



Living in Times of Interregnum

Transcript of the Lecture delivered by Professor Zygmunt Bauman at the University of Trento, Italy, on October 25, 2013

The Lecture was organized by the Jean Monnet European Centre of Excellence of the University of Trento, Democracy and Global Governance Research Center and the World Public Forum "Dialogue of Civilizations". It is related to the "22 Ideas to Fix the World" book (New York University Press, 2013)

Zygmunt Bauman, Emeritus Professor, University of Leeds:

Dear guests we are here to welcome a great book which has been published thanks to professor Dutkiewicz, professor Sakwa, Professor Della Sala, the book which says two different things. One insists on the fact that the world needs fixing, that there is something essentially wrong with the way we live. Then second thing, it suggests some sorts of things which could be done, which need to be done, which must be done to order to fix the world we live in.

I think the book will be much more important for a simple reason, because you have a whole life in front of you. You can treat this book as an inventory of issues with which you have to cope one way or other, and the result depends on the decisions you make how to tackle the issues we shall discuss.

Let me start from quotation from a very wise man and a wonderful writer J.M. Coetzee, a South African writer whom I personally reconsider to be the best novelist living, novelist among philosophers. The quotation I would like to read is from his recent diary which he called "Diary of the bad year". He raised "The question of why life must be likened to a race, or of why the national economies must race against one another rather than going for a comradely jog together, for



the sake of health, is not raised. But surely God did not make the market - God or the Spirit of History. And if we, human beings made it, can we not unmake it and remake it in a kindlier form? Why does the world have to be a kill-or-be-killed gladiatorial amphitheater rather than, say, a busily collaborative beehive or anthill?" Really a big question, because what is the necessity. The necessity is part of our past decisions and the decisions we are making now lay the foundations for the necessities of the world. Let us be quite clear about our responsibility for the state of the world and let us be aware of the gravity and the consequences of how we live our own life.

The topic of the presentation today is Interregnum, where from it comes? As far as I can say, it appears for the first time in Titto Livio history of Rome from foundation of the city he described the role of the first legendary king of Rome Romulus. Romulus, according to him, ruled Rome for 38 years and 38 years were an average length of life of an average person, which means that when Romulus died or as Titto Livio suggests was raised to heaven, there were very few people in Rome who remembered a world which did not contain Romulus. That was the first interregnum, the time of panic, of completely decomposition of life, of complete uncertainty. People were used to the idea that whatever needs to be done and how people need to live comes from Romulus. He will tell you. What is coming from his castle settle the state of affairs, the state of things, and all the recommendations will be done.

Antonio Gramsci picked up this concept and he gave an updated meaning of the concept, meaning going beyond the change of king, the period which existed in ancient Rome between disappearance of Romulus and appointment of Numa Pompilius as a next king of Rome. According to Gramsci interregnum is a situation in which the old ways of doing things do not work any longer, but new ways of doing things has not been yet designed and put in place.



There are 3 aspects of living in the world of interregnum. First of all we are haunted by ignorance. We do not know what to do, how to do it. The book “22 ideas to fix the world” is one of the expressions of many disparate, diffused, often discoordinated ideas which simply manifest our lack of self-confidence, lack of belief, trust in the knowledge we already possess how to do things. Ignorance. The other aspect very closely lettered to ignorance is the feeling of impotence, that we do not know how to do it, how to go about it, who is going to do it. Even if we had 100% volume of the knowledge required to change the world and to save the world, make it more hospitable to humanity, we would not be able to put in life our ideas. The third aspect is the most painful in the last respect is the loss of self-confidence and the feeling of humiliation, we are inadequate, whatever we do does not have much consequence, nothing happens, we are trying this and that, sometimes we are coming close to very great self-sacrifice, but nothing really happens. We are not up to the task which is confronting us. Once you believe that, than you stop acting, you stop thinking, which means that we are in sort of a vicious circle in a time of interregnum, we exacerbate all the things which make us ineffective in shaping our joint future.

I suggest that our present crisis is not so much pre-crisis of ideas, ideas are abandoned. Real ideas are very prolific. What is really dangerous crisis is the crisis of ages. When I was a young person, my generation was quarrelling about “what is to be done”, we were short of good ideas, and we looked for those ideas. Today, as I said, there is no lack of ideas any longer, what is happening actually is a lack of ages. The question is not so much “what is to be done”, the problem is today “who is going to do it?” There was a period of interregnum when Gramsci wrote about it from prison. It was in late 20s – early 30s when he wrote his copybooks from prison and he wrote about the crisis, collapse of the society after the World War I, massive unemployment, massive inflation, things falling apart. What was the difference between that crisis and our crisis of 2007 of collapse of credit? The



difference then was that people in 1920s-1930s knew how is going to improve the state of affairs. Of course the government, the state, the cities were powerful and they believed in state, there were different programs which were directed to the same place. If only we win the next election, if only we will take power, if we will occupy governmental offices, the program will be implied. The state had the ability to shape the state of affairs.

Then there was another period of interregnum in late 1970s-early 1980s – unemployment in spite of active role of the state and preventing it was against on the race, inflation was going up and efficiency of production was falling down, so clearly the things as they were done in 1950s-in 1960s, in 1970s could not be done in the same way any longer. Again, some sort of a crisis of ages, but again big difference with our own crisis, simply because in 1970s people believed in those who will do the job? Invisible hand of the market will do the job. State bureaucrats could do it but the market in its infinite wisdom will accomplish the task.

When struck the last credit crisis conducted by spending long-earned money, after that ended the difference from those two interregnum periods was that there was no savior. Without trust, state any longer and its capacity to improve things and we don't trust the wisdom or the invisible hand of the market. So who is going to do it? I suggest you that this interregnum, which we are going through today, is deeper and more serious and more prospect less that those which our ancestors experienced. That puts us in a very difficult predicament.

Just a few thoughts how it came to it, how it happened. Well, the reason of all the present interregnum period is the divorce between power and politics. Power is ability to have things done and politics is ability to decide which things are to be done. This two capacities both equally necessary for having things done, for being affective, for accomplishing the changing society were united since approximately 1555. What happened in 1555? There was a long period of religious



wars before Europe was almost devastated, according to contemporary calculations about 30 to 50% of the population of Western part of Europe at least was killed or murdered, disappeared in the result of direct combat in the war and massacres. In 1555 representatives of the ruling dynasties of Europe engaged in this cultural, religious wars came together in order to design a formula which will finally put an end to this disaster that was developing on the continent. And they found a formula. It was the formula *Cuius regio, eius religio*. Who rules has the right to decide in what God he is subject ought to believe.

That was the only formula regulating the relationship between different versions of Christianity. It was also a very important and had tremendous consequences a formula establishing the principle of territorial absolute undivided sovereignty of the ruler. And at the same time the prohibition for everybody else outside the territorial boundaries of the state to interfere with what is going on, what is happening inside these boundaries. It took almost 100 years of struggle on many battlefields of Europe for the formula actually to take roots. The first meeting was in Augsburg, and in 1648 another meeting took place, this time in two other German cities, where again representatives of ruling dynasties came to debate and then they agreed to follow this principle. Since then this formula started to guide the process which was essential to the establishment of modern society. There began the process of the modern nation building. But the nation building which was combined all along with the modern state building, nation and state needed each other tremendously; they couldn't live without each other. The nation needed the state to establish its right to sovereignty over the territory, occupied by many different ethnic groups, different languages, and different historical memories. Modern nation should be created as a unity and for doing just that it needed the coercive powers of the state. Otherwise it would not happen. The state needed nation as its legitimation, the fact that what state is requiring from its citizens is justified. This claim was based on the idea that the state is representing



the interest of the nation. The mission of the nation, the prospect of the nation - that is all for the national good. Both agents needed each other and could not live without each other and to achieve the situation, a very simple operation was needed – in the formula *Cuius regio, eius religio* you should change only one word and say *Cuius regio, eius natio*. And that is exactly what happened, that is how and that is why there were two world wars, they were wars between Europeans, stage on the global scene.

Remember Europe at some point being at a time when it was the only part of the globe which really modernized and therefore developed its own military and economic superiority over the rest of the globe, Europe expanded and while expanding in its colonialist policy, imperialist policy, it also took idea of the territorial sovereign nation state as the basic rule to organize the human cohabitation.

The question is that the principle of territorial sovereignty left a very important trace behind. Certain number of political institutions which served transforming the idea of territorial sovereignty into reality, into state of affairs. Idea of representative democracy, idea of triple separation of power, many other things, Supreme Court, - all that was invented in order to serve the reality and the reality was the division of the globe between different territorially sovereign nation states.

On assumption that still as before the territorially sovereign state has both the power and political instrument to do the job. But this is no longer the case. That is precisely what is changed. This is precisely why you look as curbs on your prime ministers, whoever they are, you haven't lost trust in any one single political party, but the whole party system, and it does not deliver. You do not believe that appealing to the government to implement this or that policy you will have all the effect, because even if the politicians are very honest and deeply moral people, not corrupted and not stupid, they are simply missing the means to reach the goal. That



is because of the process of globalization which so far consists in one thing only – I call it negative globalization, because what is happened is just sucking out power from the territorial entities, putting them in the no men’s land. The powers that has been taken away from the state, powers of trade, investment, movement of capital, they are now put beyond political control. Why the politics remained as local as it was hundred or two hundred years ago. It is confined to one territorial nation state however power the nation state is, it is quiet painfully aware that it is not in full control of its own country. It’s not. When politician make decisions, they wait nervously till Monday when the stock exchanges reopen and then they will know whether their decisions have any chance of being really set in place or whether they made a mistake. Our governments at the moment are in what can only called double binned, that means government of every territorial state is under pressure of two contradictory forces and has two maneuver between them, has to try to reconcile them and it is difficult task to perform. Two forces: you elect your governments, so that the governments depend on you and they have to listen to you. If they don’t listen to you then they won’t be elected again. They will lose power. This is the one pressure. They have to listen to the electorate and listening to the electorate they will have even to make promises. But there is another pressure coming from outside, from this powers which are no longer in the hands of the state which push the government in an opposite direction. If they really followed what the population want them to do then they could risk a tremendous trouble in which the country will fall. There is no easy exit from this situation when the problems confronted by our existing political institutions are globally produced, but the ways of dealing with them are locally qualified. We do not have so far anything on the global level which could be considered as an equivalent of the institutions which our ancestors invented and out in place for servicing territorial nation states. Power and politics remain in the state of divorce. Simply because the two are not commensurate. Power to very great extent is already global and politics to very great extent remains local. We are living between on the one



hand power which is emancipated from political democratical role and on the other hand politics which suffers of the deficit of power. That is why we feel ignorant, that is why we feel impotent, that is why we feel humiliated, that is why I suggest we should call the present crisis a crisis of ages, an institutional crisis. We lack the institutions which could marry again sufficient power and adequate political apparatus.

I guess that the rest of your life probably we will be conducted a sort of marriage brokers, we will have to remarry power and politics. Unless the both are equate to each other, not much we will be able to do in a very reasonable way make the planet more hospitable for humanity. There are arising, growing problems, quite profound problems which need speedy tackling and there is no powerful and politically able institution able to do it. Precisely because the sources are global and execution, the reaction to it is local. What problems? I will give you just two examples. One is the ongoing diasporization of the planet. Massive migration of the population which is globally produced, no one invited them in locality, they are coming because they are pushed from behind by the pressures of globalization, globalization of trade, globalization of the market and the losing of their traditional way of making the living which follows. They are globally produced, but they are from to the localities in order to be dealt with. Diasporization is a global phenomenal which is expected to be dealt with by global means. They could only be half hunted, they will create a lot of local conflicts and risk not coming anywhere near resolving the global problem of increasing production of redundant people which stands behind the mass migration. It is redundant people in their own territorial sovereign places which are forced to be on the move simple because all becoming redundant.

Second problem is the problem of the climate change but even more than that. It is the problem of sustainability of the planet. According to some trustworthy calculations we are already consuming one and a half planet which



means that we are consuming 50% more of the natural resources which our planet is able to offer us without becoming devastated. But according to other calculations in the next 40 years if we do not change anything in our way of life, our way of using the resources, which nature gave us, then in the 40 years coming, we would need 5 planets to sustain our way of life. There is a very little chance that 4 other planets will be found in 40 years time. You would say that it is also very unlikely that in 40 years time coming you will find means of remarrying power and politics and complement that negative globalization by the positive globalization, taking the let loose forces under control of the democratically elected powers.

The only thing I would like to tell you in the end is do not say that you have not been warned.

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