



How to reconcile the irreconcilable

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Zygmunt Bauman, a famous Anglo-Polish sociologist, delivers a rich, committed and unusually controversial text in which he questions the idea of a world in which growing insecurity would justify an increased need to protect oneself. Since it has been established that the welfare state is decaying, the author believes that the State is skilfully maintaining a feeling of insecurity in which it finds a new legitimacy. So, according to him, insecurity would be a feeling, more than a reality. However, security, which is supposed to reassure citizens, would paradoxically have the opposite effect since it encourages wariness of the others and isolation from the outside world seen as criminogenic. The best way of abandoning this feeling of insecurity would be by adopting an ethical approach, which would focus on living together and getting to know the Other. Isolation or living together : security and ethics would thus be seen as incompatible. If the author does not make any direct reference to companies, the latter should not remain blind to the particularly controversial ideas defended in the text.

Human uncertainty and vulnerability are the foundations of all political power: it is against those twin hotly resented, yet constant accompaniments of human condition, and against the fear and anxiety they tend to generate, that the modern state has promised to protect its subjects; and it is mostly from that promise that it has drawn its *raison d'être* as well as its citizens' obedience and electoral support .

In a 'normal' modern society vulnerability and insecurity of existence, and the necessity to live and act under conditions of acute and unredeemable uncertainty, are assured by the exposure of life pursuits to notoriously capricious and endemically unpredictable market forces. Except for the task of creating and protecting legal conditions of market freedoms, political power has no need to contribute to the production of uncertainty and the resulting state of existential insecurity; the vagaries of the market are sufficient to

erode the foundations of existential security and keep the spectre of social degradation, humiliation and exclusion over most of society members. In demanding the subjects' obedience and observance of law, the state may rest therefore its legitimacy on the promise to *mitigate* the extent of the already existing vulnerability and frailty of its citizens' condition: to *limit* harms and damages perpetrated by the free play of market forces, to *shield* the vulnerable against excessively painful blows and to insure the uncertain against the risks a free competition necessarily entails. Such legitimation found its ultimate expression in the self-definition of the modern form of governance as a '*État providence*': a community taking over upon itself, on its administration and management, the obligation/promise once imputed to Divine providence: to protect the faithful against inclement vicissitudes of fate and to help them in case of a personal misfortunes and succour in their sorrows.

That formula of political power, its mission, task and function, are all presently receding into the past. Institutions of the 'Providential State' are progressively cut down, dismantled or phased out, while restraints imposed previously on business activities and on the free play of market competition and its consequences are removed. The protective functions of the state are tapered and 'targeted', to embrace a small minority of the unemployable and the invalid, though even that minority tends to be re-classified step by step from the object of social care into the issue of law and order; the incapacity of an individual to engage in the market game according to its statutory rules while using one's own resources and on one's own personal risk tends to be increasingly criminalized or made suspect of criminal intention or at any rate criminal potential. The state washes its hands of the vulnerability and uncertainty arising from the logic (more precisely, the absence of logic) of free markets. The noxious frailty of social status is now re-defined as a private affair - a matter for the individuals to deal and cope with by the resources in their private possession. As Ulrich Beck put it, individuals are now expected to seek biographical solutions to systemic contradictions¹.

These new trends have a side effect: they sap the foundations on which the state power, claiming a crucial role in fighting back and away the vulnerability and uncertainty haunting its subjects, increasingly rested through the greater part of the modern era. The widely noted growth of political apathy, loss of political interests and commitments ('no more salvation by society', as Peter Drucker succinctly, and famously, phrased it), and a massive retreat of the population from participating in the institutionalised politics, both testify to the crumbling of the extant foundations of state power.

Having rescinded its previous programmatic interference with market-produced

existential uncertainty/insecurity, and having on the contrary proclaimed the removing, one by one, of the residual constraints imposed on profit-oriented activities to be the prime task of any political power that cares for the well-being of its subjects, contemporary state must seek other, *non-economic* varieties of vulnerability and uncertainty on which to rest its legitimacy. That alternative seems to have been recently located (first and most spectacularly, but by no means exclusively, by the recent US administration) in the issue of *personal safety*: the extant or portending, overt or hidden, genuine or putative fears of the *threats to human bodies, possessions and habitats* - whether arising from pandemics and unhealthy diets or lifestyle regimes, or from criminal activities, anti-social conduct of the 'underclass', and most recently global terrorism.

Unlike the existential insecurity born of the market, which is if anything all too genuine, profuse, visible and obvious for comfort, that *alternative* insecurity which is hoped to restore the state's lost monopoly on the chances of redemption must be artificially beefed up, or at least highly dramatized to inspire sufficient volume of fears, and at the same time outweigh, overshadow and relegate to a secondary position the *economically generated* insecurity about which the state administration can do next to nothing and nothing is particularly eager to do. Unlike in the case of the market-generated threats to livelihood and welfare, the gravity and extent of dangers to personal safety must be presented in the darkest of colours, so that the non-materialization of the advertised threats and the predicted blows and sufferings (indeed, anything less than predicted disasters) could be applauded as a great victory of governmental reason over hostile fate: as the result of laudable vigilance, care and good will of state organs.

This is the task with which CIA and FBI in the US were most preoccupied under Bush administration, while being promptly and

► ¹ See Ulrich Beck, *Risiko Gesellschaft: Auf dem Weg in einere andere Moderne*, Suhrkamp 1986; here quoted after Mark Ritter's translation, Sage 1992, p.137

² See USA Today of 11th June 2002, particularly 'Al-Qaeda operative tipped off plot', 'US: Dirty bomb plot foiled', and 'Dirty bomb plot: "The future is here, I'm afraid"'.

³ In the New York Times of 5-6 May 2002.

zealously imitated in Britain under Tony Blair's leadership: warning the citizens of the imminent attempts on their safety, putting them in a state of constant alert oscillating between 'orange' and 'red' so that there was a good supply of harrowing tension to be relieved once the expected enemy assaults failed to materialize - and all the credits for the salvation from an impending and otherwise unavoidable disaster could be by popular consent allocated to the organs of law and order, to which the state administration is progressively reduced.

For instance, the prime news on 10th June 2002 was the announcement by the highest rank US officials (FBI Director Robert Mueller, US Deputy Attorney General Larry Thompson, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz among others) of the arrest of a suspected Al-Qaeda terrorist on his return to Chicago from a training trip to Pakistan². As the official version of the affair claimed, an American citizen, American born and bred, Jose Padilla (the name suggest Hispanic roots, that is the latest, relatively poorly settled, addition of 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 how to harm his erstwhile 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.

This happened in the USA; but similar efforts to increase the volume of fear has soon become noticeable world-wide. His summary of recent shifts in the European political spec-

trum Donald G. McNeil Jr. entitled 'Politicians pander to fear of crime'³. Indeed, throughout the world ruled by democratically elected governments the 'I'll be tough on crime' (whether bred by international terrorism or of domestic origin) has turned to be the highest trump card that beats all others, but the winning hand is almost invariably a combination of 'more prisons, more policemen, longer sentences' promise with 'no immigration, no asylum rights, no naturalization' oath. As 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'.

In France, Chirac vs. Jospin presidential duel of 2002 degenerated already in its preliminary stages into a public auction in which both competitors vied for electoral support offering ever harsher measures against criminals and immigrants, but above all against immigrants that breed crime and the criminality bred by immigrants⁴. First of all, though, they did their best to re-focus the electors' anxiety stemming from the ambient sense of *precarité* (infuriating insecurity of social position intertwined with the acute uncertainty about the future of livelihood) onto the fear for personal safety (integrity of the body, personal possessions, home, neighbourhood). On 14 July 2001 Chirac set the infernal machine in motion, announcing the need to fight 'that growing threats to safety, that rising flood' in view (also announced on that occasion) an almost 10 per cent increase in delinquency in the first half of the year, and declaring that the 'zero-tolerance' policy was bound to become the law once he is re-elected. 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). On 28th August Jospin proclaimed 'the battle against insecurity', vowing 'no laxity', while on 6th September Daniel Vaillant and Marylise Lebranchu, his ministers of, respectively, internal affairs and justice, swore that

⁴ Comp. Nathaniel Herzberg & Cécile Prieur, 'Lionel Jospin et le "piège" sécuritaire', in *Le Monde* 5-6 May 2002.

⁵ Quoted by Donald G. McNeil Jr., *op.cit.*

they won't show any tolerance to delinquency in any form. Vaillant's immediate reaction to 11th September was to increase the powers of the police aimed principally against the juveniles of the 'ethnically alien' *banlieues*, where according to the official (convenient to the officials) version the devilish concoction of uncertainty and insecurity, poisoning the Frenchmen's lives, was brewed. Jospin himself went on castigating and reviling, in ever more vitriolic terms, the 'angelic school' of the softly-softly approach, to which he and swore never to belong in the past and never 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 the commitment to the ministry 'charged with public security' and 'coordination of police operations'. When Chirac brandished the idea of locked centres to confine the juvenile delinquents, Jospin echoed the promise with the vision of 'locked structures' for the juvenile offenders, outbidding the opponent with the prospect of 'sentencing on the spot'.

It does not need reminding that little if anything changed since. More than to anything else, the successor of Chirac owed his convincing electoral success to playing on popular fears and desire of a strong power able to arrest and fight back yet more fears bound to plague the future.

A mere three decades ago Portugal was (alongside Turkey) the main supplier of the *Gastarbeiter* feared by German *Bürger* to despoil the homely townscapes and undercut the social compact, the foundation of their security and comfort. Today, thanks to its sharply improved fortune, Portugal has turned from labour-exporting into a labour-importing country. Hardships and humiliations suffered when earning bread in foreign countries have been promptly forgotten, 27 per cent of Portuguese declared that crime-and-foreigners infested neighbourhood are their main worry, and the newcomer politician Paulo Portas, playing a single, fiercely anti-immigration card, helped the new rightwing coalition into power (just as Pia Kiersgaard's Danish People's Party did it in Denmark, Umberto Bossi's Northern League in

Italy, radically anti-immigrants Progress Party in Norway – or virtually all mainstream parties in Netherlands; in other words, in countries that not so long ago sent their children to far-away lands to seek the bread which their homelands were unable to offer).

All such news make it easily to the first page headlines (like 'UK plan for asylum crackdown' in *The Guardian* of 13th June 2002; no need to mention tabloid first-page banners...). The main bulk of the planet-wide immigrant-phobia stays however 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 first 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'¹⁵ – while countries too poor to attract any desperately-seeking-livelihood neighbours, 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 perpetual 'newcomers' and outsiders, always and everywhere – the Gypsies.

Permanent state of alert: dangers proclaimed to be lurking just behind the next corner, oozing and leaking from the terrorists camps masquerading as Islamic religious schools and congregations, from the immigrants-populated *banlieues*, from the underclass-infested mean streets, the violence-incurably-contaminated 'rough districts', the no-go areas of big cities; paedophiles and other sex-offenders on the loose, obtrusive beggars, juvenile blood-thirsty gangs, loiterers and stalkers... Reasons to be afraid are many; their genuine number and intensity being impossible to calculate from the perspective of a narrow personal experience, yet another, perhaps the most powerful reason to be frightened is added: one does not know where from and when the words of warning will

turn into flesh.

Contemporary menaces, and particularly the most horrifying among them, are as a rule distantly located, concealed and surreptitious, seldom close enough for direct witnessing and very rarely accessible to individual scrutiny – for all practical purposes invisible. Most of us would've never learned of their existence, were they not thanks to the panics inspired and boosted by mass media and the alarming prognoses composed by experts and swiftly picked up, endorsed and reinforced by cabinet members and trade companies – hurrying as they do to turn all that excitement into a political or commercial profit. As we, 'the ordinary people' occupied with our individual small-scale daily affairs, know of those awesome but far-away dangers only indirectly, it is possible, indeed much too easy, to manipulate our - public – attitudes; to play down or silence out the dangers promising no political or financial gains, while grossly inflating, or even inventing, some other, better fit for politically or commercially profitable exploitation. But as Moazzam Begg, a British Muslim arrested in January 2002 and released without charge after three years spent at Bagram and Guantanamo Bay prisons, rightly points out in his book published in 2006 under the title "Enemy Combatant", the summary, overall effect of a life lived under virtually incessant security alert, such as warmongering, justifications of torture, arbitrary imprisonment and terror, it to "have made the world much worse".

Whether worse or not, but – I would add - not a bit more secure; and most certainly, the world feels today considerably less secure than it did a dozen of years ago. It looks as if the paramount effect of profuse and immensely costly extraordinary security measures undertaken in the last decade has been the *deepening of our sense of danger, density of risks, and insecurity*. And there is little in the present tendency that promises a speedy return to the comforts of security. Sowing the seeds of fear results in rich political and trade crops; and the allure of an opulent harvest inspires seekers of political and commercial gains to force ever new lands open for fear-growing plantations...

In principle, security concerns and ethical motivations are at cross-purposes; whereas prospects of security and intensity of ethical intentions are at loggerheads.

What casts security and ethics in a principal opposition to each other (an opposition excruciatingly difficult to overcome and reconcile), is the contrariety between divisiveness and communion: the impulsion to separate and exclude endemic to the first - versus the inclusive, unifying tendency constitutive to the second. Security generates interest in spotting the risks, their subsequent elimination, and for that reason targeting the potential sources of danger as objects of unilaterally undertaken, 'pre-emptive' exterminating action. The targets of such action are by the same token excluded from the universe of moral obligation; targeted individuals and groups or categories of individual are denied human subjectivity and recast as objects pure and simple, located irrevocably at the receiving end of action; as entities whose sole relevance (the only aspect taken into consideration when planning their treatment) is the assumed threat they already do or yet may constitute to the security of those who undertake the 'security measures' or act on behalf of those whose security they presume/declare to be under threat. Denial of subjectivity disqualifies the selected targets as potential partners in dialogue; whatever they may say, and whatever they might have said if given voice, is a priori declared immaterial if at all listened to.

Incapacitation of humanity of the action targets goes far beyond that passivity which Emmanuel Levinas, the greatest French ethical philosopher, ascribed to the Other as the object of ethical responsibility (according to Levinas, the Other commands me by his weakness, not strength; he gives me orders by refraining from giving them; it is the indolence and silence of the Other that trigger my ethical impulse). Using Levinas' vocabulary, we may say that casting others as 'security problems' leads to the effacing of 'face' – a metaphoric name for such aspects of the Other as cast us in the condition of ethical responsibility and guide into ethical action. Incapacitating that

face as the (unarmed, non-coercive) force evoking/awakening the moral impulse is the hub of what is understood by 'de-humanization'. Inside the 'universe of moral obligations', Moazzam Begg's three-years long imprisonment without crime and torture administered to force an admission of guilt that would (retrospectively!) justify it would be an outrage and atrocity. Deprived of ethically significant 'face' by the fact of being classified as a security threat and thereby evicted from the universe of moral obligations, Begg was however a legitimate object of 'security measures', declared ethically indifferent (or 'adiaphoric' in my vocabulary) by definition. The extermination of Jews, Gypsies or homosexuals was for its perpetrators a sanitary action (crystals of Zyklon B, originally produced to poison vermin, were sprinkled through the roof of gas chambers by 'sanitary officers'). Tutsi were summarily described by the Hutu, their murderers, as 'cock-roaches'.

Once stripped of 'Face', weakness of the Other invites now, naturally and effortlessly, violence – just as the presence of human Face that weakness stretched an infinite expanses for the ethical capacity of succour and care. In Jonathan Little rendition,⁶: "the weak are a threat to the strong, and invite the violence and murder that pitilessly strike them down". Please note the pitilessness that marked the activity of striking them down – pity being one of the foremost and most salient sensations, defining moral stance)...

Jonathan Little attempts to reconstruct the deceptively smooth/inviting road that brought eventually the masses of unsuspecting men and women - confused, ingenuous and gullible, and so childishly easy to be manipulated and led astray, frightened by the earthquakes of great war and the great economic collapse depression that followed it - to the inhuman 'logical limits' of human security craze. Begg, for a change, reports the fate of those selected few who fell accidental, inadvertent victims or 'collateral casualties' (peo-

ple who, as their tormentors retrospectively explain, just "happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time") of extreme 'security measures'. The point is, though, that the damage done by securitarian passions spread yet wider and reach deeper than the most atrocious and outrageous, and so most publicized, condemned and regretted extreme and/or 'extraordinary' cases would suggest.

Security obsessions are inexhaustible and insatiable; once taken off and let loose, there is no stopping them. They are self-propelling and self-exacerbating; as they acquire their own momentum, they need no further boost from outside factors - they produce, on a constantly rising scale, their own reasons, explanations and justifications. The fever caused and beefed up by the introduction, entrenchment, servicing and tightening of 'security measures' becomes the sole prod and boost which the fears, anxieties and tensions of insecurity and uncertainty need do self-reproduce and grow. However radical they already are, stratagems and contraptions obtained and put into operation for the sake of security would hardly prove radical enough to quell the fear – not for long, at any rate. They may always be outdone and superseded, the treacherous enemy plotters may learn the way of by-passing them or ignoring, and of getting on top of every successive obstacle erected in their way.

The way it is being done (or, rather, the way this follows driven by its own logic and momentum) has been described, with a genuinely visionary insight, by Franz Kafka, in a short story *Der Bau* written in 1923⁷. The story is told by a non-descript animal obsessed with building the burrow – a complex network of endless underground corridors and passages meant to fortify, and hopefully to protect, his living space against intruders. "There are also enemies in the bowels of the earth" – the anonymous animal narrator notes. "Here", it confesses, "it is of no avail to console yourself with the thought that you are in your own

► ⁶ As noted by the narrator in *Le Bienveillantes* (2006 - here quoted after Charlotte Mandel's English translation *The Kindly Ones*, Chatto & Windus 2009, p.390).

⁷ Herefrom quoted after Willa and Edwin Muir English translation, in *Franz Kafka, Collected Short Stories*, Penguin Books 1988.

house, far rather you are in theirs”. It admits that his labours are far from complete and unlikely ever to be finished: “My constant preoccupation with defensive measures involves a frequent alteration or modification (...) The truth of the matter...is that in reality the burrow does provide a considerable degree of security, but by no means enough, for is one ever free from anxieties inside it?”. And then comes the final discovery and admission: “This trench will bring me certainty, you say? I have reached the stage where I no longer wish to have certainty”. More than anything else, more even than the ubiquitous enemy held responsible for his life-long drudgery, the obsessive/compulsive and intrepid burrow-builder fears now the moment of finishing the task that has kept him alive for so long and infused his life with meaning... And what a magnificent meaning!

Most of us would not ask for whom that particular bell, rung by Kafka’s burrow builder, tolls; they would follow the advice composed by John Donne half-millennium ago (with the death-knell bells in mind): “Never send to know for whom the bell tolls: it tolls for thee...” We all know, after all, the burrow-builder’s feelings from autopsy - even if, lacking Kafka’s power of intuition, imagination and prophetic insight, we would fail to clearly articulate what we feel, stopping well short from comprehending the roots of our own anxiety, let alone sharing what we discerned and understood with others around us. We know that once we’d installed high-tech cutting-edge alarms on every door and window of our homes, we’ve ceased being capable of falling asleep with the alarms off, and can no longer sleep quietly through the night - fearing that the electricity might be cut, a fuse may burn, or an accidental mechanical failure may put the alarms off, and so some awesome, menacing strangers, now kept safely away but eagerly awaiting such eventualities, would promptly burst into our bedrooms...

Strangers provide an outlet convenient (because close most of the time, easy to be found and reached) for unloading our fears of the unknown, uncertain and unpredictable.

In chasing strangers away from our homes and streets, the frightening ghost of uncertainty is admittedly, even if only for a moment, exorcised: the horrifying spectre of insecurity is burnt in a fleshy, palpable effigy. And yet, despite repeated exorcisms, our liquid-modern life remains stubbornly uncertain, erratic and capricious; relief tends to be short-lived, and hopes we’ve attached to the toughest of measures tend to be dashed as soon as they are raised...

The stranger is, by definition, an agent moved by intentions which at best can be guessed - but of which we can never be sure. In all equations we compose when deliberating what to do and how to behave, the stranger is an *unknown* variable. Stranger is, after all, as his name reminds us, ‘strange’: a bizarre being, whose motives and reactions may be, for all we know and suspect, thoroughly different from those of the ordinary (common, *familiar*) folks. And so, even when not behaving aggressively and not consciously, explicitly resented, strangers are discomforting: their sheer presence makes a tall order of the already daunting task of predicting the effects of our action and its chances of success. And yet the sharing of space with strangers, living permanently in the (uninvited as a rule, and unwelcome) proximity of strangers, is the condition that all city-dwellers among us find difficult, perhaps impossible to escape. By definition, cities are sites where strangers live constantly side by side without stopping being strangers to each other...

As the proximity of strangers is the urban residents’ non-negotiable fate, some *modus vivendi* promising to make cohabitation palatable, and life liveable, is a *necessity*: it needs indeed be designed, tried and tested. The way in which we go about gratifying this need is however a matter of *choice*. And choices we make, daily - whether by commission or by omission, by design or by default; by conscious decision or just by following, placidly and mechanically, the customary patterns; by wide-ranging discussion and deliberation, or just through following the trust-

► ⁸ Richard Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life*, Faber & Faber 1996, p. 39, 42.

ted, because currently fashionable, widely used means. One of possible choices is, though, opting out from the search of *modus co-vivendi*...

A prominent instance of that latter choice is the phenomenon of 'mixophobia'. Amidst the urban sea of variety and difference it manifests itself in a drive towards separation and fencing off upon islands of similarity and sameness. The reasons for mixophobia are banal - easy to understand, if not necessarily easy to forgive. As Richard Sennett suggests⁸, "the 'we' feeling, which expresses a desire to be similar, is a way for men to avoid the necessity of looking deeper into each other". It promises thereby a degree of spiritual comfort: the prospect of making togetherness easier - by making the efforts to understand, negotiate, and to compromise needless and uncalled-for. "Innate to the process of forming a coherent image of community is the desire to avoid actual participation. Feeling common bonds without common experience occurs in the first place because men are afraid of participation, afraid of the dangers and the challenges of it, afraid of its pain". The drive towards a 'community of similarity' is a sign of withdrawal not just from the 'otherness' outside, but also from the commitment to the lively yet turbulent, engaged yet cumbersome interaction inside the coveted shelter.

Choosing the escape option prompted by mixophobia has an insidious and deleterious consequence of its own: the more meticulously and steadfastly that strategy is followed, the more it is ineffective. The longer is the time which people spend in the exclusive company of others 'like them', with whom they manage to 'socialise' perfunctorily and matter-of-factly without risk of miscomprehension and without the onerous need to translate between distinct universes of meaning - the more they are likely to 'de-learn' the art of dialogue, of the negotiation of a shared meanings and a *modus co-vivendi*. As they've forgotten the skills needed to live with difference, or neglected to acquire them in the first place - they view the prospect of confronting the strangers face-to-face with rising apprehension. Strangers tend to appear ever more frightening as

they become increasingly alien, un-familiar and incomprehensible, and as the mutual communication which could eventually assimilate their 'otherness' to one's own life-world fades, or never takes off in the first place. The drive to a homogeneous, territorially isolated environment may be triggered by mixophobia; but practicing territorial separation is that mixophobia's life-belt and food purveyor.

The trend started in the US, but leaked into Europe and have by now spilt over most European countries: the tendency of the better-off urban dwellers to buy themselves out of the crowded city streets on which everything may happen but few if any happenings can be predicted, and into 'gated communities': the walled-off developments with strictly selective entry, surrounded by armed guards and stuffed with closed-circuit TV and anti-intruder alarms. Those lucky who bought themselves into a closely guarded 'gated community' pay an arm and leg for 'security services': that is, for the banishment of all mixing. In their ideal if not explicitly stated rendition, gated 'communities' would be but heaps of little private cocoons suspended in a spatial void. Inside 'gated communities' the streets are most of the time empty. If someone who 'does not belong', a stranger, appears on the sidewalk, he or she will be therefore promptly spotted - before a mischief or a damage could be done.

As a matter of fact, anybody you can see walking past your windows or front door can fall into the category of strangers, those frightening people of which you can't be sure what their intentions are and what they will do next. Everybody may be, unknowingly to you, a prowler or a stalker: an intruder with ill intentions. We live, after all, in the times of mobile telephones (not to mention MySpace, Facebook or Twitter): friends can exchange messages instead of visits, all people we know are constantly 'on line' and able to inform us in advance of their intention to pop in; a sudden, unannounced knock to the door or ringing of bell is therefore an extraordinary event and heard as a signal of potential danger... Inside the 'gated community', streets are kept empty - to render an entry of a *stranger*, or someone

behaving like a stranger, too risky for him to be tried.

To cut the long story short: the term ‘gated *community*’ is, ultimately, a misnomer. As we read in the 2003 research report published by the University of Glasgow, there is “no apparent desire to come into contact with the ‘community’ in the gated and walled area... Sense of community is lower in gated ‘communities’.” However they (and the estate agents) may justify their choices, they do not pay exorbitant rental or purchase prices in order to find themselves a ‘community’ (that is, in our terms, a universe of mutual ethical duties) – that notoriously intrusive and obtrusive, watchful and alert ‘collective busybody’, opening its arms to you only to hold you down as in steely forceps. Even if they say (and sometimes believe) otherwise, people pay all that money in order to *liberate* themselves from company and to emancipate themselves of inalienable ethical duties: to be *left alone*. Inside the walls and the gate, live loners: people who would only tolerate such ‘community’ as they fancy at the moment and only in the moment they fancy it...

A large majority of researchers agree that the main motive prompting people to lock themselves inside the walls and CCTV of a ‘gated community’ is - whether consciously or subconsciously, explicitly or tacitly - their desire to keep the wolf from the door, which they translate as keeping strangers at arm’s length... Strangers are dangers, and so every stranger is a portent of danger. Or so at least they believe. And what they wish more than anything else is to be secure from dangers. More exactly, though, to be secure from the daunting, harrowing, incapacitating *fear* of insecurity. They hope that the walls would protect them from that fear.

The snag, however, is that there are many reasons to feel insecure. Whether credible or fanciful, the rumours of rising crime and of throngs of burglars or sexual predators lying in ambush and waiting for an occasion to strike produce just one reason among those many. After all, we feel insecure because our jobs, and so our incomes, social standing and di-

gnity, are under threat. We are not insured against the threat of being made redundant, excluded and evicted, losing the position we cherish and believe to have earned to be ours forever. Nor the partnerships we cherish are foolproof and secure: all too often we may feel subterranean tremors and expect earthquakes. The familiar cosy neighbourhood may be threatened by being run down in order to clear the site for new developments. All in all, it would be downright silly to hope that all those well- or ill-founded anxieties could be placated and put to rest once we’ve surrounded ourselves with walls, armed guards and TV cameras.

But what about that (ostensibly) prime reason to opt for a ‘gated community’ – our fear of bodily harm or damage to our property, of physical assault, violence, burglary, car theft, obtrusive beggars? Won’t we at least put paid to *that* kind of fears? Alas, even on that front-line the gains hardly justify the losses. As signalled by the most acute observers of contemporary urban life, the likelihood of being assaulted or robbed may fall once behind the walls (though research conducted recently in California, perhaps the main stronghold of the ‘gated community’ obsession, found no difference between the gated and non-gated spaces) - the persistence of fear, however, would not. Anna Minton, the author of a thorough study of ‘Ground Control: Fear and Happiness in the Twenty-First-Century City’ (Penguin 2009), tells the case of Monica, who “spent the whole night lying awake and far more scared than she had ever been in the twenty years she had lived on an ordinary street” when “one night the electronically controlled gates went wrong and had to be propped open”. Behind the walls, anxiety grows, instead of dissipating – and so does the dependence of the residents’ state of mind on the ‘new an improved’ high-tech gadgets, marketed on the promise to keep the dangers, and the fear of dangers, out of court. The more gadgets one’s surrounded oneself with, the greater is the fear that at least some of them may ‘get wrong’. And the more time one worries about the menace lurking in every stranger, and the less time one spends in the company of strangers - the further one’s “tole-

rance and appreciation for the unexpected recedes” and the less one is able to confront, handle, enjoy and appreciate the liveliness, variety and vigour of urban life. Locking oneself in a gated community in order to chase fears away, is like draining water out of the pool to make sure that the children learn to swim in complete safety...

To sum up: perhaps the most pernicious, seminal and long-term effect of security obsession (the ‘collateral damage’ perpetrated by it) is the sapping of mutual trust and the sowing/breeding of mutual suspicion... With the lack of trust borderlines are drawn, and with suspicion they are fortified with mutual prejudices and recycled into frontlines. The deficit of trust leads inevitably to the wilting of communication; in the avoidance of communication, and the absence of interest in its renewal, the ‘strangeness’ of strangers is bound to deepen and acquire ever darker and more sinister tones, which in turn yet more radically disqualifies them as potential partner of dialogue and negotiation of mutually safe and agreeable modus of cohabitation. Treatment of strangers as the ‘security problem’ pure and simple stands behind one of the cases of the veritable ‘perpetuum mobile’ among patterns of human interaction. Mistrust of strangers and the tendency to stereotype them all, or their selected categories, as a delayed-action bombs bound to explode, grow in intensity out of their own logic and momentum, needing no further proofs of their propriety and no additional stimuli from the inimical acts of the targeted adversary (they rather themselves produce such proofs and stimuli in profusion). All in all, the major effect of securitarian obsession is the fast *growth* instead of shrinking of the mood of insecurity with all its accoutrements such as fear, anxiety, hostility, aggressiveness and fading or silencing of moral impulses.

All that does not mean that security and ethics are irreconcilable and bound to remain such. It only signals the pitfalls bound to be scattered by securitarian obsession on the road leading towards peaceful and mutually profitable, safe cohabitation (and indeed cooperation) of ethnicities, denominations and cultures in our globalized world of diasporas.

Alas, though with the sharpening and entrenching of human differences in almost every contemporary human settlement and every neighbourhood, a well-disposed and respectful dialogue between diasporas becomes more than ever important, indeed crucial condition of our shared planetary survival – it also, for reasons which I tried to list above, more difficult to attain and defend against present and future odds. Being difficult, however, means only one thing: the need for a lot of good will, dedication, readiness for compromise, mutual respect and shared distaste for any form of human humiliation; and, of course, firm determination to restore the lost balance between the value of security and that of ethical propriety. With all such conditions met, and only once they are all met, it is the dialogue and agreement (Hans Gadamer’s ‘fusion of horizons’) that might (just might) in their turn become the new ‘perpetuum mobile’ dominant among the patterns of human cohabitation. Of that transformation, there will be no victims - only beneficiaries.

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