



**Zygmunt Bauman, Lukasz Galecki**

## The unwinnable war

*An interview with Zygmunt Bauman*

Instead of meeting the state's obligation to protect its citizens, governments throughout the West are calling for more flexibility in areas of life regulated by market forces. One consequence of the retreat of the state is a crisis of legitimacy, which states seek to regain through their response to terrorism. In the Middle East, meanwhile, a gulf has developed between an elite that has profited from Westernization and the impoverished masses. It is the latter who, in the name of religion, are lured into anti-Western extremism, thus perpetuating the vicious circle of insecurity.

**Lukasz Galecki:** How do you define the borders of globalization?

**Zygmunt Bauman:** Globalization is not a process taking place somewhere far away in some exotic place. Globalization is taking place in Leeds as well as in Warsaw, in New York, and any small town in Poland. It is just outside your window, but inside as well. It is enough to walk down the street to see it. Global and local spaces can be separated only as an abstraction, in reality they are intertwined. The main trouble is that the globalization we are dealing with today is strictly negative. It is based on the breaking down of barriers, allowing for the globalization of capital, the movement of goods, information, crime, and terrorism, but not of the political and judicial institutions whose basis is national sovereignty. This negative aspect of globalization has not been followed by the positive aspect, and the instruments of regulation over economic and social processes are not established enough to deal with the reach and consequences of globalization.

**LG:** Are there any historical precedents for this situation?

**ZB:** Two hundred years ago our ancestors were frightened by the naked chaos which could not be tamed by the modest powers of the local communities such as village, parish, and small town. The big spaces of action that, in those days, were about to build nations must have seemed as frightening and open to ambush as the forces of globalization are to today's nation-states. Our ancestors were capable of building the instruments of political representation and the legislative and judicial means to manage chaos, to coordinate rules and procedures in order to tame this chaos, to make it relatively transparent and more or less predictable. The pioneers of the modern world were hoping that societies, ruled by reason and moved by its technical means, would prove to be more predictable and manageable than a world subject merely to the whims of, say, natural disaster. This dream turned out to be illusion, and now in a post-modern world we are facing the situation we once faced in the early nineteenth century in England, where local communities lost control over the

forces of economic development at a time when only local communities had the means, though meagre, to govern such forces. This industrializing world, spiralling out of local control, found itself in a no-man's land very similar to today's global space where success is determined by naked power, cleverness, and unscrupulousness, and where the forces attempting to reign in these developments are clearly insufficient.

**LG:** How much time passed before these forces were tamed?

**ZB:** It took the whole nineteenth century and a good part of the twentieth century before the modern state could manage this new reality. The modern state would have to establish rules and regulations dealing with issues that previous authorities did not have to face, such as child labour laws, banning the slave trade, regulating the work week, providing potable water and adequate sanitation, and basic medical care. Generally speaking, it was about repairing the damage created by the unleashed forces of chaos. A hundred years were needed so that the negative aspects of this earlier globalization could be balanced by the positive, at least in the context of a single nation. In today's world, the possibilities for collective action run far behind what is required, although almost everyone agrees that at least something needs to be done. Globalization has been going on for a long time, but recent events, in a spectacular and shocking fashion, have made us keenly aware of the things that, previously, were latent and easily overlooked. The means at our disposal to protect the rule of law and defend citizens are clearly insufficient to tame these global forces, which in their essence are extra-territorial. The events of 9/11 and the more recent attacks in Madrid and London have made clear that the traditional means of securing and maintaining respect for law and order, crudely stated, are worthless. It surprised us. All of us.

**LG:** Don't you think, in view of events in Iraq, that in treating a patient with a light flu, we have instead decided for a major operation cutting out the liver, a kidney, and half the brain?

**ZB:** Yes. However, we must consider why it is happening. Misfortunes produced by people in the course of negative globalization still happen like natural catastrophes; nobody knows when they are coming, and where they come from. As if we were walking through a minefield. It is known that an explosion will occur, although nobody knows when and where. There is a strong temptation to just bomb this minefield, to destroy the mines before they can go off. It is particularly tempting if you possess an unlimited amount of bombs and hardly any other means to handle the problem. It is so basically different from the picture of the future world designed at the beginning of the modern era. Enlightenment philosophers dreamed of an orderly world obedient to human will, mild and hospitable. And humans were to realize these dreams on their own, not being forced to rely on the wisdom of divine creation. They had just experienced the shock of the Lisbon earthquake (1755) and subsequent fire and tsunami, which came so suddenly and wreaked such havoc on both the righteous and unrighteous. Jean-Jacques Rousseau blamed civilization for this natural catastrophe. He said if people lived in accordance with nature, if they were not living in over-crowded cities, were not building the tallest buildings and, rather than trying to save their personal possessions, were saving themselves from fire and flood, then there would not have been so many victims. On the other hand, Voltaire disregarded the "natural state"; he had more faith in the intentions and actions of people. If people acted reasonably enough, they would create a civilized society in which people could feel safe. Both thinkers, though on most issues in constant opposition, trusted humans. In

this sense, both miscalculated.

**LG:** So, the beginning of modernity is a fear of the unknown?

**ZB:** The very project of modernity is born out of the desire for a world without surprises, a safe world, a world without fear. The crowning of this two-hundred-year effort, and the achievement of the project-ambition-dream, was the social state, which has always been falsely named the welfare state. The whole project was not about welfare so much as it was about a society taking responsibility for each citizen, offering him or her a life free of fear and full of dignity and meaning. It was a concept of a collective insurance policy against the consequences of individual misfortune. If an individual experienced misfortune, society would be there to help him or her, and the redistribution of resources was a means, not an end. The whole concept is based on an idea that only citizens who feel secure can stand on their own two feet. William Beveridge, who designed the British version of the social state, was a Liberal and not a socialist, and considered the concept of the social state as the realization of the liberal idea.

**LG:** Does that mean that the social state, after so many decades, managed to achieve the liberal goal of self-determination?

**ZB:** That was how it was intended to be. There is no individual self-determination without social solidarity. Freedom does not suffice unless there is a guarantee that everyone has means and equal opportunity to utilize them. If the individual has to walk a tightrope, there must a safety net to catch him or her when they fall. The people were told, we will give you security against overwhelming risk, we will protect you against the consequences of unemployment, against being an invalid, against sickness, against poverty in old age. So have no fear, people. Be brave. Exert yourself. And so the negative globalization has made it almost impossible to find a reasonable balance for human obligations within the framework of the nation-state. It strikes a blow at this concept of human coexistence. If you look around the world — perhaps with the exception of the Scandinavian states — this concept of the social state is in retreat, we are told we cannot afford it. So instead of securing this obligation made by the state about the protection against insecurity and the fear resulting from it, governments are calling for more flexibility in the labour market and in all other areas of life regulated by market forces. And this means even more insecurity. What they are calling for is not a decrease of risk, but an increase. One of the consequences of the retreat of state obligations is a crisis in legitimacy of state authority. This authority required obedience, discipline, and respect for the law, promising citizens security and a dignified life. But these promises are being dropped one by one, including free education, basic medical care, old-age pensions, and basic unemployment benefits. The state has its hands tied; it itself is being delivered into the hands of market forces. If it dares to oppose market forces, then capital will flow to a place where it can easily and comfortably grow. And then a nation will face a plague of unemployment and poverty. Capital can be moved with the push of a button. The question is: what can replace the earlier, traditional foundations of state legitimacy? What is to be the source of citizen trust? It is sad, but the most terrible consequences of this negative globalization (e.g., 9/11) have helped state authorities find a new foundation for their own legitimacy.

**LG:** Does it have anything to do with the question of individual security?

**ZB:** One can remove the notion of security from the existential domain — which is your trust in the future, trust in your own means and assets, in your social position, certainty of your family's and your own well-being — down to the sphere of individual safety: your body and your possessions and your home and neighbourhood.

**LG:** Is the traditional nation–state fighting a losing battle against globalization?

**ZB:** In this battle we are dealing with two processes taking place simultaneously. On the one hand, we are trying to tame this new element called globalization, whose powers are beyond what any state can control. The instruments we have at our disposal are too weak to resist the forces opposing it. On the other hand, there is the desperate search for an *ersatz* political formula, an *ersatz* legitimacy, which could be used despite the fact that state powers have been reduced. It is about finding a sphere in which the state can show it is able to do something, to show its citizens that it is not just sitting on its hands. More and more often we can see very spectacular scenes on our TV screens, such as: An invasion of Special Forces, tanks sitting at airports, police cordoning off train stations and subways. This is the lesson the state is trying to teach us: we are on top of the matter. And now try to think — says the state — how things would be if we were not. Of course, things are bad, but they could be worse were we not doing our job.

**LG:** Beyond the global perspective and the perspective of the nation–state, there is still a perspective of the individual human psyche. How, within this framework, does the tension between freedom and security manifest itself?

**ZB:** In today's world people have many reasons to fear. On the one hand, we can easily create a catalogue of risks which a young person faces today. But on the other hand, it is impossible to complete this catalogue because the real causes of fear are dispersed and unclear and very difficult to define, which makes them even more threatening. A young person who has spent many years getting an education and building professional skills could become worthless on the market because the job he or she was hoping to get when starting his or her studies was transferred to Cambodia. Also, his or her private life is torn to pieces because his or her life partner has found greener pastures. We could list thousands and thousands of these liquid elements in today's reality which threaten to sink you. They all cause some kind of general angst, all the more so because the map of this fear is faded and unclear. The more unclear and indefinite this fear, the more desperate is the search for concrete objects or persons who can be blamed for your diffuse fears. The goal of personal safety is perfectly suitable as one object. It is known who is guilty, what to do, and most importantly — that there is, in fact, something one can do.

**LG:** That means it quickly becomes clear what a citizen has to do...

**ZB:** The big advantage of transferring this general level of existential uncertainty to the more concrete level of personal safety is that, then, one finally recognizes what to do. I can put better locks on my doors, or a monitoring system around my house, sensors that recognize every stranger who approaches. After every assassination, every bomb, every act of terror, new tasks emerge. People find some goals and a concrete occupation on which they can focus. It gives them a sense of participation in an important and useful endeavour. I cannot prevent my company, who gave me my occupation and my family the means of existence, from moving to Bangalore, but when I see a

suspicious person overdressed in a thick coat or carrying a suspicious package, I can go to the next policeman, or at least point that suspicious person out. When I get on a bus and see someone with olive skin digging in his bag, I can go and alarm the bus driver. I am no longer helpless. The costs of this are quite high, because the civil liberties that citizens have enjoyed ever since the Magna Carta have been suspended. Step by step the landscape of freedoms and liberties is being dismantled, which has been the source of so much pride for the British people. Recent research shows that 73 per cent of British respondents think this is a price worth paying in this dark game.

**LG:** So, limiting civil liberties is not so unpopular. Maybe the queen's subjects are not looking for protection against state powers, but rather expect to be protected *by* the state.

**ZB:** Every coin has two sides. The fact that you can communicate via the Internet with someone based in New Zealand and discuss the details of some sort of project also has its dark side. Not only terrorist activities, but virtually every criminal activity could be based on this global net. In this context, a monopoly on the use of force, which according to Max Weber formed the basis of the modern state, ceased to exist long ago. It has become very clear that this monopoly, which the nation–state has long claimed for itself, was designed to fit into the framework of territorial battles and wars. It was about gaining certain territory, and installing your military forces there, subjecting that gained territory to your own administration and preventing others from taking it away. In the past, sovereignty and authority were defined territorially. And the state–run military force was a sort of guarantee for this order. Today's terrorism, being a phenomenon of the era of globalization, is by definition extra–territorial, and it thus eludes such a definition. The most powerful armed forces of all time, using the most sophisticated technical equipment and having at its disposal the greatest budget in history, is helpless against the individual using pocket weapons weighing a pound. This is a very peculiar military force, which has no headquarters, no military base, no barracks to be bombed. This military force appears from nowhere and then disappears into thin air. Its organizational structures are of only theoretical importance. You could easily use the metaphor of a swarm of bees. There is no commander, there are no orders, there are no sergeants or corporals, and for some reason so many separate individuals are following the same path, even moving in a similar way. In the Middle Ages there was an image of the enemy as a mirror copy of ourselves. The Antichrist also had its apostles, though perhaps thirteen instead of twelve, and its hierarchy of devils were seen as anti–angels... If Al–Qaeda really exists, it is as a global, extremely Manichean conception of the world with a wide array of potential disciples. The Manichean vision — consisting of two separate worlds in which the "other" half is ruled by Satan and "our" half is the one where good and truth reign — is by no means an invention of Islamic fundamentalism.

**LG:** The war against the West has been going on in the name of the Russian soul, the Germanic race, Communism, and now in the name of Islam. But Occidentalism, as an ideology of hate against the West — and when based on religious grounds — turns into a holy war against an absolute evil. In this holy war, true believers must destroy the false god of Western materialism with all the powers and means they have at their disposal. Can such a war be won?

**ZB:** Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Much more than a politicizing of religion (regardless if it is Muslim or any other), we are facing the "religionizing" of politics, in which the normal conflict of group interests is

regarded as an eschatological matter, and the confrontation of these interests is given an apocalyptic character. It is a longing for certain things in an unstable world. It is an escape from extremely complicated problems we cannot even name. It is a longing for the "great simplification". It is nostalgia for a lost, simple world and the simple array of tasks within this world. In this general cacophony — in which serious debate about the state of affairs almost never takes place, and in which television shows have actors in front of the footlights shouting slogans at one another and using "word-bites" against one another — one needs some kind of certainty. One needs a simple division between good and evil, in which our hearts are immaculate, and the evildoers are condemned, with no hope of redemption. Let's remember that Islam has no monopoly on this vision. If we look at Palestinian and Israeli radicals, they both, amazingly, use the same sort of vocabulary. Both the Palestinian and Israeli sides present the conflict as a final clash between Jehovah and Mohammed and not between Palestinians and Israeli settlers. We see a quite similar kind of vocabulary when we analyze the news coverage of the last American elections, although the gods being worshiped had different names. But one must admit that in this vast current of today's Manichaeism, Islam has occupied a very important position, and this is for geopolitical reasons.

**LG:** Is geopolitics a servant of religion, or is it the other way around?

**ZB:** Let's start from the very beginning. The Islamic world is sitting on oil. It is quite obvious that energy resources will play a key role in shaping the new geopolitical order of the twenty-first century. And the resources available in the Middle East are the only ones that could be operational by the middle of this century. I will not be able to witness it, but you will be able to see it with your own two eyes, and then you will find that, unfortunately, I was right. The economies of the great powers of the world, and particularly the largest economy, are based on cheap fuel. The situation becomes more serious when we consider that China as well as India are both about to motorize their billions of inhabitants. Imagine a world in which every Chinese and Indian family decides to buy a car and fill it up with fuel. Whoever has control of the world's oil resources will be able to dictate global conditions. The world of big business is perfectly aware of this fact. But obviously, people living in the oil producing regions whose fate is dependent on these resources are also fully aware of this. So, there's nothing amazing about the fact that America is trying to gain a major influence over that region. The story starts just after the Second World War, from the CIA plot against Mossadegh, who was brave enough to nationalize Iranian oil resources. After that, quite nasty authoritarian regimes obedient to the Americans were installed in the region, and often they used religious fundamentalism to legitimize their authority. There was not the slightest chance for any civil liberties and, even less, for democracy. The most prominent examples of this are Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The Arab elites are perfectly aware of the fact that sitting on oil allows them to control the West, and although the West has this enormous economic and military advantage, they can always think up new ways to raise the stakes. We face, on the one hand, this elite, who is gradually gaining self confidence or even becoming insolent, and on the other hand the impoverished masses, who have not profited from this distorted process of Westernization, and who have already lost their sense of security. All these factors put together are a truly explosive mixture. Well, let's try to remember our own prophets of terror, for example Bakunin and [Siergiej] Nieczajew and the devils invented by Dostoevsky. They shared the same fertile ground, where the frustrated and disillusioned intelligentsia meets the impoverished and humiliated masses. Such people — who in fact have no chance for a life of dignity — are easily convinced they

also have a chance to make a mark on the world. The American–Israeli Satan will not allow you to have this life of dignity, but you can die in dignity and make your mark in this world by wounding Satan. It is a very cynical concept to misuse a religion for the realization of goals which, in fact, have nothing in common with religion whatsoever.

**LG:** Is this just yet another example of religious propaganda, or is it a concept for political action?

**ZB:** It is just an ideology. But the crucial difference from the political ideology produced in intellectual salons is that its aim is not to inspire the masses to think, but to take action — the murdering of the unfaithful through a suicide of the faithful. As with every ideology, it channels the emotions. It also simplifies the vision of the world and narrows choices, and in any case the recipients of this ideology are candidates for a suicidal death. I am not quite sure if Bin Laden uses exactly the same phrasing with his closest collaborators, or applies the same vulgarized schema of conflict, but the world is full of this sort of thing. The teachers of future suicide bombers are intellectuals. They are people who, according to our own criteria, are well–educated and have earned degrees, frequently *magna cum laude* and quite often from the most elite Western institutions. In our disorganized world, the struggle currently taking place is not about the shape of the future world order, but rather about who is going to decide this shape. And each side of this dispute is using all the resources at its disposal. America is using all its military power and economic might. Islam has its own trump card, which is going to be decisive in this dispute. It is the fact that in more or less thirty years — maybe even sooner considering stock exchange madness — it will become evident that there is nothing more precious, and at the same time essential, for the maintenance of civilization than oil.

**LG:** Do you think that terrorism counts on Western weakness?

**ZB:** If terrorists' goal is to sow the seeds of doubt in Western societies about their own power, or to spread panic, or to incapacitate Western societies, the terrorists can count on help from big television broadcasters, who tirelessly spread the pictures of horror. They also know that the state's prevention measures create an atmosphere of constant oppressiveness and propagate the notion of a besieged fortress, of the enemy being at the gates. We are facing a situation where every person with a rucksack or any driver of a minivan could be a murderer in disguise. Secondly we discover that the monitoring powers of the state are growing. Two or three people with very primitive devices can produce an amazingly paralyzing effect. The world is full of such explosive material. On the other hand, the military powers of the West find themselves in quite the opposite situation; even billions of dollars and countless victims cannot wreak such havoc. One can say that while the anti–terrorist coalition will have to use an axe for shaving, the terrorists can use a razor blade to chop down a forest. This war is unwinnable.

**LG:** The range of activities the state can undertake in the name of security actually has no limits. Can this escalation of arms be stopped?

**ZB:** This is a process with its own momentum which will not stop without intervention by us. Both sides are inflaming the atmosphere of confrontation. We have to become reasonable, and understand that typhus cannot be treated with a rash cream. Without getting at the root causes, nothing can be done.

**LG:** So how were they able to end the terrorism in Northern Ireland?

**ZB:** The end of the terrorism in Northern Ireland was an effect of the economic miracle in the neighbouring republic. It was partly a matter of utter exhaustion. A life of constant danger — under the threat of gunfire and the thunder of bombs — became, in the end, unbearable. When the people of Northern Ireland crossed the border down to the Irish Republic, they saw people enjoying life, enriching themselves, drinking in pubs and thinking more about their next dinner than about oiling their gun barrels. They looked around, became jealous, and the message spread. One cannot exclude the possibility that, in the long run, the epic of terrorism we are now going through will end in this way. It will not happen, however, through the desperate and irregular — and thus ineffective — application of military and police methods. Agreements on debt relief and sustainable development for the poorest have contributed more to the cause of fighting terrorism than the American invasion of Iraq.

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