to join in, elaborating his own variations on the shared motif (though, unexpectedly to the main soloists, but certainly not to the sociologically-wise observers, it was Le Pen's voice that came on the top as the purest and so the most audible in this anti-crime chorus). On August 28, 2002, Jospin proclaimed "the battle against insecurity," vowing "no laxity," while on September 6, 2002, Daniel Vaillant and Marylise Lebranchu, his ministers of, respectively, internal affairs and justice, swore that they wouldn't show any tolerance for crime in any form. Vaillant's immediate reaction to September 11 was to increase the powers of the police principally against the juveniles of the "ethnically alien" *banlieues*, where the devilish concoction of uncertainty and insecurity poisoning the Frenchmen's lives was, according to the official version, being brewed. Jospin himself went on castigating and

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reviling, in ever more vitriolic terms, the "angelic school" of the soft approach, to which he swore never to have belonged in the past and never to join in the future. The auction went on, and the bids climbed skywards. Chirac promised to create a ministry of internal security, to which Jospin responded with a commitment to a ministry "charged with public security" and the "coordination of police operations." When Chirac brandished the idea of locked center to confine juvenile delinquents, Jospin echoed the promise with a vision of "locked structures" for juvenile offenders, outbidding his opponent with the prospect of "sentencing on the spot."

Moving south: A mere three decades ago, Portugal was (alongside Turkey) the main supplier of the *Gastarbeiter* feared by the German *Bürger* to despoil his homely townscapes and undercut the German social compact, the foundation of his security and comfort. Today, thanks to its sharply improved fortune, Portugal has turned from a labor-exporting into a labor-importing country. The hardships and humiliations suffered when earning bread in foreign countries having been promptly forgotten, 27 percent of Portuguese have now declared that crime-and-foreigner-infested neighborhoods are their main worry. The newcomer politician Paulo Portas, by playing a single, fiercely anti-immigration card, helped the new right-wing coalition into power (just as Pia Kiersgaard's Danish People's Party did in Denmark, Umberto Bossi's Northern League in Italy, and the radically anti-immigrant Progress Party did in Norway—all countries that not so long ago sent their children to far-away lands to seek the bread which their homelands were too poor to offer).

All such news made it easily to the first page headlines (in Britain, the *Guardian* headlined the "UK plan for asylum crackdown" on June 13, 2002, and there's no need to mention tabloid first-page banners ....). The main bulk of the immigrant-phobia, however, stays hidden from Western Europe's attention (indeed, knowledge,) and never makes it to the surface. "Blaming the immigrants"—the strangers, the newcomers, and particularly the newcomers among the strangers—for all aspects of social malaise (and most of all for the nauseating, disempowering feeling of *Unsicherheit, incertezza, precarité,* insecurity) is fast becoming a global habit. As Heather Grabbe, research director for the Centre for European Reform, put it, "the Germans blame the Poles, the Poles blame the Ukrainians, the Ukrainians blame the Kirghiz and Uzbeks"—while countries too poor to attract any neighbors desperately seeking a livelihood, like Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, or Slovakia, turn their wrath against the usual suspects and stand-by culprits: the local but drifting, fixed-addresses shunning, and therefore "newcomers" and outsiders, always and everywhere—the Gypsies.

When it comes to the setting of global trends, the United States has undisputed priority rights and most of the time holds the initiative. But joining the global trend of immigrant-bashing presents America with a rather difficult problem. The United States is an admittedly immigrant country; denigration of immigrants, throwing suspicion on the immigrants' noble calling, would go against the grain of American identity and perhaps deliver a mortal blow to the American Dream, its undisputed foundation and cement. Still, efforts are made, by trial and error, to square the circle....

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On June 10, the highest ranking U.S. officials (FBI Director Robert Mueller, U.S. Deputy Attorney General Larry Thompson, and Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz among others) announced the arrest of a suspected Al-Qaeda terrorist on his return to Chicago from a training trip to Pakistan. As the official version of the affair claimed, an American citizen, Jose Padilla (the name suggests Hispanic roots—the latest, relatively poorly-settled addition to the long list of immigrant ethnic affiliations), converted to Islam, took the name of Abdullah al-Mujahir, and promptly went to his new Muslim brethren for instructions on how to harm his homeland. He was instructed in the artless art of patching together "dirty bombs"—"frighteningly easy to assemble" out of the few ounces of widely available conventional explosives and "virtually any type of radioactive material" that the would-be terrorists "can get their hands on" (it was not clear why sophisticated training was needed to assemble weapons "frighteningly easy to assemble"—but when it comes to sowing the seeds of fear for the grapes of wrath to grow, logic is neither here nor there). "A new phrase entered the post-Sept. 11 vocabulary of many average Americans: dirty bomb"—announced the *USA Today* reporters Nichols, Hall, and Eisler.

The affair was a master stroke: the trap of the American dream had been skillfully bypassed since Jose Padilla was a stranger and an alien by his own free American's *free choice*. The terrorism was vividly depicted as simultaneously of foreign origin yet ubiquitous at home, lurking just beyond the corner and spreading over every neighborhood—just like "the Reds under the beds" scare of yore. It was an impeccable metaphor and fully credible outlet for the equally ubiquitous fears and apprehensions of precarious life.

And yet this particular expedient proved to be an error. When watched from the other offices of the federal administration, the assets of the case looked more like liabilities. A "frighteningly easy to assemble" dirty bomb would expose the folly of a multi-billion dollar "anti-missile shield," since

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placid course of our lives is to understand it. Old adages will not do. The earlier assault on the World Trade Center, together with the Oklahoma City bombing, should have taught us the sheer absurdity of tired slogans like "Never Again!" just as they should have proclaimed how irrelevant was George Santayana's oft-cited aphorism that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. Santayana was mistaken: Those who cannot remember the past are simply condemned to forget it. It is a matter of memory, not morality. That is why Holocaust education has long been one hedge against oblivion—an oblivion that is the last refuge of an ignorant mind.

The task before us is to replace maxims with insight. We have had ample opportunity to do this, but the habitual optimism of the American mind has interfered with its fulfillment. The legacy of horrendous death bequeathed by the events of September 11 may make it seem like a unique catastrophe, but it is not. Anyone familiar with the testimony of those who outlasted the Holocaust will know what Auschwitz survivor Charlotte Delbo meant when she wrote in a poem, "Dying over again/The death of those who died." To the ancient legends of the living dead we must now add painful hints of the dying living, drawn not from the annals of superstition, but from an authentic record of witnessed events. No one who saw it will ever forget the effect of watching the plane explode in flames as it crashed into the second tower. That spectacle, like Delbo's line, kindles not merely a memory of the past but an abiding presence. We are left dwelling in a middle realm where living and dying merge and re-form, but few current intellectual strategies teach us what this means or how to fuse it into contemporary consciousness.

Once we learn how to live after death, we must confront the more difficult labor of learning how to live *with* it. Those of a literary bent might phrase the question this way: How to exist internally in the Isles of the Blest and the Penal Colony *at the same time*. We have heard of the living dead, but never of the "dying living." Perhaps the place to begin is with the search for a new vocabulary consistent with the choices before us. It is the duty of ingenious educators, to say nothing of philosophers, to find a voice for what needs to be said. ❑

THE HUMAN WASTE DISPOSAL INDUSTRY *(from page 42)*

the threat was at home, not abroad. The native credentials of al-Mujahir likewise could fix a huge question mark on the planned anti-Iraq crusade and all its yet-unnamed sequels—why plan raids abroad if the danger comes from our own citizens? What was meat to some federal departments smacked of poison to some others. For the moment, those others seemed to get the upper hand, since the neck of the promising affair has promptly, swiftly, and expeditiously been wrung. But not for the lack of trying on the part of its authors and actors.

Modernity turned out, and kept turning out, from the start, huge volumes of human waste.

The production of human waste was particularly profuse in two (still fully operative and working to capacity) branches of modern industry.

The manifest function of the first of the two branches is the production and reproduction of social order. Any model of order is selective and requires cutting off, trimming, segregating, separating, or excising of such parts of the human raw material as are unfit for the new order—unable or not allowed to fill any of its niches. At the other end of the order-building process, such parts emerge as "waste," as distinct from the "useful," because intended, product.

The second branch of modern industry known to turn out continuously vast volumes of human waste is economic progress—which requires the incapacitation, dismantling, and eventual annihilation of a certain number of ways and means of eking out human existence; such livelihoods as cannot and would not meet the constantly-rising standards of productivity and profitability. Practitioners of these devaluated forms of life cannot, as a rule, be accommodated *en masse* by the new, slimmer, and smarter arrangements for economic activity. They are denied access to such means of livelihood as the new arrangements have made legitimate/obligatory, while the orthodox means, now devalued, no longer offer survival. They are, for that reason, the waste of economic progress.

The potentially disastrous consequences of the accumulation of human waste were, for a better part of modern history, defused, neutralized, or at least mitigated thanks to another modern innovation: the waste-disposal industry. That industry thrived thanks to the turning of large parts of the globe into dumping grounds to which all "surplus of humanity," the human waste turned out by the modernizing sectors of the planet, could be transported, disposed off, and de-contaminated—thereby staving off the danger of self-combustion and explosion.

Today, however, the planet has run out of such dumping grounds, in large part due to the spectacular success—the planetary spread—of the modern form of life (since at least Rosa Luxemburg, modernity was suspected of an ultimately suicidal "snake eating its own tail" tendency). Dumping grounds are in ever-shorter supply. While the production of human waste goes on unabated (if anything, rising in volume due to the globalization processes), the waste-disposal industry has found itself in dire straits. The old ways of tackling human waste are no longer feasible, and new ways have not been invented, let alone put in operation. Along the fault-lines of the world disorder piles of human waste are rising, and the first signs of this waste's tendency toward self-inflagration and imminent explosion multiply.

The crisis of the human waste-disposal industry stands behind the present-day confusion, revealed by the desperate, though largely irrational and off-the-mark crisis management bustle triggered by the September 11 spectacle. ❑

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