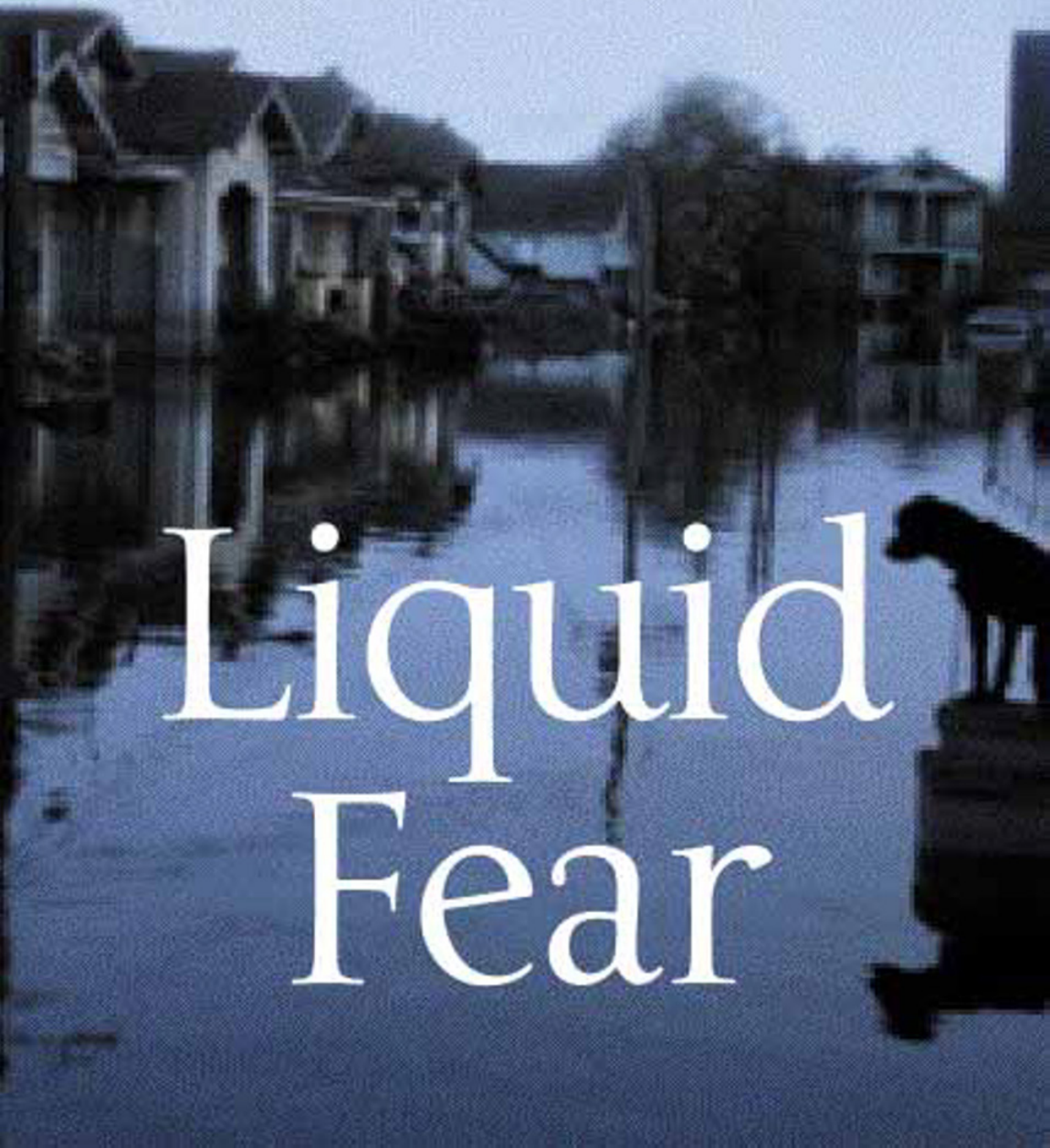
ZYGMUNT BAUMAN



Liquid Fear

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Let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.
Franklin Delano Roosevelt, *Inaugural Address*, 1933

Bizarre, yet quite common and familiar to all of us, is the relief we feel, and the sudden influx of energy, and courage, when after a long time of uneasiness, anxiety, dark premonitions, days full of apprehension and sleepless nights, we finally confront the real danger: a menace we can see and touch. Or perhaps this experience is not as bizarre as it seems if, at long last, we come to know what was standing behind that vague but obstinate feeling of something awful and bound to happen which kept poisoning the days we should be enjoying, yet somehow could not – and which made our nights sleepless . . . Now that we know where the blow is coming from, we know also what, if anything, we can do to repel it – or at least we've learned just how limited our ability is to emerge unharmed and what kind of loss, or injury, or pain we have to accept.

We have all heard stories about cowards who turned into fearless fighters when they were faced with a 'real danger'; when the disaster they had been expecting day in, day out, but had tried in vain to imagine, finally struck. Fear is at its most fearsome when it is diffuse, scattered, unclear, unattached, unanchored, free floating, with no clear address or cause; when it haunts us with no visible rhyme or reason, when the menace we should be afraid of can be glimpsed everywhere but is nowhere to be seen. 'Fear' is the name we give to our *uncertainty*: to our *ignorance* of the threat and of what is to be *done* – what can and what can't be – to stop it in its tracks – or to fight it back if stopping it is beyond our power.

The experience of living in sixteenth-century Europe – the time and the place when and where our modern era was about to be born – was crisply, and famously, summed up by Lucien Febvre in just four words: 'Peur toujours, peur partout' ('fear always and everywhere').[1] Febvre connected that ubiquitousness of fear to darkness, which started just on the other side of the hut door and wrapped the world beyond the farm fence; in the darkness anything may happen, but there is no telling what will. Darkness is not the cause of danger, but it is the natural habitat of uncertainty – and so of fear.

Modernity was to be the great leap forward: away from that fear and into a world free of blind and impermeable fate – that greenhouse of fears. As Victor Hugo ruminated,[2] wistfully and waxing lyrical on occasion: ushered in by science ('the political tribune will be transformed into a scientific one'), a time will come of an end to surprises, calamities, catastrophes – but also of an end to disputes, illusions, parasitisms . . . In other worlds, a time free of all that stuff of which fears are made. What was to be a route of escape, however, proved instead to be a long detour. Five centuries later, to us standing at the other end of the huge graveyard of dashed hopes, Febvre's verdict sounds – again – remarkably apt and topical. Ours is, again, a time of fears.

Fear is a feeling known to every living creature. Humans share that experience with the animals. Students of animal behaviour have described in great detail the rich repertoire of animal responses to the immediate presence of a menace threatening their life – which all, as in the case of humans facing a threat, veer

between the alternatives of escape and aggression. Humans, however, know in addition something else: a sort of 'second degree' fear, a fear, so to speak, socially and culturally 'recycled', or (as Hugues Lagrange in his fundamental study of fear calls it)[3] a 'derivative fear' that guides their behaviour (having first reformed their perception of the world and the expectations guiding their behavioural choices) whether or not a menace is immediately present. Secondary fear may be seen as a sediment of a past experience of facing the menace point blank – a sediment that outlives the encounter and becomes an important factor in shaping human conduct even if there is no longer a direct threat to life or integrity.

'Derivative fear' is a steady frame of mind that is best described as the sentiment of being *susceptible* to danger; a feeling of insecurity (the world is full of dangers that may strike at any time with little or no warning) and vulnerability (in the event of the danger striking, there will be little if any chance of escape or successful defence; the assumption of vulnerability to dangers depends more on a lack of trust in the defences available than on the volume or nature of actual threats). A person who has interiorized such a vision of the world that includes insecurity and vulnerability will routinely, even in the absence of a genuine threat, resort to the responses proper to a point-blank meeting with danger; 'derivative fear' acquires a self-propelling capacity.

It has been, for instance, widely noted that the opinion that the 'world out there' is dangerous and better to be avoided is more common among people who seldom, if ever, go out in the evenings, when the dangers seem to them most terrifying; and there is no way of knowing whether such people avoid leaving their homes because of their sense of danger, or whether they are afraid of the unspoken dangers lurking in dark streets because, in the absence of practice, they have lost the confidence-giving ability to cope with the presence of a threat, or because, lacking direct personal experiences of threat, they are prone to let their imaginations, already afflicted by fear, run loose.

Dangers one is afraid of (and so also the derivative fears they arouse) may be of three kinds. Some threaten the body and the possessions. Some others are of a more general nature, threatening the durability and reliability of the social order on which security of livelihood (income, employment), or survival in the case of

invalidity or old age, depend. Then there are dangers that threaten one's place in the world – a position in the social hierarchy, identity (class, gender, ethnic, religious), and more generally an immunity to social degradation and exclusion. Numerous studies show, however, that 'derivative fear' is easily 'decoupled' in the sufferers' awareness from the dangers that cause it. People it afflicts with the sentiment of insecurity and vulnerability may interpret a derivative fear by reference to any of the three types of dangers – independently of (and often in defiance of) the evidence of their relative contributions and responsibility. The resulting defensive or aggressive reactions aimed at mitigating the fear may be therefore targeted away from the dangers truly responsible for the presumption of insecurity.

For instance, the state, having founded its *raison d'être* and its claim to citizens' obedience on the promise to protect its subjects against threats to their existence, but no longer able to deliver on its promise (particularly the promise of defence against the second and third types of danger) – or able responsibly to reaffirm it in view of the fast globalizing and increasingly extraterritorial markets – is obliged to shift the emphasis of 'fear protection' from dangers to social security to the dangers to personal safety. It then 'subsidiarizes' the battle against fears 'down' to the realm of individually run and managed 'life politics', while simultaneously contracting out the supply of battle weapons to the consumer markets.

Most fearsome is the ubiquity of fears; they may leak out of any nook or cranny of our homes and our planet. From dark streets and from brightly lit television screens. From our bedrooms and our kitchens. From our workplaces and from the underground train we take to get there or back. From people we meet and people whom we failed to notice. From something we ingested and something with which our bodies came in touch. From what we call 'nature' (prone, as hardly ever before in our memory, to devastate our homes and workplaces and threatening to destroy our bodies through the proliferation of earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, mudslides, droughts or heat waves), or from other people (prone, as hardly ever before in our memory, to devastate our homes and workplaces and threatening to destroy our bodies through the sudden abundance of terrorist atrocities, violent

crime, sexual assaults, poisonous food and polluted air or water).

There is also that third, perhaps the most terrifying, zone, a sense-numbing and mind-chafing grey zone, as yet unnamed, from which ever more dense and sinister fears seep, threatening to destroy our homes, workplaces and bodies through disasters – natural but not quite, human but not completely, natural and human at the same time though unlike either of them. The zone of which some over-ambitious yet hapless accident-and-calamity-prone sorcerer's apprentice, or a malicious genie imprudently let out of the bottle, must have taken charge. The zone where power grids go bust, petrol taps run dry, stock exchanges collapse, all-powerful companies disappear together with dozens of services one used to take for granted and thousands of jobs one used to believe to be rock-solid, where jets crash together with their thousand-and-one safety gadgets and hundreds of passengers, market caprices make worthless the most precious and coveted of assets, and any other imaginable or unimaginable catastrophes brew (or perhaps are brewed?) ready to overwhelm the prudent and the imprudent alike. Day in, day out we learn that the inventory of dangers is far from complete: new dangers are discovered and announced almost daily, and there is no knowing how many more of them and of what kind have managed to escape our (and the experts'!) attention – getting ready to strike without warning.

As Craig Brown notes, however, in his chronicle of the 1990s with that inimitable wit which is his trademark:

> everywhere, there was a rise in Global Warning. Every day, there were new Global Warnings about killer viruses, killer waves, killer drugs, killer icebergs, killer meat, killer vaccines, killer killers and other possible causes of imminent death. At first, these Global Warnings were frightening, but after a while people began to enjoy them.[4]

Indeed. Knowing that this is a fearsome world to live in does not mean living in fear – at least not twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week. We have more than enough shrewd stratagems which (if supported with all sorts of clever gadgets obligingly offered by the shops) can help us to avoid such a gruesome

eventuality. We can even come to *enjoy* the 'global warnings'. After all, living in a liquid modern world known to admit only one certainty – the certainty that tomorrow can't be, shouldn't be, won't be like it is today – means a daily rehearsal of disappearance, vanishing, effacement and dying; and so, obliquely, a rehearsal of the non-finality of death, of recurrent resurrections and perpetual reincarnations . . .

Like all other forms of human cohabitation, our liquid modern society is a contraption attempting to make life with fear liveable. In other words, a contraption meant to repress the potentially disarming and incapacitating dread of danger, to silence such fears as derive from dangers that can't be, or should not be for the sake of the preservation of social order, effectively prevented. As in the case of many other harrowing and potentially order-disrupting sentiments, this necessary job is done, as Thomas Mathiesen put it, through 'silent silencing' – in a process 'that is quiet rather than noisy, hidden rather than open, unnoticed rather than noticeable, unseen rather than seen, non-physical rather than physical'. 'Silent silencing'

> is structural; it is a part of our everyday life; it is unbounded and is therefore engraved upon us; it is noiseless and therefore passes by unnoticed; and it is dynamic in the sense that in our society it spreads and becomes continually more encompassing. The structural character of the silencing 'exempts' representatives of the state from responsibility for it, its everyday character makes it 'inescapable' from the point of view of those being silenced, its unbounded character makes it especially effective in relation to the individual, its noiseless character makes its easier to legitimise, and its dynamic character turns it into a mechanism of silencing which may be increasingly trusted.[5]

To start with, like everything else in liquid modern life, death is made temporary and until further notice. It lasts until another comeback of a long unremembered celebrity or long uncelebrated tune, until a round-figure anniversary excavation of another long-forgotten writer or painter, or until the arrival of another retro fashion. As bites become common, stings no longer are or feel mortal. This or that disappearance, if it occurs, will hopefully be as revocable as so many others before it have proved to be.

Moreover, many more blows keep being announced as imminent than there are blows that eventually strike, so you can always hope that this or that blow so recently announced will pass you by. Whose computer has been incapacitated by the sinister 'millennium bug'? How many people did you meet who fell victim to the carpet mites? How many of your friends died of mad-cow disease? How many of the people you know have been made ill or invalid by genetically engineered food? Which of your neighbours and acquaintances has been assaulted and maimed by the treacherous and sinister asylum-seekers? Panics come and go, and however frightful they are, you may safely presume that they will share the fate of all the others.

Liquid life flows or plods from one challenge to another and from one episode to another, and the familiar habit of challenges and episodes is that they tend to be short-lived. You may assume as much of the life expectation of the fears currently gripping expectations. What is more, so many fears enter your life complete with the remedies of which you often hear before you have had time to be frightened by the ills which these remedies promise to remedy. The danger of the millennium bug was not the only horrifying news brought to you by the self-same companies which had already offered to make your computer, at a proper price, immune. Catherine Bennett, for instance, laid bare the plot behind the package deal in the case of a 'starter hit' for an expensive therapy which warns that 'the wrong foods are responsible for rapid, premature aging; a tired, drawn and doughy complexion . . . wrinkled, leathery, dried-out looking facial skin . . .' – only to reassure its prospective clients that 'being wrinkle-free for life is achievable if you follow the 28-day programme' – at the cost of a mere 119 pounds sterling.[6]

What the millennium bug affair demonstrated and what Bennett discovered in the case of one miracle fear-defying cosmetic device may be seen as a pattern for infinite numbers of others. The consumer economy depends on the production of consumers, and the consumers that need to be produced for fear-fighting products are fearful and frightened consumers, hopeful that the dangers they fear can be forced to retreat and that they can do it (with paid help, for sure).

This life of ours has proved to be different from the kind of life which the sages of the Enlightenment and their heirs and disciples

envisaged and set out to design. In the new life which they adumbrated and resolved to create, it was hoped that the feat of taming fears and bridling the menaces that caused them would be a one-off affair. In the liquid modern setting, however, the struggle against fears has turned out to be a lifelong task, while fear-triggering dangers, even when none of them is suspected to be *intractable*, have come to be believed to be permanent, *undetachable* companions of human life. Our life is anything but fear-free, and the liquid modern setting in which it is bound to be conducted is anything but free of dangers and threats. A *whole life* is now a long and probably unwinnable struggle against the potentially incapacitating impact of fears, and against the genuine or putative dangers that make us fearful. It is best seen as a continuous search for, and perpetual testing of, stratagems and expedients allowing us to stave off, even if temporarily, the imminence of dangers – or better yet to shift the worry about them onto a side burner where they might, hopefully, fizzle out or stay forgotten for the duration. Our inventiveness knows no bounds. The stratagems are plentiful; the more profuse they are the more ineffective and the more inconclusive their effects. Though, with all the differences that set them apart, they have one precept in common: cheat time and beat it at its own game. Delay *frustration*, not *gratification*.

The future is foggy? One more sound reason not to let it haunt you. Dangers unknowable? One more sound reason to put them aside. So far, so good; it could be worse. Keep it like this. Don't start worrying about crossing that bridge before you come to it. Perhaps you'll never come near it, or the bridge will fall to pieces or move elsewhere before you do. So – why worry now?! Better to follow the age-old recipe: *carpe diem*. To put it simply: enjoy now, pay later. Or, prompted by a newer version of that ancient wisdom, updated courtesy of credit card companies: take the waiting out of wanting.

We live on credit: no past generation was as heavily in debt as we are – individually and collectively (the task of state budgets used to be to balance the books; nowadays, 'good budgets' are those that keep the excess of spending over income at the last year's level). Living on credit has its utilitarian pleasures: why delay the gratification? Why wait, if you can relish future bliss here and now? Admittedly, the future is beyond control. But the credit card, magically, brings that vexingly elusive future straight into your lap.

You may consume the future, so to speak, in advance – while there is still something left to be consumed . . . This seems to be the latent attraction of living-on-credit, whose manifest benefit, if you believe the commercials, is purely utilitarian: giving pleasure. And if the future is designed to be as nasty as you suspect it may be, you can consume it now, still fresh and unspoiled, before the disaster strikes and before that future has the chance to show you just how nasty that disaster might be. (This is, to think of it, what the cannibals of yore did, finding in eating their enemies up the surest way of putting paid to the threats those enemies carried: a consumed, digested and excreted enemy was no longer frightening. Though, alas, all the enemies can't be eaten. As more of them are devoured, their ranks seem to swell instead of shrinking.)

Media are messages. Credit cards are also messages. If savings books imply certainty of the future, an uncertain future cries out for credit cards.

Savings books grow out of, and feed on, a future one can trust – a future certain to arrive and, once it has arrived, to be not so dissimilar from the present. A future expected to value what we value – and so to respect past savings and reward their holders. Savings books thrive as well on the hope/expectation/confidence that – thanks to the *continuity* between now and 'then' – what is being done right now, in the present, will pre-empt the 'then', tying up the future before it arrives; what we do *now* will 'make the difference', *determine* the shape of the future.

Credit cards and the debts which credit cards make easy would frighten off the meek and disturb even the adventurous among us. If they don't, it is thanks to our suspicion of *discontinuity*: our premonition that the future that will arrive (*if* it arrives, and if I will still be there to witness its arrival) will be different from the present we know – though there is no knowing in what respect it will differ and how far. Will it, years from now, honour the sacrifices done presently in its name? Will it reward the efforts invested in securing its benevolence? Or perhaps it will on the contrary make today's assets into tomorrow's liabilities and precious loads into vexing burdens? That we don't know and can't know, and there is little point in striving to bind the unknowable.

Some bridges which we tarry in starting to worry about, but which will eventually need to be crossed, are not, however, far

enough away for the worry about crossing them to be lightheartedly postponed . . . Not all dangers seem remote enough to be dismissed as no more than fanciful figments of a feverish imagination, or at any rate irrelevant to what has been placed next on our agenda. Fortunately, however, we also have a way to bypass those hurdles that have come too close for comfort and can no longer be neglected: we can think of them, and we do, as 'risks'.

We then admit that the next step to take is 'risky' (may prove to be unacceptably costly, bring closer old dangers or provoke new ones), as all steps tend to be. There is a possibility that we won't get what we want and get instead something quite different and utterly unpleasant, something which we would rather avoid (we call such unpalatable and undesirable consequences 'side-effects', or 'collateral damage', since they are not intended and are located away from the target of our action). We also admit that they can come 'unanticipated', and that notwithstanding all our calculations they may take us by surprise and catch us unprepared. All that having been thought of, pondered and said, we proceed nevertheless (for lack of a better choice) *as if* we *could* anticipate which undesirable consequences require our attention and vigilance and then monitor our steps accordingly. No wonder: it is only about the consequences which we *can* predict that we can worry, and it is only those same consequences that we can struggle to escape. And so it is only the undesirable consequences of such a 'pre-visible' kind that we file in the category of 'risks'. Risks are the dangers whose probability we *can* (or believe that we can) calculate: risks are the *calculable* dangers. Once so defined, risks are the next best thing to (alas unattainable) certainty.

Let's note however that 'calculability' does not mean predictability; what is being calculated is only the *probability* that things go wrong and disaster strikes. Calculations of probability say something reliable about the spread of effects of a large number of similar actions, but are almost worthless as a means of prediction when they are (rather illegitimately) used as a guide for one specific undertaking. Probability, even most earnestly calculated, offers no certainty that the dangers will or will not be avoided in *this* particular case here and now or *that* case there and then. But at least the very fact that we have done our computation of probabilities (and so, by implication, have avoided rash decisions and the charge of recklessness) can give us the courage to decide

whether the game is or is not worth the candle, and offer a measure of reassurance, however unwarranted. Getting the probabilities right, we have done something reasonable and perhaps even helpful; now we 'have reason' to consider the probability of bad luck too high to justify the risky measure, or too low to stop us taking our chances.

More often than not, however, switching attention from dangers to risks proves to be another subterfuge; an attempt to evade the problem rather than a passport for safe conduct. As Milan Kundera pointed out in his *Les Testaments trahis*,[7] the setting of our lives is wrapped in fog, not in total darkness, in which we would see nothing and be unable to move: 'in the fog one is free, but this is a freedom of someone in the fog', we can see a thirty or fifty yards ahead, we can admire the beautiful trees alongside the road we walk, note the passers-by and react to their gambits, avoid bumping into others and bypass the boulder or a hole in front – but we can hardly see the crossing further ahead or the car still a few hundred yards away but coming at high speed in our direction. We may say that true to such 'living in fog' our 'certainty' targets and focuses our precautional efforts on the visible, known and near dangers, dangers that *can* be anticipated and *can* have their probability computed – whereas by far the most awesome and fearsome dangers are precisely those that are *impossible*, or excruciatingly *difficult*, to anticipate: the *un*predicted, and in all likelihood *unpredictable* ones.

Busy calculating the risks, we tend to sideline that greater worry and so manage to keep such catastrophes as we are impotent to prevent away from sapping our self-confidence. Focusing on things we can do something about, we are left with no time to occupy ourselves with reflecting on things about which we can't do anything anyway. This helps us to defend our sanity. This keeps nightmares, and insomnia, at a distance. This does not necessarily make us more secure, though.

Nor does it make the dangers less realistic. Our guess/intuition/suspicion/premonition/conviction/certainty that this is so may take a nap, but it can't be put to sleep forever. Time and again, and recently on a visibly accelerating rate, dangers keep reminding us just how realistic they remain in spite of all the precautionary measures we have taken. On intermittent but quite regular occasions they are excavated from their shallow grave where they have

been buried just a few inches below the surface of our awareness, and are brutally cast into the limelight of our attention; obligingly, successive catastrophes proffer such occasions – in profusion.

Several years ago, and a few years before the events of 9/11 the tsunami, Hurricane Katrina and the terrifying leap in petrol prices that followed them (even if mercifully short-lived this time round) supplied such shocking occasions to wake up and sober up, Jacques Attali pondered the phenomenal financial triumph of the film *Titanic*, which outstripped all previous box-office records of apparently similar disaster movies. He offered then the following explanation, strikingly credible when it was written down, but a few years later sounding not short of prophetic:

> *Titanic* is us, our triumphalist, self-congratulating, blind, hypocritical society, merciless towards its poor – a society in which everything is predicted except the means of predicting . . . (W)e all guess that there is an iceberg waiting for us, hidden somewhere in the misty future, which we will hit and then go down to the sounds of music . . .[8]

Sweet music as it were, soothing yet exhilarating. Live music, real-time music. Latest hits, top celebrity performers. Reverberating sounds that deafen, blinking stroboscopic lights that blind. Making the faint whispers of forebodings inaudible, and the enormity of majestically silent icebergs invisible.

Yes, *icebergs* – not one iceberg, but many, probably too many to count them all. Attali named several: financial, nuclear, ecological, social (unpacking the latter as the prospect of 3 billion 'redundancies' in the planet's population). Were he writing now, in 2005, he would surely lengthen the list – reserving pride of place for either the 'terrorist iceberg' or the 'religious fundamentalism iceberg'. Or, and perhaps most probably, the 'implosion of civilization' iceberg – one that could be recently watched, in the aftermath of Middle Eastern military adventures or Katrina's visit to New Orleans, in a sort of dress rehearsal, and in all its ugly, gruesome monstrosity.

*Im*plosion, not *ex*plosion, so different in shape from the one in which the fears of the 'collapse of the civilized order' – fears that had accompanied our ancestors at least from the time that Hobbes proclaimed *bellum omnium contra omnes*, war of all against all,