

**"France and the World
at the Dawn of 2007"**
Report of a Listening Post
held on 10th January



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post participants are invited to identify, contribute and explore their experiences in their various social roles:

- As working people, MDs, consultants, professors, or retired
- According to age, from 27 to 63
- As members of religious or political groups, neighbourhoods or any voluntary organizations
- As members of families and communities

This part was largely concerned with what might be called 'the stuff of people's everyday lives', aspects relating to participants' 'social' or 'external' world, but also their lives as Europeans, and citizens of the world.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. The following four themes were identified:

(a) precarious situations, rising poverty / demand for security and protection/social and financial support

Several participants observed that more and more people were in precarious situations, mainly because of job insecurity, and housing problems. While some people find this suddenly thrust upon them, for others it is a long-term situation (the 57-year-old spouse of one of the group members has been unemployed for several years, and has still not found a job). Job insecurity for young people is growing, and was almost institutionalised in France in early 2006 with the prime minister's idea of introducing the "CPE" lower-protection work contract for young people. This brings about a demand for security, and/or protection and/or social and financial support from parents, the company, or society. More and more people seem to be unable to take charge of themselves.

(b) distress and despair

Several of those present mentioned that they were aware of a good deal of distress in their entourage, including among people generally considered apparently privileged.

(c) radicalisation: democracy under threat

Several people observed that critical thinking was on the decline, while political correctness, conformity, clannishness and fundamentalism were on the rise. Freedom of

information is not under threat, but it is noted that the discourse is often based on standardised "pensée unique" thinking or political correctness.

(d) commitment / action inhibition / feeling of powerlessness

Faced with the large number of significant events (the war in the Lebanon, the rise in fundamentalism, job insecurity, immense socio-economic problems and mental distress, etc), most of the people present talked about how difficult it can be to commit to involvement, as the feeling of powerlessness can be all-consuming faced with the sheer scale and complexity of the task.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

job insecurity / security / financial support

Analysis:

Job insecurity is affecting more and more people in the entourage (caretakers, children, spouses, etc), even in social classes that until recently had considered themselves safe from such problems. A growing number of people are obsessed with the idea of loss even while they still have a job, a home, social status. These people live in the same heightened mental insecurity as those experiencing social and economic insecurity. This insecurity is the sign of the loneliness of some who no longer have the support of a social and/or family network, and the disintegration of a system of social protection providing assistance in an increasingly pinpointed, less sustained way. Meanwhile, the feeling of insecurity is also a subjective experience, and does not necessarily correspond to the person's real-life experience. The boundary between fear of real dangers and imaginary or exaggerated dangers is blurred. More and more people are living in the same heightened mental insecurity as those experiencing social and economic insecurity. Insecurity stimulates movements of solidarity.

But sometimes this solidarity has to cope with a massive demand for support. In such cases, solidarity could be transformed into rejection. There is a certain lack of intergenerational understanding from the older people in the group concerning the younger generations' fear of risk. They may forget that future prospects looked different thirty years ago, and while it is possible to take risks when you have a past history built on successes, it is much more difficult when you are young with no experience, and the future appears to offer no opportunities. As it is difficult to live with ambivalence, interpersonal solidarity is disappearing and the person is thrown back on the social system, which is known to be powerless. Rejection, individualism, guilt and feelings of powerlessness are gradually replacing solidarity.

Hypothesis

Because the people finding themselves thrust into insecurity are increasingly people like us, it becomes possible to identify with them. This could arouse archaic anxieties, when the Ego and the Non-Ego once again merge. When solidarity is too dependent on fantasies of reparation (M Klein), it turns into a feeling of powerlessness (depressive position) instead of developing a real capacity of concern (Winnicott). It is dangerous to ignore the socio-economic environment that arouses such affects.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

distress and despair

Analysis

The participants were sensitive to two sorts of distress: visible, but unexpressed distress (homeless people speak very little about themselves), and invisible distress in people who are able to speak about it (students who see psychiatrists). Distress is the product of an economy and a society. Like poverty, it appears to be part of the system, as if it were the price to pay for the system to work. Some people will get through, others won't. Both distress and poverty arouse compassion and a feeling of revolt; but also a feeling of powerlessness and guilt. It needs both individual and collective commitment. The risk is indifference or spectacularisation (which can however sometimes get results).

Hypothesis

This distress is not just something that concerns others and may be visible or invisible. It is also a subjective experience, confronting each person with his/her own distress and personal history. It requires more collective elaboration, and because of this tends to turn the individual inwards rather than opening him up to others, being in solidarity with them.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

radicalisation: democracy under threat

Analysis

September 11th marked a turning point for the western world: the arrival of fundamentalism in an extremely visible and violent way. In its wake, and in the name of so-called fight against evil, all sorts of violent acts have been perpetrated (Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Iran, Sudan, etc). This radicalisation is clear everywhere, as are its consequences: rejection of differences, clannishness, self-justification, etc. This radicalisation also brings about the following:

- the "politically correct": increasingly fearful thinking,
- refusal of complexity
- decline in critical thinking
- increasingly strong influence of the media - who do the thinking for individuals: simplification, reduction.

The reality of an entire part of the world is being denied. Fighting this situation requires serious political analysis, an effort in self-reflection (how am I personally concerned by this?) and a strong personal and collective commitment when the media amplify the emotional dimension of events.

Hypothesis

Aggressive and destructive impulses are not highly elaborated, and projected away from

the person. Highly regressive behaviour, quasi-magical thinking: "in destroying the other, I destroy the evil in me".

Analysis and Hypothesis 4

commitment / action inhibition / feeling of powerlessness

Analysis

Most of the participants mentioned the need for commitment to fighting the situations analysed above. This analysis took place in depressive mode, although revolt and fighting spirit can be perceived in what they say. One person (a lecturer and researcher) stressed that as an intellectual, he felt very brilliant at analysing situations, and very inhibited in action. But he now refuses to take the neutral position of a researcher, and is no longer afraid to give his opinions (after having presented objective analysis of the situation) to students and managers in training. He even agrees to speak on TV programmes. The role of intellectuals is less important than it used to be. The media concentrate too much on emotional responses rather than the rational analysis that would enable intellectuals to commit to involvement. Emotions and sentimentality often take the place of reflection and commitment, and it is difficult to fight against this, even for oneself. For most people in the group, committed involvement is generally considered individually rather than collectively. This certainly partly explains the feeling of powerlessness. We are much too busy doing certain things to be able to take part in the movement for change but almost all of them consider that they participate of changing the world in their own invisible way but there is so much to do everywhere. . .

One person said "I'm close to retirement and I don't have enough energy any more. It's time for the younger ones to take over." The younger ones belong to the "zap generation", get involved in a campaign then disappear. They say they are sensitive to sustainable development but buy extremely expensive brands. It was also remarked that their generation has no authority figure, or frameworks to rely on.

Hypothesis

The ideal of the Ego acts as an alibi and inhibits action: the amount of difference we can make is laughable compared to the sheer scale of the task. The Superego and guilt thus come in. Individualism and individualisation make significant contributions to these feelings of powerlessness and the lack of collective solidarity.

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