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ANTICIPATING OBAMA: AN INTERVIEW WITH ZYGMUNT BAUMAN

G. Battiston

G. Battiston: During the electoral campaign Barack Obama has never claimed an exclusivist ethnic identity (rather, he called himself a 'mixed' person) and has never tried to play the politics of identity card, adopting the so-called culturalist version of identity to such an extent that some observers define him as the first 'post-essentialist' American president. His election could be interpreted as the sign that the American political system has definitively broken the link between *demos* and *ethnos* and that America is going toward a more conscious post-ethnic society.

Zygmunt Bauman: Let me rephrase the problem. . . . Obama was careful to bid for power *not* in the name of the 'downtrodden and oppressed', and for that reason proclaimed inferior masses whose imposed and stereotyped ineptitude, indignity and infamy rubbed on him due to his ethnically/racially inherited assignment. And he did not come to power on the wave of the 'downtrodden and oppressed' rebellion or 'social/political movement', as their spokesman, plenipotentiary and avenger. What his advance and elevation was to prove – and in all probability did – was that a collective stigma can be washed off the selected individuals; in other words, that some *individuals* among the oppressed/discriminated categories possess qualities that 'outweigh' their participation in a collective, *categorical* inferiority: qualities that may equal, or even surpass, those boasted by the competitors unburdened by the categorical stigma. Such a phenomenon does not necessarily invalidate the assumption of the *categorical* inferiority; it may be perceived (and is by many) as a perverse reassertion of the assumption: here is an individual who, almost in Baron Münchhausen's style, lifted himself by his bootstraps from the bog, through his individual talents and stamina, not *thanks*

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to his belonging but *despite* it, and proving by the same token not so much the grossly underestimated virtues of 'his people' as the tolerance and generosity of those ready to make exceptions by closing their eyes to collectively carried defects – providing the individual in question gallantly and successfully fights to erase them. This is, indeed, a round-about restatement of infallibility of the underlying assumption. If *some* individuals made it because they earnestly tried, it only shows that the rest, a massive majority that 'failed to make it', are sunk in their misery by their sloth and/or inherent incapacity (there is apparently astonishing – but, if you think about it, not that astonishing – news of the American 'far right' celebrating the elevation of Obama).

Of course, the feat accomplished by Obama would embolden more ambitious and talented individuals from the discriminated category to try to follow his suit, and quash many an objection as well as soften the resistance to the social/political acceptance of those who succeed. This does not mean, though, that their advance will lift the 'category as such' from its inferior social position and open wider life prospects before all its members. The long semi-dictatorial rule of Margaret Thatcher did not bring social equality of women. . . . What it proved was that *some* women may defeat men in their own game. Many of the Jews who in the 19th century managed to emerge from the ghettos and pass (or so they tried to believe) for Germans did pretty little to lift their ascribed but left behind brethren from poverty and legal and/or social discrimination. Many of the most vociferous and dedicated ideologues and practitioners of the most radical varieties of 20th-century, particularly the up-and-coming, nationalisms (Stalin and Hitler including) were newcomers from 'ethnic minorities' or 'naturalizing' foreigners. The Jew Disraeli solidified and fortified the British Empire. The war-cry of all 'assimilants' was 'whatever you do, I can do better' – the promise and determination to be *plus catolique que le Pape*, to out-German the Germans, out-Pole the Poles, out-Russian the Russians in enriching *their* culture and promoting *their* 'national interests' (which, by the way, in numerous cases was held against them and taken for a proof of their duplicity and insidious intentions . . .). In all such cases, it was the inhabitants of the world of destination that were accorded the undisputed right to judge the success or failure of assimilating efforts, according to the criteria they set. Among all those things which they were bent on 'doing better' than the natives was for many assimilants also the contempt and reproof of the 'natives' for the genuine or putative ways and means of the assimilants' 'community of origin'.

Obviously, reasoning by analogy, just like knowledge of statistical trends, makes one think, but it does not enable one to predict what will happen in any particular case. However massive a majority that justifies speaking of a 'trend' or 'rule' might be, there is always room for exception. Please interpret my answer to your question as a call to be cautious in prognosticating and abstain from jumping to conclusions. 'Don't count your chickens before they are hatched' is one of the time-honoured popular wisdoms. . . .

GB: In *Intervista sull'identità* (with Benedetto Vecchi) you take Peer Gynt as an example of a 'productive' elusive and 'nomadic' identity, while in *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* you quote the 'Mann ohne Verwandtschaften' of Musil as the 'typical representative of our modern-liquid society'. How would you collocate in this typology the 'character' Barack Hussain Obama with his multiple roots and identities? Is he another representative of our modern liquid modernity?

ZB: I restate what I've already suggested: one should be wary of 'filing up' cases instead of analysing each in its own uniqueness. . . . After all, as we all repeat after Max Frisch, 'having identity' means to refuse to be accommodated in 'types' and 'categories', and breaks any category into which the 'typologizers' try to squeeze you. . . . 'Individuality' means not to be fully at home in any of the files. And you are right, the liquid modern condition that rendered all 'communities of belonging' frail and porous supports strongly such 'individuality' – whether by design or by default. Most of us belong simultaneously to several 'communities', or – as their successors are called now – 'networks'. Almost in each individual case connections of the 'members' of a 'network' spread in varying directions beyond its boundaries (if the term 'boundary' is at all applicable to networks, existing through the ongoing dynamics of 'connecting' and 'disconnecting'). And in many ways Obama is more individual than most! At any rate, he is not 'another' representative of our liquid modernity, but one of its most spectacular and conspicuous incarnations. Everybody agrees that 40 years ago the stunning life itinerary of Obama would not only be implausible, it would be downright inconceivable!

GB: According to some observers, the result of the American presidential election should be seen more than as a victory of Obama than as the defeat of the Bush administration policy, especially of its attempt to use the 'protection' of personal safety as the main criterion to legitimate and strengthen the executive power. In these terms, can the Obama election be interpreted as the will *to* find a new equilibrium between freedom and security, an equilibrium where the former is not completely subsumed by the latter? Or has Obama been voted in mainly as an antidote *against* what in *Search for Politics* you call the 'wicked trinity' (uncertainty, insecurity and vulnerability)? In other words, is the task which Obama has been asked to accomplish to satisfy the need of *Sicherneit*, *closing* the space in order to avoid risks, or instead to give a recognizable profile to a new American dream, *opening* new space for its implementation?

ZB: There is a widespread opinion that the 'credit crunch' with all its paraphernalia – the sudden necessity to live within one's (mostly inadequate) means, the threat of repossessions and evictions, the prospect of losing jobs – was the last nail in the coffin of the Republican ticket; many observers

suggest that without that catastrophe in the last stage of the presidential campaign all the blunders and iniquities of the out-going administration would not have sufficed to render Obama's, and the Democrats', victory certain. . . . And that means that one of the decisive, or perhaps even *the* decisive factor in the turn of the majority to Obama was a instant, momentary, gut reaction to the latest shocking news, rather than a product of long processes of reasoning and a profound shift in the worldview. (On the same day that Obama was elected a number of states voted in favour of reactionary state laws reflecting the still prevailing 'radical right' mood of the electorate.) There was hardly a groundswell change in the popular life-philosophy. . . .

All the same, the largest majorities of Obama voters are to be found in the African-American and Hispanic categories; only a minority (though substantial) of whites gave their votes to the candidate whose most frequently pronounced word was 'change'. 'Change' is a wide open basket concept; everyone is free to put in it what one would like to find there. . . . For the vulnerable and frightened of yet worse to come, security (not only in the sense of personal safety from terrorists and tobacco smoke, but in the sense of a decent, assured and reliable place in society) would be indeed, as you suggest, the greatest change they might desire and could imagine. What will constitute genuine change in their condition is (heretofore abysmally lacking!) protection from sudden turns of from-behind-the-scene manipulated fate and putting an end to the rule of privatizing profits while refusing to nationalize the losses. . . . I do not know how the people in question visualize that 'world-after-change', and whether they have any clear vision of it. Voting for 'change' testifies that voters run away from something, but this does not say much about where they want to run to, even less about where they will run once the election fever subsides and realities, old or new, will need to be faced point blank. . . .

At any rate, expectations have been beefed up to enormous heights – and preventing the electors' hopes from being frustrated will be a daunting task even if the new administration set urgently, earnestly, and uncompromisingly to lift realities to the level of those hopes. There are, however, worryingly numerous signs that instead of running anywhere (whether from or towards), the electors might find themselves staying put (or having been stood put). In the post-election vocabulary of Obama's staff, the word 'change' has been increasingly elbowed out by the concepts of 'smooth transition' and 'continuity'. Protests (not to mention actions) against outrageously corrupt and corrupting practices in handling the exorbitant sum of \$700 billion earmarked by the outgoing administration for 'recapitalizing the banks' and bringing them back to 'business as usual', or against new tax rules for mergers that (as Naomi Klein calculated) are sure to deprive the taxpayers of around \$140 billion (a sum equal to the costs of the 'renewable energy program' which Obama promised in his electoral speeches) are lukewarm at best, but mostly muted or nonexistent. . . . Instead, public statements of

the incoming administration's spokespersons all too often suggest the acceptance of the political and economic agenda set by the outgoing one. The motif I feared – 'Whatever you have done, we will do better' – I pray to be, by Obama and his staff's deeds, proved wrong. . . .

GB: The Obama electoral campaign was based on a strong 'popular' participation, which seemed to refill the public space with the trust on the effectiveness of public engagement to stimulate a collective action. Do you think that this participation was due to the desire to 're-collectivize the privatized utopias of "life politics"' and to give form to new visions about 'right society' and 'good society', or does it mainly come from the need for a community of people in search for *Safety in an Insecure World*? In other terms, is the Obama's community an ad hoc community which will soon disappear, or is it rooted in the idea that the society is a 'common property' which can – and should – be managed together?

To some people, Obama's election demonstrates that the American political space is more 'open' than the European one: if the American political space is still permeable to the evocative strength of a dream (despite or thanks to its vagueness), in the European political framework the reification, crystallization and 'institutionalization' of political energies and movements into ideologies (and in some cases dogmas) have de-potentiated or absorbed the space for new ideas. Would you agree on that interpretation?

ZB: It seems to me that the two big issues/processes which you've articulated in two separate questions are too intertwined and too dependent on each other to be treated and prognosticated separately; the prospects of a popular movement that would mean a significant rise in the popular involvement in 'running the country viewed as common property' and the appearance and promotion of 'new ideas' breaking the ideological mould and stepping beyond the customary limits of political concerns as well as attempting to reach to the socio-cultural roots of that 'reality' which governments perceived and presented as unquestionable and untouchable are as closely related as heads and tails on a coin. In fact, they ought to be viewed as two inseparable sides of the same process. There won't be 'new ideas' of genuine consequence without substantial widening of the political scene and of the realm of political activity and the composition of its effective actors, and vice versa. The two eventualities you suggest will happen together, or not at all.

But will they happen? My knowledge – and feeling – of grassroots America is not intimate enough to prophesize: 'scholarly predictions' of such and similar developments compromised in the past the meaning of both words, 'scholarly' and 'predicting', much too often for comfort. Vaclav Havel, summarizing his long and distinguished political life, memorably observed that what really counts is what people are willing to sing, but that there is no way of knowing what songs they will sing next year. . . . I remember the

public excitement and the enormous tide of popular political involvement on which Anthony Blair swam to power. He left his office amidst almost universal frustration, apathy, disenchantment with and suspicion of everything remotely reminiscent of 'party politics' and related to the practising politicians, leaving behind a party emptied of militants, vision, programme, will to act and trust in the sense of acting. Reasoning by analogy is a highly risky undertaking and I am far from suggesting that history will necessarily go on repeating itself.

On the other hand, however, what you call ad hoc communities (I call them cloakroom communities, after the pattern of the theatre public filling them with their coats and anoraks at the beginning of performance, only to collect them again on their way home after the curtain falls) are the prevailing form of association in our liquid modern times. Associations which stick together long enough to justify the assumed or imputed name of 'community' are nowadays few and far between. If the masses celebrating Obama's election prove to be one of those extremely rare cases, that would signify a truly watershed change in politics as we came to know it in the liquid modern era. . . .

GB: Dear Professor Bauman, thank you.