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# Sociology, Nostalgia, Utopia and Mortality: A Conversation with Zygmunt Bauman

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Any conversation with Zygmunt Bauman is exhilarating, and this is especially true of the many interviews that have been published over recent years. Like many of those pieces, this conversation was carried out by email, and therefore it has a focus and solidity that might otherwise be missing from a verbal interchange. Bauman's answers are characteristically wide-ranging, circuitous and fascinating. He tends to approach a question from the side rather than head on, all the better to strike up a relationship with the interlocutor and the reader, all the better to make the conversation an opportunity for engagement and communication. Moreover, the status of the answers that Bauman provides in this piece – as in many conversations – have textually different statuses. It is obvious that some responses paraphrase already written texts, others allude to previous publications, while some answers tackle a question head-on. All the time the reader is being encouraged to engage with the text, think about it, work with it and against it; all the time the reader is being invited to enter into a relationship. In short, this conversation is an invitation to think at once about one's own interpretation of the world and, indeed, about the possibilities and provocations of Bauman's own intellectual activity. But perhaps even more than that, this conversation is one small attempt to help make a *human* encounter. Moreover, the present conversation touches upon aspects often neglected in existing interviews – the *undercurrents*, as it were, of Bauman's work such as utopia and nostalgia – thereby allowing the reader to get a glimpse of Bauman 'between the lines' and of sentiments and perspectives 'hiding in the light' in his work.

In this piece, Bauman is openly reflexive. The conversation can be read as an instance of this most important of sociologists reflecting on the context, categories and reception of his own work. There is a sense running through his piece that Bauman is not simply presenting a point of view but also thinking through what has happened to his work as it has been carried out in different situations and aimed at different audiences; audiences that can no longer be presumed but need now be constituted in and through the act of communication. To this extent, the conversation form is particularly appropriate for the constitution of an audience precisely because of its intrinsically dialogic character. And that is perhaps the best way to approach this piece; as an opportunity to engage with Bauman and his work.

## Part I

**MHJ/KT:** For whom do you write? Do you write for an audience that you are confident exists, or is it an audience that remains to be made; a hoped for audience? If you write for the latter – hoped for – audience, how do you reconcile this with the pressures from publishers who want definite audiences?

**ZB:** I apologize in advance for the lengthy argument which is bound to follow your query – but this apparently simple question of yours can't be answered without looking back, in search of the reasons which caused such a question to be asked and an answer to it sought.

My generation witnessed a slow yet relentless decomposition of the 'historical agent' – hoped for by the intellectuals who were mindful of the 'organic' standards set for them by Antonio Gramsci's code of conduct – to usher, and/or be ushered into a land in which the long march towards liberty, equality and fraternity – adumbrated by the thinkers of Enlightenment but later diverted into the capitalist or the communists cul-de-sacs – would finally reach its socialist destination.

For at least a century, the prime intellectual choice for the role of the 'historical agent' of emancipation was a collective composed of the assortment of skills and trades summarily categorized as the 'working class'. United by selling their labour at a fraudulent price, and by the refusal of human dignity which went together with such sale, it was hoped that the working class would become the one part of humanity which, according to Karl Marx's unforgettable sentence, could not emancipate itself without emancipating the whole of human society and could not end its misery without putting an end to all human misery. Once it had been ascribed such potency, the working class seemed to offer a natural and secure haven to hope; it was a haven that was so much more secure than the far-away cities, where the writers of early modern utopias used to place the enlightened despots legislating happiness upon their unwitting or unwilling subjects.

Whether the ascription was or was not warranted, was from the start a moot question. It could be argued that, contrary to Marx's belief, the restlessness on the early capitalist factory floors was prompted more by the loss of security than by the love of freedom, and that once security was regained or rebuilt on another foundation the unrest would inevitably boil away, stopping well short of its allegedly revolutionary destination. Indeed, after a long period of initial unrest associated with the melting of pre-modern economic and social structures there came the period of 'relative stability', underpinned by the emergent, apparently solid structures of industrial society. The politically administered instruments of the 'recommodification of capital and labour' settled as a constant feature of the capitalist world – with the state being given an active role of 'pump priming', promoting and ensuring both the intensive and the extensive expansion of the capitalist economy, on one hand, and the reconditioning and rehabilitation of labour through the multiple provisions of the social state, on the other. However harsh the hardships suffered at the receiving end of the capitalist expansion, and

however disconcerting the fear of periodic bouts of economic depression, the frames fit to accommodate life-long expectations and equipped with the tested and trustworthy repair tools appeared firmly set, allowing for the long-term planning of individual lives, confidence in the future and a rising feeling of security. Capital and labour, locked in an apparently unbreakable mutual dependency, and increasingly convinced of the permanence of their bond and sure to 'meet again and again' in the times to come, sought and found mutually beneficial and promising, or at least tolerable, modes of cohabitation – punctuated by repetitive tug-of-wars but also by the rounds of successful renegotiations of the rules of cooperation.

Frustrated and impatient with the ways things seemed to be going, Lenin complained that if left to their own ambitions and impulses, workers would develop only the 'trade-union mentality' and so would be far too narrow-minded to perform their historic mission. What irritated Lenin, the founder of the 'short cut' and 'professional revolutionaries' strategy, was also spotted, but viewed with mildly optimistic equanimity, by his contemporary, Eduard Bernstein. He was the founder (with not inconsiderable help from the Fabians) of the 'revisionist' programme of accommodation, of pursuit of socialist values and intentions inside the political and economic framework of the essentially capitalist society, and of the steady yet gradual 'amelioration' rather than a revolutionary, one-off overhaul, of the status quo. As events kept confirming Lenin's sombre and Bernstein's sanguine anticipations, György Lukács explained the evident reluctance of history to follow Marx's original prognosis with a custom-made concept (which, however, looked back to Plato's shadows on cave walls) of 'false consciousness' which the deceitful 'totality' of capitalism insidiously promotes and won't fail to promote unless counteracted by the efforts of the intellectuals striving to see through the deceitful appearances into the inexorable truth of historical laws – and after the pattern of Platonian sages sharing their discoveries with the deluded cave-dwellers.

When combined with Gramsci's concept of 'organic intellectuals', Lukács's reinterpretation of the vagaries of post-Marx history elevated the historical destiny and so the ethical/political responsibility of intellectuals to new heights. But by the same token, a Pandora's box of reciprocal accusations, imputations of guilt and suspicions of treachery was thrown open and the era of the charges of *trahisons des clercs*, un-civil wars, mutual defamations, witch-hunting and character-killings started. If the labour movement failed to behave in line with the prognosis, and particularly if it shied away from the revolutionary overturn of the capitalist power, no one but the intellectuals betraying their duty or botching its performance was to blame. Paradoxically, the adoption of such an unflattering view of themselves was for the acknowledged, aspiring or failed intellectuals a temptation that was difficult to resist, since it converted even the most spectacular displays of their theoretical weaknesses and practical impotence into powerful arguments reasserting their key historical role. I remember listening, shortly after coming to Britain, to a PhD student, who after perusing a few of Sidney Webb's writings, hurried to proclaim, to the unqualified approval of the

tightly packed seminar audience, that the causes of the socialist revolution's late arrival in Britain were all there.

There were writings on the wall, which – if read carefully – would have cast doubt on the intellectualist conceit of the British 'New Left'; but the recently rediscovered thoughts of Lukács or Gramsci did not exactly help to decode the messages they conveyed. How to link, say, student unrest to the winter of discontent? Was one witnessing rearguard battles waged by troops in retreat, or the avant-garde units of advancing armies? Were they distant echoes and belated rehearsals of old wars, or signs and auguries of new wars to come? Symptoms of an end, or of beginning? And if a beginning, then ushering in what? News from abroad only added to the bewilderment and confusion, as the announcements of the 'farewell to the proletariat' drifted in from the other side of the Channel together with Louis Althusser's reminders that time has finally matured for revolutionary action. E. P. Thomson's enchanting vision of the working class's immaculate conception or parthenogenesis met with a frontal assault by the *New Left Review* editors for its theoretical poverty (meaning, probably, the conspicuous absence of intellectuals in Thompson's edifying story).

It is tempting, but it would be dishonest and misleading, to claim retrospectively one's own advance wisdom, just as it would be unjust and not at all illuminating to blame those locked inside fast running affairs for their confusion. The impending end of the 'glorious thirty' (the three post-war decades have been so named only after the conditions for which they stood have ended, and only when it became obvious that they had) threw the familiar world out joint and made useless the tested tools of that world's scrutiny and description. The time of hunches and guesses had arrived; orthodoxies dug in ever deeper trenches while heresies, growing thicker on the ground, gained in courage and impertinence, although moving nowhere near consensus.

To wind up the long and convoluted story, the explicitly pointed out or glossed over source of intellectual disarray was the apparent vanishing of the historical agent, at first experienced on the intellectual left as a growing separation and a breakdown of communication with 'the movement'.

**MHJ/KT:** According to your analysis, what happened to the intellectuals as historical agents and their relationship to other historical agents and what were the consequences?

**ZB:** As the theoretically impeccable postulates and prognoses were one by one refuted by events, intellectual circles turned ever more zealously and conspicuously to self-referential interests and pursuits, as if in obedience to Michel Foucault's announcement of the advent of the 'specific intellectuals' era. Whether the concept of 'specific' or 'specialized' intellectual could be anything other than an oxymoron was of course, then as it is now, a moot question. But whether or not the application of the term 'intellectual' is legitimate in the case of university lecturers visiting the public arena solely on the occasion of successive disagreement on salaries, or the artists protesting about successive cuts in the subsidies

for theatre or film making, one thing is certain: to that new, institutionally confined, variety of political stand-taking and power struggle the figure of the 'historical agent' is completely irrelevant and can be dropped from the agenda with no guilty conscience and above all without the bitter aftertaste of a loss.

However, must the hopes and the jobs of emancipation follow the vanishing 'historical agent' into the abyss, like Captain Ahab beckoning his sailors? I would like to argue that the work of Theodor W. Adorno can be re-read as one long and thorough attempt to confront that question and to justify an emphatic 'no' as the answer. After all, long before the British intellectuals' passions for a historical agent started to dull, Adorno warned his older friend Walter Benjamin against what he called 'Brechtian motifs': the hope that the 'actual workers' would save arts from the loss of their aura or be saved by the 'immediacy of combined aesthetic effect' of revolutionary art.<sup>1</sup> The 'actual workers', he insisted, 'in fact enjoy no advantage over their bourgeois counterpart' in this respect – they 'bear all the marks of mutilation of the typical bourgeois character'. And then came the parting shot: beware of 'making our necessity' (that is the necessity of the intellectuals who 'need the proletariat for the revolution') 'into a virtue of the proletariat as we are constantly tempted to do'.

At the same time, Adorno insisted that though the prospects of human emancipation focused on the idea of a different and better society now appear less encouraging than those which seemed so evident to Marx, neither the charges raised by Marx against the world unforgivably inimical to humanity have lost any of their topicality, nor has a clinching proof of the unreality of the original emancipating ambitions been thus far offered by a competent jury; and so there is no sufficient, let alone necessary, reason to take emancipation off the agenda. If anything, the contrary is the case: the noxious persistence of social ills is one more and admittedly powerful reason to try yet harder.

Adorno's admonition is as topical today as it was when first written down: 'The undiminished presence of suffering, fear and menace necessitates that the thought that cannot be realized should not be discarded'. Now as then, 'Philosophy must come to know, without any mitigation, why the world – which could be paradise here and now – can become hell itself tomorrow'. The difference between 'now' and 'then' ought to be sought elsewhere than in the task of emancipation losing its urgency or the dream of emancipation having been found idle.

What Adorno hastened to add, however, was the following: if, to Marx, the world seemed prepared to turn into a paradise 'there and then' and appeared to be ready for an instantaneous U-turn, and if it therefore looked that 'the possibility of changing the world "from top to bottom" was immediately present'<sup>2</sup> – this is no longer, if it ever was, the case ('only stubbornness can still maintain the thesis as Marx formulated it'). It is the possibility of a *short cut* to a world better fit for human habitation that has been presently lost from view.

I would also say that between this world here and now and that other, 'emancipated' world, hospitable to humanity and 'user friendly', no visible bridges are left. Nor are there crowds eager to stampede the whole length of the bridge if such a bridge had been designed, nor the vehicles waiting to take the willing to

the other side and deliver them safely to the destination. No one can be sure how a usable bridge could be designed and where the bridgehead could be located along the shore to facilitate smooth and expedient traffic. Possibilities, one would conclude, are *not* immediately present.

So where does all that leave the intellectuals, the guardians of the unfulfilled hopes and promises of the past, the critics of the present guilty of forgetting the hopes and promises, and abandoning them, unfulfilled?

As Adorno repeatedly warns, 'No thought is immune against communication, and to utter it in the wrong place and in wrong agreement is enough to undermine its truth.'<sup>3</sup> And so, when it comes to communicating with the actors, with would-be actors, with abortive actors and those reluctant to join the action: 'For the intellectual, inviolable isolation is now the only way of showing some measure of solidarity' with those 'down and out'. Such self-inflicted seclusion is not, in Adorno's view, an act of treachery; neither a sign of withdrawal, nor a gesture of condescension (or both: 'condescension, and thinking oneself no better, are the same' as he himself points out). Nor did it signal an intention to break communication – only the determination to protect the 'truth' of the human prospects of emancipation against the threat of being 'undermined'. Keeping a distance, paradoxically, was an act of engagement, in the only form in which engagement on the side of unfulfilled or betrayed hopes may sensibly take: 'The detached observer is as much entangled as the active participant; the only advantage of the former is insight into his entanglement, and the infinitesimal freedom that lies in knowledge as such'.<sup>4</sup> The strategy of communication proposed by Adorno is one of the 'message in a bottle'.

**MHJ/KT:** Could you explain a bit more in detail what you mean by invoking the metaphor of intellectual communication as 'messages in a bottle'? Should your own work be read as such 'messages in the bottle'?

**ZB:** The 'message in a bottle' allegory implies two presumptions: that there is a message fit to be written down and worthy of the trouble needed to set the bottle afloat; and that once it is found and read (at a time which cannot be defined in advance), the message will be still worthy of the finder's effort to unpack it and ingest, absorb and adopt. In some cases, like Adorno's, entrusting the message to the unknown reader of an undefined future may be preferred to consorting with the contemporaries who are deemed un-ready or un-willing to listen, let alone to grasp and retain, what they heard. In such cases, sending the message into unmapped space and time rests on the hope that its potency will outlive the present-day neglect and survive the (transient) conditions that caused the negligence. The 'message in a bottle' expedient makes sense if (and only if) someone who resorts to it trusts values to be eternal or at least holding more than momentary significance, believes truths to be universal or at least not merely parochial, and suspects that the worries that currently trigger the search for truth and the rallying in defence of values, unlike the fleeting 'crisis management' concerns, will persist. The message in a bottle is a testimony to the *transience of frustration*

and the *duration of hope*, to the *indestructibility of possibilities* and the *frailty of adversities* that bar them from implementation. In Adorno's rendition, critical theory is such a testimony, and this warrants the metaphor of the message in a bottle.

In the postscript to his last magnum opus, *La misère du monde*,<sup>5</sup> Pierre Bourdieu pointed out that the numbers of personalities of the political stage who can comprehend and articulate the expectations and demands of their electors are fast shrinking; the political space is inward-focused and bent on closing upon itself. It needs to be thrown open again, and that can be done only through bringing the (often inchoate and inarticulate) 'private' troubles and cravings into direct relevance to the political process (and, consequently, vice versa). This is easier said than done, though, as public discourse is inundated with Émile Durkheim's *prénotions* – the rarely spelled out overtly and even less frequently scrutinized presumptions, which are uncritically deployed whenever subjective experience is raised to the level of public discourse and whenever private troubles are categorized to be processed in public discourse and re-represented as public issues. To do its service to human experience, sociology needs to begin with clearing the site. Critical assessment of tacit or vociferous *prénotions* must proceed, together with an effort to make visible and audible such aspects of experience as normally stay beyond the individual horizons, or beneath the threshold of individual awareness.

A moment of reflection would show, though, that 'to make aware of the mechanisms that render life painful or even unliveable, does not mean yet to neutralize them; to draw the contradictions into light, does not mean to resolve them'. A long and tortuous road stretches between the recognition of the roots of trouble and their eradication, and making the first step in no way assures that further steps will be taken, let alone that the road will be followed to the end. And yet there is no denying the crucial importance of the beginning – of laying bare the complex network of causal links between pains suffered individually and conditions collectively produced. In sociology, and even more in a sociology which strives to be up to its task, the beginning is yet more decisive than elsewhere; it is this first step that designates and paves the road to rectification which otherwise would not exist, let alone be noticed. Indeed, one has to memorize – and to practise the best one can – Bourdieu's commandment: 'those who have the chance of dedicating their lives to the study of the social world, cannot rest, neutral and indifferent, in front of the struggles of which the future of the world is the stake'.<sup>6</sup>

Now I can return to your previous question 'for whom I write' . . . But I guess it is no longer necessary, because the recapitulation of my generation's experience provides the best answer I can offer – if not for my practice as it has been, then for how I would dearly wish it to be. Perhaps I scribble messages destined for a bottle. Bottle messages have no preselected addressees (if they had, there would be no need of consigning them to the waves), but I trust the messages to seek and find, after the pattern of 'smart missiles', their targets: to select, among the individual sailors whom our liquid-modern society has burdened with the task



of seeking and finding solutions to the problems with which it confronts them, such sailors who might be eager to open the bottles and absorb the messages inside them.

**MHJ/KT:** You write a great deal. It seems to us that your work requires a dialogue between readers and the texts, so does this incredible productivity reflect an attempt to keep the conversation going or, by contrast, is it an attempt to make the conversation happen? Put another way, is your productivity a sign of the presence or absence of dialogue? Or is it a more simple case that the sociological vocation makes us all Puritans, working hard in our calling, without ever knowing if we are destined for the secular salvation of being heard?

**ZB:** Brilliant observation! Yes, perhaps we are all Puritans now – though by decree of history rather than by choice. We can't be sure of salvation and of the shape in which it will come when (if) it arrives. But this only adds attraction to Jack Nicholson's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* attempt to tear a boiler out of its concrete casing and heave it to break the iron bars in the asylum window. Jack was not mad enough to believe that he had enough strength to do it, but he wished to make sure that no one, including himself, would accuse him of not trying. And as you know only too well – messages, however loud and bright, come nowadays with a 'use-by' date printed or presumed and vanish as fast as they appear. However you judge the civilization of excess and waste which compensates with excessive quantity for the deficit of quality, you need to follow the recipe given by George Bernard Shaw to photographers (to follow the cod's example and hatch thousands of eggs so that one of them at least will turn into a mature fish) if you wish your message to be ingested before the bottle goes into recycling or into the refuse bin. To 'keep conversation going' you have 'to make it happen' – repeatedly, untiringly.

And please remember that whereas Jack Nicholson failed, his Indian companion-in-misery, taking inspiration from his failed attempt, succeeded – and got free . . .

**MHJ/KT:** Through the 1990s the style of your work changed quite dramatically. You moved away from the careful development of logically coherent positions, and instead became a lot more essayistic. It seemed as if you started to try to debate rather than persuade. Equally, the interlocutors in your texts changed; academic productions became less prominent than, say, newspaper reports or opinions. As *The Guardian* has pointed out, you are just about the only sociologist who has seen any ethical significance in *EastEnders*. The texts also became more fragmentary and obviously called on the reader to engage rather than just read the words. Why the change? Is it merely stylistic, or are you trying to achieve something else?

**ZB:** Spot on . . . As Gaston Bachelard, the formidable philosopher of science, observed, modern science was born of breaking communication with the ordinary

experience of ordinary men. He suggested that you may recognize the scientific (say, physics) book because it starts from a reference to other professional scientists, their laboratory experiments or the equations they composed, rather than from a commonly observed and widely familiar sight, like the lid shaking when the water in the pot reaches the boiling point. The appearance of such books that refused to converse with non-scientists and their lay wisdom was, in Bachelard's view, science's declaration of independence. From then on, scientific conversation was by invitation only, intended for a selected audience; and only the judgements of people issued with passes were to count. As to the topics of conversation, they were no longer supplied by the puzzles of common experience but by events which ordinary people could not witness for the lack of equipment. Galileo fathered modern science by putting a telescope between his eye and heavenly bodies; (and how many of us can hire hundreds of pollsters to patch a statistical table out of quota samples?), or such as happened in spaces to which common people were barred entry (who has a cyclotron in his kitchen, or an entry permit to the bunkers where cyclotrons are kept?).

The change of habit to which you refer comes from my resolution to opt out from the 'scientific conversation' as described by Bachelard and, you may say, return to the 'pre-scientific', direct dialogue with common experience, common knowledge and common sense. That resolution in turn derived from my disenchantment with, and (in my view) failure of sociology's long, yet far from happy, romance with, 'managerial reason'. It also derived from the conclusion that in the liquid-modern context, that era of deregulation, individualization, frailty of human bonds, of fluidity of solidarities and of seduction replacing normative regulation, the choice confronting sociology is one between such 'direct dialogue' and crying in the wilderness. In the wake of that resolution, I withdrew from doing my work with an eye focused on my fellow sociologists, and from the internecine 'I'm right, you're wrong' warfare that by design or by default occupied the lion's share of the time and concerns of academia.

What my fellow sociologists find and suggest is still of great interest and importance to me, and I am immensely grateful to them for observations that I may incorporate in the conversations with common knowledge in which I would rather engage. But it is not *their* recognition or their refusal of recognition that guides my search and motivates my writings. I guess that being safely retired from academia helped me to make such resolution and remain loyal to it.

You are right to observe that 'the interlocutors in my texts changed; academic productions became less prominent than, say, newspaper reports or opinions'. Yes, if addressing the partners of the conversation I try to launch, invigorate or simply to join, I need to refer to their experience and their knowledge. And TV or the press are crucial parts of that experience and knowledge, and moreover the parts in which their and mine (as well as my fellow sociologists') experiences overlap – and so they are custom-made for bridge building. Those current or would-be partners are more likely to come from the ranks of TV watchers and the readers of dailies rather than from among those engrossed in current academic preoccupations.

And you are right when you point out that my texts 'became more fragmentary and obviously called on the reader to engage rather than just read the words'. I may try to influence the contents of my partners' perception, but I cannot single-handedly change the way they perceive the world – the way shaped by the fashion in which the world presents itself and is presented to them, the way by now drilled into the very modality of their (our) being-in-the-world. In that modality, the world offers itself for scrutiny in fragments, and, moreover, in the rapidly, kaleidoscope-style shifting fragments. And their (our) attention has adjusted to that modality, re-made itself in its measure.

I would much like to be able to say of my 'products' what Charles Baudelaire could say, with justice, of his *Le spleen de Paris*:

A small work of which one could say, not unjustly, that it has neither head nor tail, since everything in it is on the contrary a head and a tail, alternatively and reciprocally . . . We may cut short – I my musings, you the text, the reader his reading; because I do not hold the tiring will of any of them endlessly to a superfluous plot. Take off one disc, and two pieces of that tortuous fantasy will fall back together without difficulty. Chop out many fragments, and you'll find that each one can exist on its own.

Story needs to be fragmented for the dialogue to be whole; interrupting 'the plot' would enable continuity of conversation.

The trick is, how to show the universe in a drop of water – how to show the fragments not just 'existing on their own', but also encompassing, like each bit of a hologram, the whole. I do not pretend that I've found the way of doing that. But I am trying – as hard as my (very!) limited abilities allow me.

**MHJ/KT:** You often seem to equate literature with sociology – the role of the novel with that of sociology. Moreover, you have expressed intellectual affinity if not kinship with some of the great novelists of the twentieth century. Can you explain how the novel, or literature more generally, can enrich sociology and our appreciation of it?

**ZB:** In his latest book, *Le Rideau (The Curtain)*, Milan Kundera writes of Miguel de Cervantes: 'A magic curtain, woven of legends, was stretched over the world. Cervantes sent Don Quixote on the journey and tore up the curtain. The world had prostrated itself before the Knight in all comic nudity of its prose.' Kundera proposes that the act of 'tearing up the curtain of prejudgements' (Bourdieu's *prénotions*?) was the moment of birth of modern arts. It is the 'destructive gesture' that modern arts have since repeated endlessly. And the repetition needs to be, and cannot but be, endless, since the magic curtain promptly sews backs the patches, glues the slits and promptly fills the remaining holes with new stories to replace those discredited as legends. Piercing the curtain is the main and recurrent topic of Kundera's new book and the key to the interpretation of the history and the role of the novel to which that book is dedicated. He praises Henry Fielding for aspiring to the role of 'inventor' in order to commit, in his own

words, 'a quick and sagacious penetration into the true essence of all the objects of our contemplation' – that is the piercing of the curtain that bars us from looking into that essence. He also commends Jaromir John, the author of *The Exploding Monster* published in Czech in 1932 (the title referred to the mechanically generated noise, singled out as the devil running the modern hell), for abstaining 'from re-copying the embroidery on the curtain of pre-interpretations' and displaying instead the 'Cervantesque courage in tearing it apart'.

Not unexpectedly if you know his 'topical relevances', Kundera focuses on the 'destructive gestures' of *novelists*. But the image of the 'magic curtain' and its tearing apart strike me as eminently appropriate as the job description of the practitioners of the *sociological* vocation. Piercing through the 'curtain of prejudgements' to set in motion the endless labour of reinterpretation, opening for scrutiny the human-made and human-making world 'in all the comic nudity of its prose' and so drawing new human potentialities out of darkness in which they had been cast, and stretching in effect the realm of human freedom and retrospectively revealing all that effort as the constitutive act of free humanity. I do believe that by doing or failing to do such job sociology ought to be judged.

I am far from 'equating', as you suggest, novel-writing and sociology-writing. Each activity has its own techniques and modes of proceeding and its own criteria of propriety, which set them apart from each other. But I would say that literature and sociology are siblings: their relationship is a mixture of rivalry *and* mutual support. They share parenthood, bear unmistakable family resemblance, serve each other as reference points which they can't resist comparing, and as yardsticks by which to measure the success or failure of their own life pursuits.

It is as natural (as it is useless) for the siblings to dissect obsessively their differences – particularly if the similarities are too blatant to overlook and affinities too close for comfort. Both siblings are, after all, after the same goal – piercing the curtain. And so they are 'objectively' in competition. But the task of human emancipation is not a zero-sum game . . .

**MHJ/KT:** Finally, for the moment, a quotation from Adorno:

Whoever thinks is without anger in all criticism. Because the thinking person does not have to inflict anger upon himself, he furthermore has no desire to inflict it on others . . . Such thought is happiness, even where unhappiness prevails; thought achieves happiness in the expression of unhappiness.

Is your thought happy? Has it achieved happiness?

**ZB:** I am not sure about the relationship between anger and thought . . . Hate-love? Impossibility of cohabitation coupled (exacerbated? mitigated?) with implausibility of separation? Or a prime specimen of Jacques Derrida's family of *pharmaco*ns?

I find a modicum of anger to be a supreme stimulus to thought, and its excess more like thought's funeral director. But at what point does the modicum turn into excess? I also found thinking to be sometimes anger's most effective tranquilizer, yet at some other times its most steadily supplied fuel. But how to know

when is what? Following Paul Ricoeur's suggestion,<sup>7</sup> I'd say that if in its first stage thought leads to the rejection of intolerance (through refraining from marrying disapprobation to power) and so causing the fonts of anger to dry, and proceeds to tolerance (that is, the voluntary asceticism of power and so suspension of anger), it is thanks to the gesture of indignation that posits certain objects as intolerable (the 'intolerable' should not be confused with intolerance; 'intolerable' is the product of Hegelian 'double negation' of intolerance; 'intolerable' is thinkable and comes into its own only *after* toleration's triumph) that it eschews the trap of indifference which may follow the unqualified victory of tolerance. And that indignation, at the summit of thought's progression, means anger . . .

I know we are moving here on a slushy and poorly signposted ground. Maps are useless on quicksands. But here you are: wandering without Ordnance Survey Maps is the fate which we have decided, joyously or with sadness, to recast as our vocation. Take it or leave it.

And does thinking make me happy? I would be dishonest giving a resolute answer, whatever the answer. One thing I am sure of is that restfulness is for thought the most unbearably tiring, and so repulsive, condition; and also perhaps a sign that the time for last rites is approaching.

## Part II

**MHJ/KT:** In 1976, you published the book *Socialism: The Active Utopia*. For several decades the topic of utopia seemed to disappear from your writings. It has, however, resurfaced again in recent years. Why is this? What is the function of utopianism and utopian thought for sociology, as you see it?

**ZB:** The first book explored the signs of utopia's demise or terminal convulsions (incorrectly deciphered, as it afterwards transpired); most recently, an examination of its newest avatar. But I believe that in the meantime utopia was very much present in my writings, though in a somewhat perverse fashion – 'hiding in the light'. Utopia was then 'the Great Absentee', conspicuous in a roundabout way, by the fatal impact of its disappearance: if anything, utopia's significance was enhanced as it became evident, once the orientation point whose role it served through a large part of modernity was missing from the landscape, that it was precisely an orientation point that made a bagful of sights into a landscape. Clearly, without such point, the paintings (presumably, also their model) were wanting . . . Noticing the new, notoriously, takes time . . . Attention lag? Quite a long one, if it lasted, as you point out, 'several decades'! It will take yet more time (and space) to make sense of what is happening now and what has meanwhile happened that brought us into that 'now'.

To be born as prodromal symptoms of approaching modernity, utopian dreams needed two conditions. First, the overwhelming (even if diffuse and inarticulate) feelings that the world was not functioning properly and had to be attended to and overhauled to set it right. Second, the confidence in human

potency to rise to the task, belief that 'we, humans, can do it' – being armed as we are with enough reason to spy out what is wrong with the world and find out with what to replace its diseased parts, and with enough strength to graft such designs on human reality: in short, the potency to force the world into a shape better fit to the satisfaction of human needs – whatever those needs already are or yet may become.

With those two conditions now by and large missing or at least enfeebled, there is little or no room left for utopian musings; not many people would treat utopian blueprints seriously, were they offered them for consideration. Even if we knew what to do to make the world better, and took the job of making it better to our hearts, the truly puzzling question would be who has sufficient resources and strong enough will to do it . . .

For a large part of the modern era, the hope of re-making the world used to be vested in the resourceful authorities of nation-states – but as Jacques Attali recently observed in *La voie humaine*, 'nations lost influence on the course of affairs and have abandoned to the forces of globalization all means of orientation in the world's destination and of the defence against all varieties of fear'. Under the new circumstances, Roget's *Thesaurus*, justly acclaimed for its faithful recording of the successive changes in verbal usages, had every right to list the concept of the 'utopian' in close proximity to 'fanciful', 'fantastic', 'fictional', 'chimerical', 'air-built', 'impractical', 'unrealistic', 'unreasonable', or 'irrational'. And so are we indeed witnessing the end of utopia?

Another, closely related notion, also playing a seminal role in the shaping of the modern world – that of 'progress' – also seemed to have fallen on hard times. When (if) that notion crops up nowadays in public discourse or private contemplation, it no longer refers to a forward drive. Rather than a chase after a spinning-along utopia, it implies a threat that instead of promising improvement makes an imperative out of a lucky escape; it inspires the urge to run away from a breathing-down-the-neck disaster.

Progress, to cut the long story short, has moved from the discourse of shared improvement to that of the individual survival. Progress is thought about no longer in the context of propulsion to rush ahead, but in connection with the desperate effort to stay in the race. We do not think of 'progress' when we rejoice watching the world around running faster ahead, but when we worry about staving off the fall. The notion of 'progress' is saturated with the anxiety and redolent with the odour of the rubbish heap: it exudes the fear of being excluded. The time flows on, and the trick is to keep pace with the waves. If you don't wish to sink, keep surfing – and that means changing your wardrobe, your furnishings, your wallpapers, your look, your habits – in short, yourself; and as often as you can manage.

I don't need to add, since this should be obvious, that the present emphasis on the disposal of things – abandoning them, getting rid of them – rather than on their appropriation, suits well the logic of consumer-oriented economy. People sticking to yesterday clothes, computers, mobiles, or cosmetics would spell disaster for an economy whose main concern and the condition sine qua

non of survival is a rapid and accelerating assignment of sold and purchased products to waste, and in which the swift waste-disposal is the cutting-edge industry.

Increasingly, escape now becomes the name of the most popular game in town. Semantically, escape is the very opposite of utopia, but psychologically it is its sole available substitute: one would say – its new rendition, re-fashioned to the measure of our deregulated, individualized society of consumers, the kind of society in which you can no longer seriously hope to make the world a better place to live and you can't even make really secure that better place in the world which you might have managed to cut out for yourself.

What is left to your concerns and efforts is the fight against losing: try at least to stay among the hunters, since the only alternative is to find yourself among the hunted. And the fight against losing is a task which to be properly performed will require your full, undivided attention, 24 hours a day and seven days a week vigilance, and above all keeping on the move – as fast as you can . . .

Joseph Brodsky, the Russian-American philosopher-poet, vividly described the kind of life that has been set in motion and prompted by the compulsion to escape. The lot of the losers, of the poor, is – he says – violent rebellion or, more commonly, drug addiction: 'In general, a man shooting heroin into his vein does so largely for the same reason you buy a video' – Brodsky told the students of Dartmouth College in July 1989. As to the potential haves, which the Dartmouth College students aspire to become:

You'll be bored with your work, your spouses, your lovers, the view from your window, the furniture or wallpaper in your room, your thoughts, yourselves. Accordingly, you'll try to devise ways of escape. Apart from the self-gratifying gadgets mentioned before, you may take up changing jobs, residence, company, country, climate, you may take up promiscuity, alcohol, travel, cooking lessons, drugs, psychoanalysis . . .

In fact, you may lump all these together, and for a while that may work. Until the day, of course, when you wake up in your bedroom amid a new family and a different wallpaper, in a different state and climate, with a heap of bills from your travel agent and your shrink, yet with the same stale feeling toward the light of day pouring through your window.

Andrzej Stasiuk, an outstanding Polish novelist and particularly perceptive analyst of contemporary human condition, suggests that 'the possibility of becoming someone else' is the present-day substitute for the now largely discarded and uncared-for salvation or redemption:

Applying various techniques, we may change our bodies and re-shape them according to different pattern . . . When browsing through glossy magazines, one gets the impression that they tell mostly one story – about the ways in which one can re-make one's personality, starting from diets, surroundings, homes, and up to rebuilding of psychical structure, often code-named a proposition to 'be yourself'.

Ślawomir Mroźek, a Polish writer of a world-wide fame with a first-hand experience of many lands, agrees with Stasiuk's hypothesis: 'In old times, when feeling unhappy, we accused God, then the world's manager; we assumed that He did



not run the business properly. So we fired Him and appointed ourselves the new directors'. 'But', as Mrozek, though notoriously loathe of clerics and everything clerical, finds out – business did not improve with the change of management. It has not – since once the dream and hope of a better life is focused fully on our own egos and reduced to tinkering with our own bodies or souls:

there is no limit to our ambition and temptation to make that ego grow ever bigger, but first of all refuse to accept all limits . . . I was told: 'invent yourself, invent your own life and manage it as you wish, in every single moment and from beginning to end'. But am I able to rise to such a task? With no help, trials, fittings, errors and rehashings, and above all without doubts?

The pain caused by the unduly limited choice has been replaced; we may say, by no lesser a pain, though this time inflicted by the obligation to choose while having no trust in the choices made and no confidence that further choices will bring the target any closer. Mrozek compares the world we inhabit to

[a] market-stall filled with fancy dresses and surrounded by crowds seeking their 'selves' . . . One can change dresses without end, so what a wondrous liberty the seekers enjoy . . . Let's go on searching for our real selves, it's smashing fun – on condition that the real self will be never found. Because if it were, the fun would end.

The dream of making uncertainty less daunting and happiness more plausible by changing one's ego, and of changing one's ego by changing its outer wrappings, is the 'utopia' of liquid modern times; the 'deregulated', 'privatized' and 'individualized' version of the old-style visions of good society, society hospitable to the humanity of its members. As Blaise Pascal centuries ago prophetically noted, what people want now is 'being diverted from thinking of what they are . . . by some novel and agreeable passion which keeps them busy, like gambling, hunting, some absorbing show'. People want to escape the need to think of 'our unhappy condition' – and so 'we prefer the hunt to the capture'. 'The hare itself would not save us from thinking' about the formidable but intractable faults in our shared condition, 'but hunting it does so'.

The snag is, though, that once tried, hunt turns into compulsion, addiction and obsession. Catching a hare is an anticlimax; it only makes more seductive the prospect of another hunt, as the hopes that accompanied the hunt are found to be the most delightful (the only delightful?) experience of the whole affair. Catching the hare presages the end to those hopes – unless another hunt is immediately planned and undertaken.

Is that the end of utopia? In one respect it is – in as far as the early-modern utopias envisaged a point in which time will come to a stop; indeed, the end of time as history. There is no such point though in hunter's utopia, no moment where one would say that the job has been done, the case open and shut, the mission accomplished – and so could look forward to the rest and enjoyment of the booty from now to eternity. In the utopia of hunters, a prospect of an end to hunting is not tempting, but frightening – since it may arrive only as a personal defeat. The horns will go on announcing the start of another adventure,



the greyhounds' bark will go on resurrecting the sweet memory of past chases, the others around will go on hunting, and there will be no end to universal excitement . . . It's only me who would be stood aside, excluded and no longer wanted, barred from other people's joys; just a passive spectator on the other side of fence, watching the party but forbidden or unable to join the revellers, enjoying the sights and sounds at best from a distance and by proxy. If a life of continuing and continuous hunting is another utopia, it is – contrary to the utopias of the past – a utopia of no end. A bizarre utopia indeed, if measured by orthodox standards; the original utopias promised temptingly the end to the toil – but the hunters' utopia encapsulates the dream of toil never ending.

Strange, unorthodox utopia it is – but utopia all the same, as it promises the same unattainable prize as all utopias brandished, namely the ultimate and radical solution to human problems past, present and future, and the ultimate and radical cure for the sorrows and pains of human condition. It is unorthodox mainly for having moved the land of solutions and cures from the 'far away' into 'here and now'. Instead of living towards the utopia, hunters are offered a living inside the utopia. The end of the road would be the lived utopia's final, ignominious defeat. Adding insult to injury, it would also be a thoroughly personal defeat and proof of a personal failure. Non-participation in the hunt can only feel as ignominy of personal exclusion, and so (presumably) of personal inadequacy.

Utopia brought from the misty 'far away' into the tangible 'here and now', utopia lived rather than being lived towards, is immune to tests; for all practical intents and purposes, and it is immortal. But its immortality has been achieved at the price of frailty and vulnerability of all and each one of those enchanted and seduced to live it . . .

**MHJ/KT:** Some of your recent books, especially from *Postmodernity and Its Discontents* onwards, seem to entertain a certain element of nostalgia in that you appear to decry the state of the contemporary social scene. Would you agree with such a claim that your books contain nostalgic undertones? Do you see any function of nostalgia in sociology?

**ZB:** I know of no arrangement of human togetherness, present or past, which could be seen as an optimal solution to the aporia of human condition. It seems that linearity of history, by whatever criterion plotted, could be only a product of reductionism (when reported) or utopia (when projected). The trajectory of successive re-arrangements is reminiscent more of a pendulum than a straight line. Each arrangement tried to reconcile incompatible demands, but the efforts ended as a rule with resigning a part of one for the sake of gratifying a part of another. And so each re-arrangement inspired sooner or later a demand for another; each next step brought more of the 'good things' missing – but at the expense of some other things whose 'goodness', indeed indispensability, was revealed only after the exchange was made (their 'goodness' stayed unnoticed as long as they were 'self-evident', or unproblematic to the point of invisibility). The other way to say the same is that each improvement brought new shortcomings (or re-evaluation

of old). As Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling opined almost two centuries ago – *Erinnerung* (reminiscence) is a ‘retrospective impact’ of the end on the beginning; beginnings stay unclear until the end is reached, and the antecedents reveal themselves only through their consequences . . . We may add that the ‘revelation’ of the ‘unclear’ is not a one-off event, but in principle an infinite process, and that – contrary to its definition – ‘the past’ is as motile as its futures that go on reshuffling and re-assessing its contents.

For many years now I’ve been repeating after Freud that ‘civilization’ (meaning: a social order) is a trade-off, in which some values are sacrificed for the sake of others (usually it is the lot of such values as seem to be had in sufficient quantity to be given away in order to attain more of the values which are felt to be in short supply). In these terms, one may say that history of systemic changes is a succession of trade-offs.

The passage from the ‘solid’ to the ‘liquid’ variety of modern life was a reversal of the trade-off which Freud noted in the passage to modernity. Centuries that followed the disintegration of the *Ancien régime* (the pre-modern order) could be described retrospectively as a long march towards restitution (on a different level and with different means) of the shattered security; we are now in the midst of another long march, this time towards dismantling the constraints that have been imposed on individual liberties in the course of the long march to security resting on the intensive and extensive normative regulation and thorough policing. Let me note, though, that this new ‘long march’ seems to be destined to be much shorter than its predecessor . . . Signs gather, and quickly, of the return of the old value preferences. Symptoms accumulate of a new tendency to trade-off personal liberties for personal (corporeal, bodily?) safety. This new tendency is not a return to the preoccupation with the kind of securities described by Freud; but it signals another turn of the pendulum between security and freedom – solidity and flexibility, determination and open-endedness, constraint and uncertainty . . .

What you see as ‘nostalgia’ is perhaps the reflection of the unpleasant, though hardly avoidable fact that the full costs of a new trade-off can be calculated only at the end of the accounting period. For the ‘leap to order’ (as I tried to document in *Modernity and the Holocaust* and *Modernity and Ambivalence*) an enormous and atrocious price needed to be paid – but this does not mean that repairing the unprepossessing features of ‘solid’ modernity ushered into a cloudless and faultless form of human togetherness that would leave no room for dissent. Each arrangement has, I repeat, its own shortcomings crying for attention – and each needs to be judged in terms of its own virtues and vices. And due to the ‘pendulum-like’ trajectory of historical sequences, a close proximity of ‘forward and backward’ or ‘utopia’ and ‘nostalgia’ pregnant with confusion is virtually inevitable . . .

**MHJ/KT:** In recent years, especially since the publication of *Postmodernity and Its Discontents*, you seem to have focused intensively on the perpetual existential dualisms of social life: freedom versus security, dependency versus equality,

morality versus indifference, autonomy versus heteronomy, etc. But can the inherent ambivalences of social life be understood exclusively in these either/or terms?

**ZB:** The whole point is that those couples are *not* 'either/or'. There is a conjunction, not disjunction; or rather conjunction and disjunction rolled into one. A *Haßliebe* relation; could live *with*, could not live *without* each other. In its pure form, each side of the opposition is either implausible or unbearable, but letting some space off to its opposite side immediately triggers a trench war punctuated by occasional offensive sallies and continuous reconnaissance skirmishes. Neat separation is impossible, nor is a peaceful cohabitation. Life is indeed a continuous progress through this kind of a battlefield (there is no alternative living space). And life is spent in the continuous efforts to reconcile the warring sides, though the best one can hope for is a (temporary) armistice . . . It is because of such human predicament that each condition past, current and prospective is bound to be ambivalent. It is for the same reason that the treacherous temptation of 'great purification' and *Eindeutigkeit* crops up again and again, remaining so ubiquitous and so strong . . .

**MHJ/KT:** You once mentioned in conversation with Peter Beilharz that your book *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies* was your personal favourite. Since then the topics of death and immortality have permeated many of your other writings as a prism through which to describe and analyse the conditions of the living. How do you think using death and immortality as such a prism can in fact inform and enrich our comprehension of life, say, in liquid modernity? Or is it that, in the end, death is something we must all confront?

**ZB:** The 'original (and endemic) fear' of death we, the humans, share, it seems, with all animals; but only we, the humans are aware of the death's imminence and only we have named it. Each signifier can be detached from its signified, set to float and be re-attached metaphorically or metonymically to an undefined number of signifieds. This particular signifier is uncannily potent (ambivalence incarnate; the imminence of death endows life with enormous significance – in Hans Jonas' words, it makes days count and be counted – while simultaneously robbing it of meaning) and so tends to be keenly manipulated.

Manipulation is inescapable; the prohibition to pronounce the true name of God (and the advice to avoid naming the Satan lest the sleeping dog is awakened) is a fundamental rule of all relation with 'the tremendous', death is the archetype of the tremendous, and looking death in its bare face is all but unbearable. (The Gorgon was a mythological version of that unbearability.) All cultures could be viewed as ingenious contraptions meant to mask and adorn that face and so make it 'liveable with'.

There are many ways of achieving that effect, but I believe that they all could be registered under three essential strategies: cover up, deconstruction and banalization – in order of the historical succession of their respective prevalence. The

first consists in transporting the event of death to another realm, so that the realm of daily life could be cleansed of its presence; the second in shifting attention (and worry!) from death itself, which is universal and inescapable, to the specific 'causes' of death which could be resisted; and the third consists in daily rehearsal of death as the 'absolute', 'ultimate', the 'irreparable' and the 'irreversible' end – an end which, as in the case of the 'retro' fashions, can be shown, however, to be somewhat less absolute than absolute and reversible: just one more banal event among so many others. I am not suggesting that the strategies are fully effective: that cannot be, they are but palliatives after all. But they go some way towards taking the poison out of the sting and so allowing one to endure the unendurable by taming and domesticating in the world of being the 'absolute alterity' of non-being.

There is a second, parallel current in the cultural response to death: aiming, with mixed effect, at detoxification of the primal fear by the 'cancellation' of the 'absolute' in the phenomenon of death. That response consist in building bridges between mortal life and eternity – ranging all the way from the immortality of soul, through the 'undying fame' of great generals, poets and scholars and 'indelible trace' left on eternity by the acts of heroic patriotism, and up to the current promises of nanotechnology that would make bodily death history . . .

All in all, I do believe that human mortality, and the awareness of it, are arguably the most important among the attributes of human condition which sociologists have left out, glossed over and suppressed as a guilty secret. It seems that sociological analysis tends to start where culture finished its job: after it had already completed its cleaning or more precisely the under-the-carpet-sweeping efforts. Of that job, sociology is more a willing or gullible accomplice than an objective analyst.

**MHJ/KT:** In several books, as well as in the interview conducted by Tony Blackshaw and published in *Newsletter of the British Sociological Association* (2002), you mention your methodical strategy to be that of 'sociological hermeneutics' as opposed to conventional 'hermeneutic sociology'. You also mention that you utilise a 'sociological sixth sense'. Could you explain those terms?

**ZB:** Not so much 'as opposed' as 'as distinct from'. I would not *a limine* stop availing myself of the findings and the ideas promoted by any school of sociology, since I believe those schools to be complementary rather than in competition (except in the competition for grants and subsidies, of course – which all too often is waged using the claims of more scientificity or a privileged access to truth as its major weapons). And the foremost representative of hermeneutic sociology was Max Weber, to whom I owe a large part of my understanding of what sociologizing is about; and on whatever point I may find Weber wanting, his insistence on the importance of hermeneutics in the study is not one of my reservations.

By 'sociological hermeneutics', I do not mean a separate variant of sociological activity, an idiosyncratic style in which it is conducted, or a self-contained school – but a postulate that the effort of understanding human realities ought

to be made with sociological tools. You may say that I claim for sociology *as a whole* (that is, for the on-going inquiry into the difference made by humans being simultaneously products and producers of social reality) the paramount, nay decisive, role in the effort to understand and explain (which in the case of humans amounts much to the same) human conduct and the verbal glosses that precede or follow it. Or you may say that I do not propose to reform sociology through hermeneutics, but hermeneutics through sociology. The postulate of 'sociological hermeneutics' demands that whenever we pursue the meaning of human thoughts or actions we ought to look into socially shaped conditions of people whose thoughts or actions we intend to understand/explain. In other words, hermeneutics of human conduct is primarily a sociological, not a semantical or philological operation.

This is, alas, a postulate much, much more difficult to meet than in the case of demands spelled out in most 'handbooks of sociological research' composed for the indoctrination of first-year students . . . The ways of proceeding in 'sociological hermeneutics' are vexingly resistant to codification; they refuse to be reduced to a finite number of algorithmic rules, fit to be memorized and followed with little hesitation and no guilty conscience thanks to the absolution from responsibility which is the meaning and the main attraction of the rule . . . Hence the reference to 'sociological sixth sense' – in other words to *intuition*, something akin to the E.M. Foster's appeal 'only connect', which cannot be assured its correctness in advance, which needs to justify itself in a dialogue (or polylogue) – possibly in an argument with no visible end, let alone a resolution. This makes the prospect of 'raising' sociology to the rank of an exact science rather murky – but then the humans, the creatures who set the standards for the science they've invented and practise, are notoriously reluctant to submit themselves to their demands . . .

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## Notes

- 1 See Adorno's letter to Benjamin of 18 March 1936, in Adorno (1999: 127–330).
- 2 Ibid., p.14.
- 3 See Adorno (1997: 25).
- 4 Ibid., p.26.
- 5 Postscript to *La misère du monde* (1993: 1449–554).
- 6 Quoted in Claude Lanzmann and Robert Redeker (1998: 14).
- 7 See his 'L'usure de la tolérance et la résistance de l'intolérable' (2005: 309–24).

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