



this is not a diary.

ZYGMUNT BAUMAN

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Zygmunt Bauman

polity

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First published in 2012 by Polity Press

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-5569-7

ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-5570-3(pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 11 on 13 pt Sabon
by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited
Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Group Limited, Bodmin, Cornwall

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September 2010

3 September 2010

On the sense and senselessness of diary-keeping

I confess: as I am starting to write (it is 5 a.m.), I haven't the slightest idea what, if anything, will follow, how long it will go on and how long I'll need, feel the urge and wish to keep it going. And the intention, let alone a purpose, is anything but clear. The question 'what for' can hardly be answered. At the moment when I sat down at the computer, there was no new burning issue waiting to be chewed over and digested, no new book to be written or old stuff to be revised, recycled or updated, no new interviewer's curiosity to be satiated, no new lecture to be sketched out in writing before being spoken – no request, commission or deadline...In short, there was neither a frame nailed together waiting to be filled, nor a plateful of podgy stuff in search of a mould and a form.

I guess the question 'because of what' is more in order in this case than the question 'what for'. Causes to write are abundant, a crowd of volunteers line up to be noted, picked and chosen. The decision to start writing is, so to speak, 'overdetermined'.

To begin with, I've failed to learn any other form of life except writing. A day without scribbling feels like a day wasted or criminally aborted, a duty neglected, a calling betrayed.

To go on, the game of words is for me the most heavenly of pleasures. I enjoy that game enormously – and the enjoyment reaches its peak when, after another reshuffle of the cards, the hand I get happens to be poor and I need to strain my brains and struggle hard to make up for the blanks and bypass the traps. Forget the destination; it is being on the move, and jumping over or kicking away the hurdles, that gives life its flavour.

Another cause: I seem unable to think without writing...I suppose I am a reader first and writer second – scraps, snippets, bits and pieces of thoughts struggling to be born, their ghostly/ghastly spectres whirling, piling up, condensing and dissipating again, need to be caught by the eyes first, before they can be stopped, held in place and given contours. They must first be written down in a row for the tolerably rounded thought to be born; or, failing that, to be aborted or buried as stillborn.

In addition, while adoring solitude, I abhor loneliness. After Janina's departure I've reached the darkest bottom of loneliness (if there is a bottom to loneliness), where its bitter and most pungent sediments and its most toxic effluvia gather. Since Janina's face is the first image I see when switching on my desktop, the rest that follows the opening of Microsoft Word is nothing if not a dialogue. And dialogue makes an impossibility of loneliness.

Last, though not least, I suspect I am a natural or nurtured graphomaniac...an addict, needing another daily dose, or risking agonies of withdrawal. *Ich kann nicht anders*. And this, probably, is the underlying reason, one that makes the search for reasons as desperate and inconclusive as it is inescapable.

As to yet other reasons and causes, they can't be really counted, and for all I know their number will keep growing daily. Among those that figure most prominently at the moment is the gathering feeling that I am overstaying my welcome, that I have done already what my immoderately moderate capacities entitled or obliged me to, and that the time has therefore arrived to apply to myself Wittgenstein's recommendation to keep silent about things I can't speak of or about (I would add, things I can't speak of or about *responsibly*, that is with a bona fide conviction of having something useful to offer). And things I can't speak about are increasingly those things that are nowadays the most worth speaking about. My curiosity refuses to retire, but my capacity to satisfy it or at least placate and alleviate it cannot be either cajoled or per-

suaded to stay. Things flow too fast to allow room for the hope of catching them in flight. This is why a new topic for scrutiny, a new theme for a full-length study hoping to do justice to its object, is no longer on my cards. And not for a dearth of knowledge available for consumption – but because of its excess, defying all attempts at absorbing and digesting it.

Perhaps this unfeasibility of absorption is an outcome of ageing and of fading strength – a fully or mostly physical and biological matter, rooted ultimately in the changing condition of my own body and psyche (a plausible guess, made still more credible by the impression that the resources needed to obtain and process new information, supplied in my younger years in the form, so to speak, of a limited number of banknotes of large denominations, are now on offer in huge heaps of copper coins, tremendously high in bulk and heaviness, yet abominably low in purchasing power – which makes them, to borrow Günther Anders's expression, 'overliminal' for an aged body and easily tiring psyche). Our time excels in pulverizing everything, but nothing as thoroughly as the world image: that image has become as pointillist as the image of the time that presides over its fraying and grinding.

I gather that at long last the fragmented world has caught up with the painters of its likenesses. An old Indian fable comes to mind, in which half a dozen people, having bumped into an elephant on their way, try to assess the nature of the strange object they have encountered. Five of them are blind, none of them able to reach far enough to touch and feel the elephant all over and tie together their scattered impressions into a vision of its totality; the only one who has his eyes wide open to see is, however, dumb... Or Einstein's warning that although a theory can, in principle, be proved by experiments, there is no path leading from experiments to the birth of a theory. That much Einstein must have known. What he did not and could not surmise was the advent of a world, and a way of living-in-the-world, composed only of experiments, with no theory to design them, no reliable advice on how to start them off, pursue them and evaluate their results...

What, after all, is the difference between living and reporting life? We can do worse than take a hint from José Saramago, my lately discovered fount of inspiration. On his own quasi-diary he reflects: 'I believe that all the words we speak, all the movements and gestures we make... can each and every one of them

be understood as stray pieces of unintended autobiography, which, however involuntary, perhaps precisely because it is involuntary, is no less sincere or truthful than the most detailed account of life put into writing and onto paper.’

Exactly.

4 September 2010

On the usefulness of fighting windmills

At the threshold of the third millennium, France, like most of the planet, was in the throes of uncertainty. The entry into the new era was appropriately preceded by what might have been (we would never know for sure) one of the most successful hoaxes in history: the ‘millennium bug’ affair, which cast thousands of serious, down-to-earth business corporations and governmental offices, as well as millions of their clients and subjects, into a state of alert aroused by the horrifying, well-nigh apocalyptic vision of the routines of Planet Earth stopping dead, of life on the planet grinding to a halt, at the moment of encounter between New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day. That end of the world having failed to arrive, the computer-service companies counted their blessings and summed up their profits, and the disaster that never struck was promptly forgotten, elbowed out of the endemically excitable and chronically agitated attention of the public by disasters that *did* strike, or were expected to hit at any moment; whereas the crumbling of public trust and the condensation of public uncertainties – the kinds of troubles the story of the ‘millennium bug’ symbolized – stood fast and refused to budge, let alone to bid farewell.

Perhaps the end of computerized civilization ‘as we knew it’ was not after all nigh, as was proclaimed on the outer edge of the preceding millennium, but the end of the happy-go-lucky years presaged by that proclamation may well have been. One by one, the habitual foundations of security trembled, cracked and fell apart, the prospects of steady jobs and incomes dimmed, once solid bonds and partnerships grew sickly and frail, many a lighthouse of allegedly unshakeable reliability collapsed or shook under the burden of its own corruptions or imploded together

with the confidence of beguiled and straying sailors. As for the governments expected to make the insecure secure again and put the disorderly in order, they responded with a staunch and blunt ‘there is no alternative’ answer to the complaints and protests of their increasingly confused and frightened subjects; that is, if they stooped to responding, instead of returning the ‘help me’ and ‘do something’ petitions with ‘wrong address’ or ‘addressee unknown’ rubber stamps...

Against the background of all such noises and silences, the words (and the televised shows that shortly followed them) of Nicolas Sarkozy, newly appointed as Minister of the Interior – French Home Secretary (in 2002) – sounded like a message overflowing with just the right meaning – the first such message for years. The appointment, coming so quickly after the beginning of what seemed to many to be a millennium, or a century at least, of uncertainty, appeared to open the door to a new governmental role and strategy, and to usher in the time of a ‘listening government’, a government following the example set by the banks that were tempting their prospective clients by assuring them that they ‘loved to say “yes”’. Sarkozy’s appointment promised the advent of times that would render powers-that-be trustworthy once again, and their subjects confident once more that they would not find themselves abandoned to their atrociously scarce resources in their desperate struggle to find firm ground under their feet.

Sarkozy’s message was threefold. First, the hothouse of the insecurity known to torment ordinary folks like you and me, that den of vice and gushing source of daytime horrors and nightmares, has been found, pinpointed and located: as a matter of fact, in the *banlieues*, the French wholesale name for rough districts and mean streets, populated by people of strange (read, not like ours) look and demeanour, and so probably strange (read, suspect) habits and intentions. Second, as the deepest roots of the adversities and inequities of Frenchmen’s fate have finally been mapped, we the people-in-power, powerful guys, can and will at long last ‘strike at the roots’ of evil – something we are indeed beginning already to do (as seen on TV). Third, what you’ve just seen on TV (the forces of law and order flexing their muscles and raiding the fortresses of crime at dawn in order to round up and incarcerate past, present and prospective criminals, those ultimate culprits of your harrowing days and sleepless nights) is just one example, but a

vivid one, of the government in action, determined from the start to end in victory. (Lest such optimism bewilders present readers, let me recall that it was the year 2002, a timing fortunate for the author of the message because, two or three years later, he could have added, to his subsequently yet greater shame, that the governmental actions were ‘bound to end in triumph just like the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are bound to’.) In short, what is said by the government is done by the government...or at least is already beginning to be done.

It is 2010 now. In the course of the passing years, that Home Secretary ran on his ‘death to insecurity’ ticket and was elected President of France (in 2007), moving from somewhat humbler premises on Place Beauvau to the dazzling splendours of the Élysée Palace. And now, eight years after the message first summoned Frenchmen and Frenchwomen to listen and take note, that identical triple message is being sent again, with the President’s passionate endorsement and blessing, by Brice Hortefeux, his successor at Place Beauvau. According to Denis Muzet, writing in today’s *Le Monde*, the replacement and heir of Nicolas Sarkozy followed point by point the 2002 feat of his boss and mentor, extending his own workday to twenty hours and using the impressively expanded time to show up and be seen ‘where the action is’. He personally supervised the dismantling of Roma camps, rounding up the evicted and sending them back to ‘where they came from’ (that is, back to their previous misery), calling in local prefects for reporting and briefing, or catching them unawares ‘in the field’ in order to admonish them and spur them into more action: into one more try, one more effort, one more Summer (Autumn, Winter, whatever) Offensive against the perpetrators and culprits of the misfortune of decent folks known by the name of ‘insecurity’; one more final drive to finish another war promised to end all wars. You are haunted by monsters? Let’s start by getting rid of windmills. This doesn’t stand to reason? Perhaps, but at least you know now that we don’t sit idly by. We do something – don’t we? As seen on TV!

The French warriors against insecurity-by-proxy are not alone in promising to burn insecurity out in the form of Roma and Sinti effigies. Their close ally is Il Cavaliere – The Cavalier – ruling neighbouring Italy. It so happens that today there is also a report by Elisabetta Povoledo, in the *New York Times*, from Italy, where Silvio Berlusconi’s government, with an eye on

the Roma, passed a decree in 2007 allowing it to expel citizens of the European Union after three months' stay in the country if they could be shown to lack the means to support themselves; following it in 2008 with another decree, granting the state authorities new powers to expel European Union citizens for reasons of public safety – if you are a threat to public safety, you may, should, and will be picked up and escorted to the nearest airport.

To profit from such brand-new wonder weapons in the war declared on insecurity, one needs first to make sure that the hated Gypsies do become, and above all are seen as, a paramount threat to public safety; just to make sure that the word of the powers-that-be becomes flesh indeed, and the forces of law and order do not flex their muscles in vain. Or, yet more to the point, to make one's prediction into a self-fulfilling prophecy: having foretold on *Good Morning TV* a forest fire, proceed right away to sprinkle trees with petrol and to strike matches, so that by the end of the day one's reliability and trustworthiness can be documented on *Newsnight*. 'When municipally authorized camps are built,' Povoledo reports, it is often on the outskirts of a city, segregated from the rest of the population, with living conditions well below standard. That allows governments 'to bypass the question of integration, a process that would include giving Roma permanent residences and access to schools'. Governments incite suspicion towards Roma on the ground of their nomadic inclinations, and then the same governments force Roma to stay nomadic despite their wish to settle, and try hard to force back into a nomadic life those who have already settled, willingly and quite a time ago – so that the original summary dismissal of the whole ethnic group as 'travellers' can after all be convincingly corroborated by statistics, those least debatable 'facts of the matter'. The Roma are resented as obtrusive beggars? Well, make sure they have no chance of 'decently' earning a living. And as to our forest-burning allegory,

temporary camps are a hazard. Last week in Rome, a three-year-old Roma boy was burned to death when a fire broke out in the hut he was living in with his family in an illegal camp near Fiumicino Airport. Afterward, the mayor of Rome, Gianni Alemanno [another politician elected on a 'war on insecurity' ticket], said the city would begin dismantling 200 illegal camps this month.

In a flash of prevision, shortly before being crowned Queen of the United Kingdom, young, simple-hearted and plain-speaking Victoria noted in her diary under the date of 28 December 1836: ‘whenever any poor Gypsies are encamped anywhere and crimes and robberies &c. occur, it is invariably laid to their account, which is shocking; and if they are always looked upon as vagabonds, how *can* they become good people?’

Marx said that history tends to happen twice: the first time as drama, the second time as farce. That rule came into action once more in the case of the two successive wars against insecurity declared by Sarkozy in the course of one decade. On the second of the two wars, Alain Touraine caustically observed that, in sharp distinction from the crowds who applauded the declaration of the first war, ‘no one believes that the Roma or Gypsies are responsible for our misfortunes’. Few indeed do, even though some still swallow the bait and delay spitting it out. But it was not in order to debate the causes of evil, or make the nation believe the official version, that this particular campaign of fear was launched. Touraine hits the bull’s eye when he observes that all that front-page headlines, hullabaloo and public excitement takes place ‘in a setting remote from the great catastrophes we live through’. The effects of politics Sarkozy-style are not to be measured by the number of minds converted to, or continuing to cling to blaming the Roma, but by the number of eyes diverted (even if only temporarily) away from what is truly relevant to people’s lives and their prospects – as well as away from assessing how far, if at all, the government of the country is acquitting itself in the duties which, as it claims, legitimize its prerogatives, its pretensions, and its very presence. If measured in this – proper – fashion, Sarkozy-style politics cannot be easily dismissed as a straightforward failure. Nor is it bankrupt – as vividly testified by the growing number of governments hurrying to concoct local imitations and put them into operation.

The eyes of the nation, you may comment, are unlikely to stay averted forever, so won’t the respite gained by rulers be short-lived? But what these days, forgive me asking, is long-lived? And how many suckers still believe in long terms and ultimate solutions? It will be quite enough, thank you, if the respite lasts long enough to allow the rulers to find another attraction equally likely to draw eyes to itself before they have a chance to turn to what

really *does* matter, to those things about which the rulers neither can nor want to do anything that matters.

There is also another collateral casualty of Sarkozy-style governance. Surprisingly, though not so very surprisingly, the additional casualty is the self-same value which such governance promised and continues to promise to promote and serve: the sentiments of safety and security, of being protected and insured against adverse fate. Frenchmen may now be more sceptical or even downright cynical about the effectiveness of the government's promises, and about the value of the videotaped and televised governmental undertakings, than they were at the beginning of the first of Sarkozy's wars; but it is sure that they are now more *frightened* than ever before. They have lost much of their past faith in the possibility of making their situation any better. They are beginning to believe that insecurity is here to stay, and that it is likely to turn into a normal human condition; and most certainly that state governments are not the sort of instrument which can be used to try to tinker with that particular verdict of nature, of history, or of human fate. Whether by design or by default, Sarkozy's warlike actions ploughed and fertilized the soil for lush fundamentalist and tribal crops... The soil so prepared is a temptation to adventurous conquistadores which few if any aspiring politicians will find easy to resist.

This kind of governance also needs *appointed* victims. In the events reported by Denis Muzet and Elisabetta Povoledo, such victims are, of course, the Roma and Sinti populations. But in the kind of politics increasingly à la mode, victims, whether appointed or 'collateral', are not just pawns in other people's games; in the games currently being staged they are also anonymous and expendable extras, easy to replace – supernumeraries whose demise or departure no players, and only a few spectators, are likely to notice and remember, let alone bewail and mourn.

5 September 2010

On virtual eternity

A bus from Tokyo disgorged a large group of youngsters on a beach at Atami, a little sea resort and a favourite weekend haunt

for the capital's seekers after erotic adventure; this is what we learn from today's edition of Yahoo! News. Buses arrive from Tokyo several times a day, so how come that one of them earned space in the widely read online news bulletin? This particular bus brought to Atami the first batch of the new Nintendo Love+ game players; this bus was a swallow announcing a long and profitable spring for Atami restaurateurs and hoteliers.

The youngsters who alighted from the bus, unlike other passengers, paid no attention to the scantily clad 'girls frolicking on the sand'. Clutching their smartphone cameras, armed with AR ('augmented reality') software, they hurried instead straight to the genuine objects of their desire, the *real thing*: the *virtual girlfriends*, enchanted in a little barcode glued to the plinth of a love couple's sculpture. The software fed into the boys' smartphones allowed them to 'disenchant' from the barcode the one and only girl of their virtual dreams, take her for a walk, entertain her, ingratiate themselves in her eyes and win her favours just by following the clear-cut, unambiguous rules spelled out in the interactive onscreen instructions – results guaranteed or your money back. They can even spend a hotel night together: kissing is allowed and encouraged, though sex alas is for the time being barred; there are still some limits which even the cutting edge technology is unable to cross. One can bet, however, that the technowizards will be able to break this limit, as with so many other limits in the past, by the time Love++ or Love2 is launched.

A serious technological website, dbtechno.com, convinced that technology exists in order to serve human needs and satisfy humans' demands, is impressed: 'Love+ is a new game devoted to the man who cannot handle having a real woman in their life and in the country of Japan it has taken off big time,' it says. As to the services rendered, it is hopeful: 'For the men out there who do not want to put up with a woman in their life, the virtual girlfriend may be the answer.'

Another 'need niche' yearning to be filled is spotted by cream-global.com: 'A generation who grew up with Tamagotchi' (alas, no longer in fashion and so out of the market) has developed a 'caring habit', indeed, a sort of addiction (to virtual) caring for (virtual) beings (virtually) alive – a habit which they are no longer able to satisfy because they don't possess the appropriate technogadgets to unload it. They need a new gizmo with which to

practise the contrived habit, and possibly in a manner yet more exciting and pleasurable (for a time). Thanks to Love+, however, the worry is over: 'To keep the girlfriend, the player must tap a stylus on the DS touch-screen where they can then walk hand-in-hand to school, exchange flirtations, text messages and even meet in the school courtyard for a little afternoon kiss. Through a built-in microphone, the player can even carry on sweet, albeit mundane, conversations.' Note: inserting 'albeit' does not necessarily signal regret; remember that Tamagotchi did not manage to make conversing, let alone non-mundane conversing, into a habit.

On ChicagoNow.com, Jenina Nunez wonders: 'In the era of dating and virtual reality, have we become so lonely (and given up on real, human love) that we're willing to court the image of the perfect companion?' And she hypothesizes in response to that question: 'I'm starting to think that Love+, which seems to eliminate a human companion from the equation entirely, is a clear example of how far people would go to avoid feeling lonely...' The surmise underpinning that answer – a guess which Jenina Nunez unfortunately neglected to make explicit and failed to develop – is right on target. Yes, the revolution that the latest Nintendo game portends, and the secret of its instant marketing success, is the elimination of a human companion *entirely* from the human relations game. While being rather in the style of non-alcoholic beer, fat-free butter or calorie-free food, it is something hitherto attempted only cravenly, surreptitiously, or in inept, primitive, cottage-industry style and manner in its application to what for techno-boffins and techno-traders is the supreme challenge and the nearest equivalent to a can of worms or a lion's den: the sphere of human partnerships, bonds, friendship, love...

This is an ambitious new game, this Love+. In supplying virtual (read, sanitized, stripped of 'strings attached', of side-effects, of 'unanticipated consequences' and fears of pre-empting future liberty) substitutes, it aims at the very peak: at the *future itself*. It offers eternity for instant, on-the-spot consumption. It offers a way to keep eternity at bay and under control, and the ability to stop it the moment it ceases to be enjoyable and desired. It offers 'eternal love' to be imbibed and relished in full on a short coach trip to Atami – with no need to carry it back home. As Naoyuki Sakazaki, a man in his forties, put it: 'Love Plus is fun because the relationship continues *forever*' (italics added). He should know:

the Love+ campaign in Atami started on 10 July and had finished by the end of August...

For this kind of accomplishment, there has been, to my knowledge, only one known precedent, albeit apocryphal and unprovable. The Mogul emperor Shah Jahan was so deeply in love with his third wife, Mumtaz Mahal, that when she died he summoned, hired and paid the greatest architects of his time, and spent twenty-one years supervising the construction of a fitting monument to her charm and beauty: the Taj ('crown of buildings') of Mahal. When the last frieze was engraved and the last ornamentation polished, Shah Jahan allegedly inspected the masterpiece and found his love longings finally gratified and nostalgia for his lost love satiated.

What spoiled his delight, however, so obviously distorting the harmony and elegance of the supreme composition, was a strange, coffin-like box at the centre. It was the removal of that box that needs to be seen as the fully and truly last, ultimate and crowning finishing touch of the Jahan–Mumtaz romance...

11 September 2010

On farming words

About giving interviews, as about many other forcefully promoted customs of our times, José Saramago had his doubts. He noted on 16 November 2008, having turned eighty-six, a year older than I am now: 'I'm told that the interviews were worth doing. I, as usual, tend to doubt this, perhaps because I'm tired of listening to myself.' So am I... More than once, pressed by interviewers to reveal what they thought they did not know but their readers yearned to learn, I have felt humiliated by being forced to repeat what 'has with the passing of time turned into a reheated soup for me': discoveries once exciting and impatient to be shared now felt soporific in their banality... 'Worse still,' as Saramago hastens to add, 'the handful of sensible things I've said in my life have turned out after all to be of absolutely no consequence. And why should they be of consequence?' Again, I know the pain: when urged by interviewers and reciting my own, incomparably tinier handful of once iconoclastic thoughts, all too often I have seen

and could think only of icons that were meant and hoped to crumble long ago out of shame and belated remorse, but which instead hit back at me, even more unsightly than I remembered them and just as self-confident as they were in their tender years, if not more so – now staring me arrogantly in the face, sneering, jeering, jibing...

‘Do we talk for the same reason we perspire? Just because we do?’ Saramago asks. Sweat, as we know, promptly evaporates or is keenly washed away, and ‘sooner or later ends up in the clouds’. Perhaps this is the fate for which, in their own manner, words are destined.

And then Saramago recalls his grandfather Jeronimo, who ‘in his final hours went to bid farewell to the trees he had planted, embracing them and weeping because he knew he wouldn’t see them again. It’s a lesson worth learning. So I embrace the words I have written, I wish them long life, and resume my writing where I left off.’

‘There can be’, he adds, ‘no other response’. So be it.

12 September 2010

On superpower, superbroke

Two days ago America celebrated/mourned/regurgitated another 9/11 anniversary.

‘American pacifists need not worry any more about “wars of choice”,’ Thomas L. Friedman suggested a few days earlier. ‘We are not doing that again. We can’t afford to invade Grenada today.’ The superpower is now superbroke, he opines, and bound to turn – for many years to come – superfrugal. ‘America is about to learn a very hard lesson: You can borrow your way to prosperity over the short run but not to geopolitical power over the long run.’

Not that Friedman’s opinion is universally shared. Hillary Clinton, for instance, is on record trying just four days ago to convince the members of the Council on Foreign Relations that the ‘United States can, and shall lead, and in fact does lead’ the world in the beginning century. Well, what else could the chief of diplomacy say? Another member of the federal government,