Zygmunt Bauman

In Search Of Politics
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Beliefs do not need to be coherent in order to be believed. Beliefs that tend to be believed these days – our beliefs – are no exception. Indeed, we consider the case of human freedom, at least in ‘our part’ of the world, to be open and shut, and (barring minor corrections here and there) resolved to the fullest conceivable satisfaction; at any rate, we do not feel the need (again barring occasional minor irritations) to take to the streets to claim and exact more freedom or better freedom than we feel we already have. But, on the other hand, we tend to believe equally firmly that there is little we can change – singly, severally, or all together – in the way the affairs of the world are running or are being run; and we believe too that, were we able to make a change, it would be futile, even unreasonable, to put our heads together to think of a different world from the one there is and to flex our muscles to bring it about if we consider it better than the one we are in. How these two beliefs can be held at the same time would be a mystery to any person trained in logical thinking. If freedom has been won, how does it come about that human ability to imagine a better world and to do something to make it better was not among the trophies of victory? And what sort of freedom is it that discourages imagination and tolerates the impotence of free people in matters which concern them all?

The two beliefs fit each other ill – but holding both of them is not a sign of our logical ineptitude. The two beliefs are by no
means fanciful. There is more than enough in our shared experience to support each of the two. We are quite realistic and rational when believing what we do. And so it is important to know why the world we live in keeps sending us such evidently contradictory signals. And it is also important to know how we can live with that contradiction; and, moreover, why most of the time we do not notice it and are not particularly worried when we do.

Why is it important to know that? Would anything change for the better once we obtained this kind of knowledge? This, to be sure, is by no means certain. An insight into what makes things to be as they are may prompt us to throw in the towel just as much as it may spur us into action. The knowledge of how the complex and not readily visible social mechanisms which shape our condition work cuts notoriously both ways. Time and again, it prompts two quite distinct uses, which Pierre Bourdieu aptly called ‘cynical’ and ‘clinical’. Knowledge may be used ‘cynically’: the world being what it is, let me think of a strategy which will allow me to exploit its rules to my best advantage; whether the world is fair or unjust, likeable or not, is neither here nor there. When it is used ‘clinically’, the same knowledge of how society works may help you and me to fight more effectively what we see as improper, harmful or offending our moral sense. By itself, knowledge does not determine which of the two uses we resort to. This is, ultimately, a matter of our own choice. But without that knowledge there would be no choice to start with. With knowledge, free men and women have at least some chance to exercise their freedom.

But what is there to know? It is with this question that this book tries to come to grips. The answer it comes up with is, roughly, that the growth of individual freedom may coincide with the growth of collective impotence in as far as the bridges between private and public life are dismantled or were never built to start with; or, to put it differently, in as far as there is no easy and obvious way to translate private worries into public issues and, conversely, to discern and pinpoint public issues in private troubles. And that in our kind of society the bridges are by and large absent and the art of translation seldom practised in public. In the absence of bridges, the sporadic communication between the private and public shores is maintained with the help of balloons
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which have the vexing habit of collapsing or exploding the moment they land – and, more often than not, before reaching their targets. While the art of translation is in its present sorry state, the sole grievances aired in public are sackfuls of private agonies and anxieties which, however, do not turn into public issues just for being on public display.

In the absence of strong and permanent bridges and with translating skills unpractised or altogether forgotten, private troubles and pains do not add up and can hardly condense into common causes. What, under the circumstances, can bring us together? Sociality, so to speak, is free-floating, seeking in vain solid ground in which to anchor, a visible-to-all target on which to converge, companions with which to close ranks. There is a lot of it around – wandering, blundering, unfocused. Lacking in regular outlets, our sociality tends to be released in spectacular one-off explosions – short lived, as all explosions are.

Occasion for release is sometimes given by carnivals of compassion and charity; sometimes by outbursts of beefed-up aggression against a freshly discovered public enemy (that is, against someone whom most members of the public may recognize as their private enemy); at other times by an event most people feel strongly about at the same time and so synchronize their joy, as in the case of the national team winning the World Cup, or their sorrow, as in the case of the tragic death of Princess Diana. The trouble with all these occasions is, though, that they run out of steam quickly: once we return to our daily business things by and large come back, unscathed, to where they started. And when the dazzling flash of togetherness goes out, the loners wake up just as lonely as before, while the shared world, so brightly illuminated just a moment ago, seems if anything still darker than before. And after the explosive discharge there is little energy left for the limelights to be lit again.

The chance of changing this condition hangs on the agora – the space neither private nor public, but more exactly private and public at the same time. The space where private problems meet in a meaningful way – that is, not just to draw narcissistic pleasures or in search of some therapy through public display, but to seek collectively managed levers powerful enough to lift individuals from their privately suffered misery; the space where such ideas may be born and take shape as the ‘public good’, the
‘just society’ or ‘shared values’. The trouble is, though, that little has been left today of the old-style private/public spaces, whereas new ones able to replace them are nowhere in sight. The old *agoras* have been taken over by enterprising developers and recycled into theme parks, while powerful forces conspire with political apathy to refuse building permits for new ones.

The most conspicuous feature of contemporary politics, Cornelius Castoriadis told Daniel Mermet in November 1996, is its *insignificance*, ‘Politicians are impotent . . . They no more have a programme. Their purpose is to stay in office.’ Change of governments – of ‘political camps’ even – is no watershed; a ripple at most on the surface of a stream flowing unstoppably, monotonously, with dull determination, in its own direction, pulled by its own momentum. A century ago the ruling political formula of liberalism was a defiant and impudent ideology of the ‘great leap forward’. Nowadays, it is no more than a self-apology for surrender: ‘This is not the best of imaginable worlds, but the only real one. Besides, all alternatives are worse, must be worse and would be shown to be worse if tried in practice.’ Liberalism today boils down to the simple ‘no alternative’ credo. If you wish to find out what the roots of the growing political apathy are, you may as well look no further. This politics lauds conformity and promotes conformity. And conformity could as well be a do-it-yourself job; does one need politics to conform? Why bother with politicians who, whatever their hue, can promise nothing but more of the same?

The art of politics, if it happens to be *democratic* politics, is about dismantling the limits to citizens’ freedom; but it is also about self-limitation: about making citizens free in order to enable them to set, individually and collectively, their own, individual and collective, limits. That second point has been all but lost. All limits are off-limits. Any attempt at self-limitation is taken to be the first step on the road leading straight to the gulag, as if there was nothing but the choice between the market’s and the government’s dictatorship over needs – as if there was no room for the citizenship in other form than the consumerist one. It is this form (and only this form) which financial and commodity markets would tolerate. And it is this form which is promoted and cultivated by the governments of the day. The sole grand narrative left in the field is that of (to quote Castoriadis again) the accu-
mulation of junk and more junk. To that accumulation, there must be no limits (that is, all limits are seen as anathema and no limits would be tolerated). But it is that accumulation from which the self-limitation has to start, if it is to start at all.

But the aversion to self-limitation, generalized conformity and the resulting insignificance of politics have their price – a steep price, as it happens. The price is paid in the currency in which the price of wrong politics is usually paid – that of human sufferings. The sufferings come in many shapes and colours, but they may be traced to the same root. And these sufferings have a self-perpetuating quality. They are the kind of sufferings which stem from the malfeasance of politics, but also the kind which are the paramount obstacle to its sanity.

The most sinister and painful of contemporary troubles can be best collected under the rubric of Unsicherheit – the German term which blends together experiences which need three English terms – uncertainty, insecurity and unsafety – to be conveyed. The curious thing is that the nature of these troubles is itself a most powerful impediment to collective remedies: people feeling insecure, people wary of what the future might hold in store and fearing for their safety, are not truly free to take the risks which collective action demands. They lack the courage to dare and the time to imagine alternative ways of living together; and they are too preoccupied with tasks they cannot share to think of, let alone to devote their energy to, such tasks as can be undertaken only in common.

The extant political institutions, meant to assist them in the fight against insecurity, offer little help. In a fast globalizing world, where a large part of power, and the most seminal part, is taken out of politics, these institutions cannot do much to offer security or certainty. What they can do and what they more often than not are doing is to shift the scattered and diffuse anxiety to one ingredient of Unsicherheit alone – that of safety, the only field in which something can be done and seen to be done. The snag is, though, that while doing something effectively to cure or at least to mitigate insecurity and uncertainty calls for united action, most measures undertaken under the banner of safety are divisive; they sow mutual suspicion, set people apart, prompt them to sniff enemies and conspirators behind every contention or dissent, and in the end make the loners yet more lonely than