THE 20TH CENTURY: THE END OR A BEGINNING?

Zygmunt Bauman

ABSTRACT Contrary to its heaping disasters, various actors and interpreters viewed the 20th century as the century of progress. This was as true of certain Marxists, or communists, as it was of Americanists such as Parsons. The temptation was to view the century, even in progress, as result, to view change as the precondition rather than as the process. Capitalism and modernity live on, rather, in the permanent revolution of liquid modernity. Capitalist, or at least liberal-democratic, and socialist utopias nevertheless behaved as though perpetual peace was possible, if not impending. Uncertainty and contingency reigned in everyday life, if not in intellectual or progressive culture. Only now does the serpent again have its tail in its mouth.

KEYWORDS contingency • liberalism • Marxism • progress • uncertainty

The poet Vladimir Mayakovsky warned his contemporaries against the not just silly, but dangerous habit of jumping to conclusions: ‘Don’t paint epic canvases during revolutions; they will tear the canvas in shreds’. Mayakovsky knew what he was talking about. Like so many other talented Soviet writers, he tasted to the last drop the fragility of fortune’s favours and the slyness of its pranks. Painting epic canvasses may be a safer occupation for the painters here and now than it was in Mayakovsky’s time and place, but this does not make any safer the future of such canvasses. Epic canvasses keep being torn in shreds and dumped at rubbish tips. Mayakovsky’s sober observation acquires particular gravity at the moment when summing up the logic (or illogicality?) of the last tortuous 100 years of our joint history becomes a popular pastime for us all and almost a compulsion for professional thinkers.

The summary of a century is not a one-off affair. As the distance from the summarized time-span stretches and the subsequent experience grows in

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volume, the line dividing the important from the unimportant, the lasting significance from transient extravagancy will be redrawn, repeatedly. The next summary won't be necessarily superior – better informed and more correct – than the last one. All successive summaries will tell us more about the state of mind of the summarizers than about the truth of the era they've tried to summarize. Poor peasants of the 17th century, frightened out of their wits by the fears of plagues, satanic ambushes and malevolent witches, would be astounded to hear that their times will be later written down in history books under the name of the 'Age of Reason'.

In human history, as in individual lives, there are no closed chapters ready to be summarized, and if there were such chapters, we would have no way of knowing it for sure. History is a 'going concern', perpetually in a state described by Heidegger as *Wiederholung* (recapitulation). The subject matter of history-telling never stays 'the same' for long. Permanently unfinished, always wide open towards that elusive place called 'the present', that turbulent pace where future turns into the past, it is constantly fed new ingredients. But new ingredients do not lie quietly aside the old. Neither is the old stuff unaffected by their arrival. Substances, old and new, enter something not unlike chemical reaction. Old compounds can hold no more and are falling apart, new syntheses emerge. When thrust into new company, the familiar components change their aroma, taste and colour.

There are more threats, though, to the prospects of epic canvasses. No one paints canvasses for the use of the past that the canvasses depict. Epic canvasses are painted for the sake and the benefit of the future. The partners in the conversation that historic canvasses start off (or are hoped to start) are not the heroes and villains of the past whose likeness the painters wished to record (mostly dead by now and unable to respond), but the yet unknown numbers of unknown people presently alive or yet to be born. Painting a historic canvas means sending a message to the future – in a language that the painter hopes will be recognized by the future as its own, understood, ingested and absorbed. But that language is not yet known either at the time the canvas is painted.

Karl Marx suggested that history-telling rests its method on the assumption that the anatomy of Man is the key to the anatomy of Ape. Looking at our own bones and muscles, we know what the evolutionary fate of the primates has been since they were formed; we know the primates' future! We know therefore what in the anatomy of Ape revealed later its true significance of a preliminary or incipient form of the organs developed fully only in the later, human stage of the species history. We know as well what features, however prominent in the body and life of Apes, have been subsequently, in human bodies, reduced to rudiments and relics. In other words: the true importance of any trait is decided in the course of the subsequent historical development. The importance of any aspect noticed in period X boils down to its evolutionary potential, and so it is revealed only in time

X + 1. We may add that unless we arrogantly assume that the coming of *Homo sapiens* has been the final point and *telos* of species history, we must see that *any* revelation of the aspect's importance should be regarded as temporary, until further notice. What has been revealed to the contemporaries of the time X + 1 stands a good chance to be revised or outright refuted in time X + 2.

A correction that Marx would be likely to approve as in tune with his image of the human way of being-in-the-world, is that when it comes to writing history the role of the 'anatomy of Man' is not as a rule played by the Man as he is known in a given time, but by what Man in that time intends to *become*. That 'man' who serves as the benchmark for evaluating the past is construed of his unresolved problems, yet-unfulfilled ambitions, tasks still on the agenda. In short: it is not so much the *anatomy* of man that is at stake, as Man's *future* – imagined, wished or expected at the time of writing. At all times humans are 'ahead of themselves'. In every 'present' they remain underdefined, incomplete or, as Ernst Bloch famously put it '*noch nicht geworden*' and modern humans are more so than any of their predecessors. Exaggerating only a little, we may say that humans spent a good part of their history living in the future. And with no exaggeration at all we can say that the periods in which they lived in the future more than they did in the present were times of the most rapid change and most profound upheavals and upturns in their form of life. We use to call such times of condensed, accelerated change 'revolutions'.

The trouble with future, though, is that it *does not* exist – while all the refined methods of truth-seeking designed by scientific reason have been made to the measure of things that *do*. There cannot be a science, or more generally an exact, provable/refutable knowledge, of something that does *not* exist, since it cannot be reached by any of the empirical tools and so cannot be forced into the realm of human experience. The future, as Emmanuel Levinas expressed it, is the 'absolute Other', and so a complete enigma, impenetrable mystery (Levinas, 1979: 71). Anticipations of future, and what actually happens when the present eats into the time where the future has been previously located, inhabit, we may say, two separate worlds, *incommunicado* with each other. Only such future is 'given to *us*', here and now, as resides in the realm of human imagination. The degree of similarity or dissimilarity of that imagined future to our future plight is unknowable in advance – incurably uncertain – and thus a constant source of acute anxiety.

The novelty of our times is that the periods of condensed and accelerated change called 'revolutions' are no longer 'breaks in the routine' – brief intervals separating eras of 'retrenchment', of relatively stable, repetitive patterns of life that enable, and favour, long-term predictions, planning and composition of Sartrean 'life projects'. We live today under conditions of *permanent revolution*. Revolution is the way society lives nowadays. Revolution has become human society's *normal state*. And so in our time, more than at any other time, epic canvasses risk being torn into pieces. Perhaps they will be in shreds even before the painters manage to complete their *oeuvres*. No wonder that the artists today prefer installations, patched together only for the duration of the gallery exposition, to solid works meant to be preserved in the museums of the future, to illuminate, and to be judged by, their future visitors.

Paint canvasses we must, though, and we are unlikely to stop, whatever the risks. Too much is at stake to refrain from painting them. The question ‘where do we go?’ – the genuine life-and-death question for thinking and acting humans – blends inextricably with the questions ‘where do we stand?’ and ‘where did we come from?’. The questions overlap, each one seeking answer through raising the other two. We cannot attempt to answer the first question without coming to grips with the rest. We should be grateful therefore to Valerio Castronovo for initiating another debate on the meaning of the century that just ended; doubly grateful for the setting for the debate, from the start, to such a highly principal and demanding standard (Castronovo, 1999: 6–11). What is at stake in that discussion is our ability and determination, or our incapacity and negligence, to face up to (as Castronovo aptly put it) the ‘hopes and fears’ of the century that just began.

It may be difficult to take it in now, but still a mere half-century ago social scientists were busy theorizing about the amazing capacity of social systems to ‘self-equilibrate’, to remain ‘identical with themselves’ over indefinitely long periods of time, to prevent all and any deviations from the ‘norm’ and dominant pattern of conduct and to fight back or neutralize disturbances as they arise in the course of interaction with ‘environment’. Social scientists proved beyond the reasonable doubt of their colleagues and their readers that the supreme purpose of system is to enable people to stay as they are and fight change tooth and nail. Against the background of such a *Weltanschauung* any change, and particularly a change that refused to go away and looked as if it was something more than a momentary blip in the tranquil flow of ‘the same’, was a mystery and a puzzle. Change was seen as an extraordinary event, caused by extraordinary occurrences and calling for extraordinary explanations. By definition, change was an ‘anomaly’, a symptom of ‘malfunctioning’, a signal of corruption or decay.

Today – a mere half-century later – we hear seldom, if at all, of a ‘theory of change’. Asking why there is change would seem to us a purely metaphysical question, akin to the inquiry ‘why there is something rather than nothing?’. Things perpetually becoming different from themselves is the ‘brute fact’ that explains all other facts but itself neither can, nor needs to be explained. Change is what society, and living in society, are all about. ‘Existence’ equals permanent change. If something does require an explanation and suggests extraordinary circumstances, it is the rare occasion when change grinds to a halt for a while or does not come soon enough.

Richard Sennett (1998: 22, 31, 51) suggests that ‘no long term’ is the motto of the new state of affairs. He also writes of the overwhelming experience of ‘disjointed time’ – time sliced into episodes only loosely connected to each other. Being sliced in such a way, the flow of time gives an impression of a succession of new starts. Even our understanding of ‘change’ has changed: ‘change’ no more calls to mind a longish process of slow transformation, revision, modification, adaptation or adjustment – but an abrupt passage, the sudden abandonment of one form and the equally sudden appearance of another. No wonder that, as Sennett suggests, ‘what’s peculiar about uncertainty today’ is that ‘it is woven into the everyday practices’ – at all levels of our living together. Continuous discontinuity, constant change, is our shared condition.

Constant change is also the supreme norm of behaviour, advertised and promoted as the recipe of survival in the turbulent and no more predictable world. Capacity to change, to change instantly, to change with no regret and without ever looking back, to change at whatever cost and to change for nothing else than the change’s sake, becomes nowadays the index of ‘fitness’. Such capacity is the trait sought and announced to have been found in healthy selves and healthy business companies alike. As Sennett notes, ‘[p]erfectly viable businesses are gutted and abandoned, capable employees are set adrift rather than rewarded, simply because the organisation must prove to the market that it is capable of change’.

Our current experience of living in a mobile, volatile, fluid world of globalization, deregulation and individualization (that is, to quote Ulrich Beck, a world that shifts onto individual men and women the responsibilities once carried by society as a whole, and forces them to seek ‘biographical solutions of systemic contradictions’ (Beck, 1992: 137)), provides that ‘anatomy of Man’ standpoint from which we currently look at, and try to comprehend, the ‘anatomy of Ape’. What strikes us most when looking at the past century from this novel standpoint are first and foremost its solid (or claiming to be solid) structures, its long-term planning and investment, its lifelong projects, its inert routines, its commitments and engagements meant to be ‘forever’ and its partnerships intended to last ‘till death do us part’.

But what about the previously expressed belief that the metaphor of the ‘anatomy of Man’ needs to be corrected (or supplemented) if it is to clarify the nature of history writing? I have pointed out that the standpoint of the ‘anatomy of Man’ from which the historical past is surveyed and has its meaning interpreted is not the shape of a human condition that has already been achieved and fully formed, but *human potential* as seen at the time, the direction in which people expect, hope or fear to evolve. In other words, the standpoint is the *future as anticipated under conditions of the present.* But future, let me repeat, is the absolute alterity. Future is a condition absolutely unknowable by anything remotely reminiscent of scientific standards of reliable knowledge. ‘Uncertainty’ is the very definition of ‘future’. This is, by the way, why future is visualized as the land of freedom – in opposition to the past, by definition gone and closed, which offers comforting certainty, albeit wrapped together with un-freedom. You cannot wish away what has already happened. You can belie the past, you can distort its likeness, but you cannot *change* it, and being unable to make things different than they are is the bottom line of un-freedom.

This circumstance could have cast history writing in a quandary; it could have confronted the history writers with a paradox without evident solution. Certainty about the past has to be sought (and grasped) while floating in the misty air of essentially unprovable anticipations; not really knowing for sure what the future, selected as the authority to pronounce on the meaning of the past, will bring. Somehow, though, the history writing could go on, and went, unabated. It gathered courage and self-confidence in the times of modernity, the most future-conscious era in human history. The paradox ensconced in such an attitude and conduct did not seem to worry history writers much. It is easy to see now, with the benefit of hindsight, why it did not; it is also possible to postulate, again retrospectively, that it did not *need* to.

To think of it, rewriting the past from the position of the not-yet-fulfilled potential of history requires a lot of self-confidence. But such self-confidence is not difficult to obtain if there is trust in the steadiness of history's direction, in human ability to keep history on course and in the rising potency of the tools humans may use to fulfil that task. In short: when one is confident that humans may *control* their future.

One can feel such confidence when it is widely believed that (1) the opacity of the future is but a temporary irritant, (2) the fog veiling the future will become thinner as human knowledge grows and eventually will be dispersed altogether, and (3) the measure of risk that the future contains will shrink and will eventually be eliminated altogether as human skills grow. As the last century started, all such beliefs were firmly in place. Modernity was a bold declaration of war on uncertainty, unpredictability and contingency of human fate, and there was widespread determination to win the war and conviction that the war would be won.

At the threshold of the modern era, 'nature' was viewed as the major source of uncertainty that haunted human life. Floods and droughts, famines that struck without warning and contagious diseases that came unannounced, unspeakable dangers lurking in 'wilderness' – spaces yet untouched by human ordering zeal and often starting just a few yards beyond the farm fence – were the main repositories of the fearsome 'unknown'. Even the dangers threatening from other people were seen as the side effect of the drawbacks in taming nature. The ill will, malice and uncouth conduct of the next door, next street, or beyond-the-river neighbours that made people fear and tremble in anticipation of imminent disasters, were classified on the side of 'nature' as distinct from the manmade part of the world. They were viewed as the regrettable results of the warlike instincts, 'natural aggression' and the resulting inclination to *bellum omnium contra omnes* seen as the 'natural state' of mankind, as the legacy and relics of raw 'nature' that need be, and will be eradicated, reformed or repressed through patient, laborious and painstaking effort of the 'civilizing process'.

The confidence-building myth of the modern era was the story of the humans lifting themselves by their own wits, acumen, determination and industry, those refined versions of Baron Münchhausen's bootstraps, out of the mire of the 'natural', 'precivilised' condition. The corollary of that myth was the unshakeable trust in human ability to improve on nature and belief in the superiority of reason over the 'blind natural forces' which with its help humans can harness to a more useful work or shackle if too obstreperous. By far the most repulsive and intolerable feature of all things 'natural', that is objects and states unprocessed by conscious, purposeful human labour, was that their haphazard, random conduct evaded human control and so exploded human designs. The idea of 'civilised order' was a vision of the human condition from which everything that was not allowed as part of that order was prohibited and eliminated. Once the civilizing process completes its job, there will be no dark corners left, no black holes of ignorance, no grey areas of ambivalence, no vile dens of vicious uncertainty.

Hobbes hoped, and generations of his disciples believed, that society, identified with the state as the carrier of sovereign power, will provide the much needed and coveted shelter from uncertainty by defending its subjects against fearsome powers of nature outside and their own inborn wickedness and base instincts that they are too weak to conquer on their own. Many years later, in the middle of the 20th Century, Carl Schmitt summarized if not the reality, then at least the intention of the modern state by defining the sovereign as 'he who decides on the state of exception'. Commenting on Schmitt's definition, Giorgio Agamben suggested that the constitutive feature of sovereign state was the 'relation of exception', through which 'something is included solely through its exclusion' and the rule is asserting itself by setting the limits to its application. Modern state, indeed, was about managing human affairs through the exclusion of everything unmanageable and thereby undesirable. We may add that uncertainty, and all that caused it and contributed to it (all that was resistant to management, evading categorization, underdefined, category crossing, ambiguous and ambivalent), was the major, most toxic pollution of the would-be manmade order that had to be excluded. Modern state was about cleansing and purification.

I suggest that this tendency of the modern state culminated in the middle of the past century. A good part of that century passed under the aegis of the imminent end of history as known thus far: history as a free play of unbridled, discoordinate forces.

To the acclaim stretching far beyond the boundaries of the land he ruled, Hitler announced the arrival of the Thousand-Years-Reich starting with the elimination of the last *unwertes Leben*. To the joy of his worldwide enthusiasts, Stalin proclaimed the end of history of class oppression and class wars to be just round the next corner, waiting merely for the unmasking and execution of the last enemy of the society in which the sovereign classlessness asserts itself by shooting out all who stand out and do not fit. Using Agamben's terms, we can say that the two forms of the 20th-century totalitarianism explored the limits of the sovereign power of exclusion. Auschwitz and Kolyma were laboratories in which the limits of human pliability were researched and the most effective means of cleansing society of its disorderly, uncertainty-generating contaminations were experimented with (Agamben, 1998: 11, 18).

In totalitarian regimes the tendency of modern state sovereignty (described by Max Weber at the threshold of the century, and later again by Norbert Elias, as 'monopoly of the means of coercion') was given free rein and allowed to run berserk hoped to find their own limits. That totalitarian adventure was not an aberration, an 'accident in history' that can be explained away and dismissed as a cancerous deformation of the otherwise healthy modern political body. That it was not merely a sidetrack or a deviation shows the keen attention with which the exploits of Mussolini, Stalin and Hitler were watched all over the modern world. It was not easy to dismiss them, and downright dangerous not to try to respond to their challenge.

The challenge was the promise of 'no more contingency', of security of which people of all modern (that is, compulsively modernizing) lands dreamt, while having been asked to respect the law of their country in exchange for fulfilling their dreams. Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia put paid to the spectre of the unemployed. In exchange for obedience they offered (and delivered to all but the minorities earmarked for exclusion) freedom from the horror of uncertainty. They pulled up most of their subjects from the depth of depression with which other governments, hesitant or impotent to make full use of their monopoly of coercion, struggled but had little to show for their efforts. The response to such a challenge was the new network of governmental responsibilities aptly called in French *L'État Providence*, and the postwar half-hearted flirting with the state management of economy and the state planning. Most knowledgeable and perceptive minds of the 'glorious thirty years' that followed the atrocities of the Second World War (the collapse of the fascist regimes and the retrenchment of the communist ones) proclaimed the imminent 'convergence' of the temporarily separate routes leading to 'good society'. The Soviet dictators and the western democrats may have followed different strategies, but they shared the ultimate aim of a prosperous world offering to its subjects security and freedom from fear, and to that aim they would jointly arrive.

At the threshold of the 21st century it all sounds like fairytale stuff and another episode in the long history of human errors – one that the hapless prophets of the unstoppable march to the everything-predicted or everything-prescripted, all-taken-care-of society would dearly wish to forget. For us, who stand at the threshold of the 21st century, the 20th century is fully and truly a foreign country. Both the hopes and the fears of that country's residents are increasingly difficult to grasp, let alone to comprehend.

The war waged against uncertainty has ended, though with no declaration of victory, admission of defeat or signing of a peace agreement. The hostilities fizzled out, as conscripted soldiers were sent home and the commanding officers retired or voted out of office. The spokesmen for sovereign powers no longer promise that the spectre of insecurity will be vanquished. Society is no more proclaimed or believed to be the guardian and purveyor of certainty. Uncertainty is proclaimed to have been unduly demonized in the past. Fighting the risk and taming the future, like many other orthodox functions of the state, is being deregulated and shifted to individual initiative and responsibility.

Nature has not been conquered. The intended conquest has in practice boiled down to erecting a protective wall between the habitat of the humans and 'nature'. From behind that wall the traditional dangers that nature had in store (supplemented by the new, manmade banes) are less clearly visible. During his brief walk from the air-conditioned aircraft to the air-conditioned office, President Bush has little time to sample the greenhouse gases. Fighting such old and new dangers has become, if anything, more difficult than before. Society, hoped to become a bulwark against nature's uncertainty, has on the other hand become a profuse and seemingly inexhaustible source of insecurity.

From the sovereign rule-setter, stern protector of the game's fairness and the sworn advocate of the victims of unfair moves, 'society' has turned into one of the players. Like the rest of the players, it keeps its cards close to its chest and hides its intentions behind a pokerface, cheating on occasion and deploying surprise as the most common strategy. 'Society' stands now for those invisible, untouchable and inscrutable entities that carry obscure names like 'world finances', 'global markets', 'international investors', 'competitiveness' or 'efficiency' and circle their orbits removed light years away from the field of daily practices: entities that are able, nevertheless, to turn upside down, overnight and without warning, the daily routines on which daily life for most of us rests. Those entities must bear awesome force, since they are capable of destroying livelihoods, poisoning rivers, air and foods, invalidating most prized possessions, exploding neighbourhoods and communities and playing havoc with dear-to-heart ways of life. Few if any people in sane mind would expect from society such assurance of their security. But few if any people would know how to make the uncertain certain, the insecure secure – let alone how to force the powers-that-be to cooperate with their efforts.

It is not even clear from what crevices the suffocating anxiety is oozing, where the mysterious dangers that strain the nerves lie, and what makes people look to the future with apprehension instead of hope. It is not clear either what to desire and what to strive for in order to disperse anxiety, soothe the nerves and once more look hopefully to the future. At the threshold of the 21st century the values seemingly least controversial 50 years ago are reevaluated, condemned, ridiculed and dismissed. One needs to forget whatever one has learned of the art of life; but learning the new art does not come easy, since authoritative advice and learned counsels offer little more than exhortations to deploy one's own wits and gumption and to blame one's own indolence or sloth if the results fall short of expectations.

Old values and old anti-values have been given new names to facilitate the revaluation. And so the once-vaunted security has been renamed 'dependence'. In its new verbal avatar it is something one should beware of at all cost and steer as clear from as possible. And obviously, no one would wish the elected government to purvey dependence . . . Uncertainty, on the other hand, has been rebaptized 'flexibility', turning from a bane to be fought or avoided back into a virtue to be learned and practised daily. Under its new name, uncertainty is preached from every party-political and social-scientific pulpit and extolled as the most powerful tool of that life success that certainty of the future was once expected to assure.

In the world of endemic uncertainty and ambient insecurity people have good reasons to be nervous and afraid. They are not necessarily more frightened than their ancestors – but perhaps no less either (how to compare fears anyway; how to decide whose fear is more fearsome?) The ancestors' fears and our own are not greater or smaller; they are simply *different*. Commenting on Jean Delumeau's observation that in the history of human collectivities fears change, but the fear remains, Ignacio Ramonet (2000: 1) points out that fears that haunted people at the entry to the 20th century emanated mostly from untamed nature: inclement weather, food shortages or epidemics. Most of our fears come from another direction. We are horrified at the thought of the awesome human resources and technological acumen being put in service of wrong causes or being unbridled, let loose and running amok, sowing devastation that leaves far behind anything that 'untamed nature' has visited upon us so far. These days our fears are born more often than not in the high-security laboratories of the high-class experts serving high-calibre corporations, where the ways to ignore or push aside the 'laws of nature' (with consequences impossible to calculate) are researched in order to be sold at high profit to the rest of us. Our fears are less now of being flogged and herded towards destruction. We fear instead that perdition (individual or collective) may wait on the road we are following according to our own will, joyously, attracted by the prospects of steadily rising comfort and more pleasures.

There are many ways in which large stretches of time (eras, epochs, centuries) may be compared. None of these ways is foolproof, none is insured against the sin of simplification, none towers decidedly over the rest. Comparing times by their 'typical fears' is not necessarily better than using other indices, but not necessarily inferior either. We may hypothesize (but remember the dangers of painting epic canvasses in the time of revolution!) that the change of guard on the fears front has been a most salient difference between life in the past century and the life lurking at the horizon of the current one.

To the dilemma signalled in the title (was the 20th century the end or a beginning?) we may answer tentatively: it was both. It was (at least if measured by the scale of modern history) a change of direction, a watershed. Another 'mountain pass', to use Reinhardt Koselleck's fine expression applied to the equally seminal time between the 17th and the 18th centuries. The 20th century was the culmination of the long and tortuous modern crusade against uncertainty. It was also the time of 'farewell to arms' – the arms stocked to be wielded in that crusade. So it was also a beginning. A start to the long and tortuous process of reshuffling and refurbishing our joint, enlarged, global home in which uncertainty, once a despised aborigine meant to be civilized or an illegal immigrant meant to be rounded up and sent home, has been issued with the permission to stay and made to feel welcomed. It is now the turn of its adversaries to fear for their security.

Zygmunt Bauman is Professor Emeritus at Leeds and Warsaw. His most recent books in English are *The Individualized Society* and *Community*. *Address*: 1 Lawnswood Gardens, Leeds LS16 6HF, UK.

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