

**"France and the World
at the Dawn of 2006"**
Report of a Listening Post
held on 19th December



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Compte rendu de la réunion listening post du 19 décembre 2005

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

The themes discussed by the present people are related both to their professional life, to their age (position in the genealogy) and to the way in which they lived through the events of the past year. Spontaneously, people connect their day to day life with the "major preoccupations of the world"

The themes covered were:

- Youth
- Collective action
- Communication

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

Youth

Mood of the discussion

Youth is a real preoccupation for "the world is in the hands of the elderly" (which most of the present people are a part of). Overall, the underlying feelings are the ones of failure, guilt and depression:

- We do not know and do not have time to take care of them (nurture them)
- We failure to transmit our values and principles to them:

the republican principle of "Freedom, equality and fraternity (brotherhood)" are in perdition (ou distress) as well as the values which sustained the youngster of "Mai 68", such as freedom "it is forbidden to forbid", the refusal of consumption.

The future we have set up for them is not appealing:

There are economical difficulties, no social project. "A whole generation is in precariousness and we can no longer protect them from it".

Youth distinguishes itself by its diversity. The most discussed ideas were:

- The infant that the mother has problems in feeding because she has to get back to work quickly if she doesn't want to loose her job and jeopardise her career;

- Youth from the suburbs: "When I go to the suburbs, I realize that we cannot comprehend the younger generation for we no longer speak the same language";
- The theme of 'violence': For many nights hundreds of cars were burned down, not only in the suburbs of major cities (some people found out that when "everything is fine", on any given day no less than 100 cars burn in France, a situation which has become so ordinary that it is mentioned nowhere). Kids are mugged outside schools. This violence spreads out to small towns and villages and is no longer exclusively an issue related to the suburbs of big-major cities;
- By youth, one also means our students (There were 5 professors from prestigious private University "Grandes Ecoles") who ask from us recipes and solutions to succeed immediately/ rapidly, when we would prefer to teach them reflexivity and how to take a step back and have a broader view on things;
- It is because of a small proportion of 'arrogant' youngsters, who put us face to face with our failure to transmit the better world, which we had dreamt for them;
- It is our kids who isolate themselves in their rooms, each with their own TV set, which we actually bought/ paid for;
- Youth today also carries the issue of unmotivated and powerless parents.

However, there are also the parents who witness the success of their children, the fact that they are actually able to do things, which they themselves could not even have dreamt of at the same age: foreign studies, activities such as theatre.

Collective Action

Individualism / Communautarism

This era is increasingly defined by notions of individualism, though balanced by the development of communautarism.

The fact is, France is in a situation, which is one of decline of social cohesion and of collective action. The refusal of the European constitution illustrates this self-withdrawal of the French at large.

The communautarist withdrawal / fall back

When this social link exists, it increasingly takes a communautarist form, illustrated by a strong and active sense of identity and belonging reduced to one dimension - religion, colour of skin, living area/ place of residence.

In the wokplace, the economical requirements have now crushed most social preoccupations.

The effects of globalization can be felt. The short term objectives in terms of profit are achieved through the sacrifice of social preoccupations, redundancies and delocalization, "People no longer talk, they count." The number of patients treated and to the budget spent measure the efficiency of a medicine doctor at hospital more than to the actual "good" he or she can do. The economical logic has now taken over the notion of care. There is an increasing shift between the values of individuals and the ones of the firms in relation to these same individuals. People have a feeling of lack of qualification and uselessness. This results in a lower self-esteem and/or more and more cynicism.

Relationships of domination remain

Men/ Women, North/South, Adolescents/ Adults, the employee/the company

The rule of the game is collective, but the success is individual.

Only the strong, the powerful, the dominant can have individual strategies. They take advantage of the weak and oppressed ones. There can be a genuine instrumentalisation of the other: "I use the other to my own ends."

What represents power is totally delegitimated

The embezzlement within the firms, by politicians is common practice. There is an unquestionable failure of the capital, the intellectuals and the politics.

People condemn this self-withdrawal, but they feel powerless. These problems are so important and so complex that we lack a solution to handle them. What a person on its own can do is very insignificant in comparison to the immensity of the task. When people decide to go on strike, it is without the slightest illusion of being able to change anything "thank god there is still the pleasure of being together."

There are less and less mediatory institutions.

The associations have considerable difficulties in surviving and fulfilling their roles. Many of them have bureaucratized themselves, and the members of such structures now spend more time fighting against this bureaucratization than actually accomplishing their social mission. The institutions (The state, Police, School, the political sphere) have taken on the role of these structures associations in decline, due to bureaucratization and/or lack of funding. But the problem is that they are far from the actual reality and fail to be successful in that role. As a result, associations no longer feel concerned.

Valorisation of immediate action, or proximity, the micro resistances:

Nevertheless, some people, companies have a local action and give some of their time to try to build a better world.

Communication or the crisis of the social bond

People communicate, but no longer talk.

The two established facts that came to mind immediately and spontaneously were "we communicate before even thinking (mobile phone, instant messenger, SMS, emails) and "people no longer manage to talk properly". Something that illustrates this idea well is the scene where two people are at the restaurant, each of them on the phone with someone and utterly ignoring the person opposite them. Formerly, the telephone had a wire that connected people implicitly; today, individuals use wireless devices, mobile phones with earflaps, thus giving a sense of people soliloquizing and listening to themselves. All these new mediatory devices are designed to talk more than to listen. Each social group invents its own language, which others do not understand. (Youth slang, jargon). A father admits that he communicates by email with his son when he is in California, but fails to talk to him when he is in his room in the family flat/house.

All this communication is here to prevent us from thinking.

The immediacy of today means of communication (mobile phone, email, instant messengers, news on CNN) pushes us to communicate before we think. Information arrives in masses, repeated and repeated incessantly for a whole day until they finally disappear, without a trace, leaving no specific impact of the viewers/listeners. The group also concluded that these messages are simplistic and deprived of a true meaning.

The spectacular aspect of information seduces the audiences and prevents them from using their mind. Sensationalism annihilates the very act of thinking. The Media develops and encourages the passivity of those who are exposed to it, taking most information for granted or as serious thoughts. Wireless internet in university lectures or seminars worry the teachers, who feel that they need to be more appealing and interesting than instant messengers or internet itself.

The content of communication

Furthermore, the Media fool us, deliberately or not. The information can no longer be trusted. Previously, we used to find out about dangers or catastrophes after they occurred, now we witness them live, as they happen, if not even before and without any means of preventing them of affecting our lives (ex: Grippe Aviaire)

Blogs, autobiographies, reality TV shows, all these resemble more a modern form of exhibitionism than a possible means of bringing people together. Similarly, in popular television shows, the imitators steal the fame from the very people they imitate. There is a sort of "dereality" of what is provided to us as viewers.

Artistic creation is threatened, more than ever before, by the ever so easy and free access to artistic creations (music, film, text).

Freedom/ Dependence

There is a real dependence to mobile phones: as soon as people leave a place, they hastily grab their mobile phones, to see if someone has tried to reach them or what they have missed. And yet, a mobile phone, an instant messaging system and internet enables people to be reached in any place, work wherever they wish: they can work where and when they decide to and in the end, ultimately, finally, much more than when at work with a strict timetable. We are constantly reachable. People can get a hold of us at any time and to/from any place. Simultaneously, they give the impression to have thousands of things to say. Meanwhile, corresponding by email can also be very pleasant. The telephone or messaging systems also enable people to get back in touch with one another after having lost contact.

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We failure to transmit our values and principles to them:

The future we have set up for them is not appealing:

There are conomical difficulties, no social project. "A whole generation is in precariousness and we can no longer protect them from it".

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Youth

Analysis:

Conflicts between different generations have indeed always existed, but they have taken a particularly acuteness nowadays.

The youth is the symptom of an endangered society, of the limits of the neo liberalism, of non elaborated contractions, of parents who, for most of them, do not know what to do and feel very lonely facte to contradictory words, who, for some of them, refuse to see the world as it is and take refuge in nostalgia of an utopia which had never came true. This is obvious through:

- Violence

Adolescence is by definition the age of opposition, one of rebellion. It appears that most of today's youngsters have had parents who were teenagers in "Mai 68". At the time, the leitmotiv was "it is forbidden to forbid". In many cases, these youngsters lack references, a frame in which to fit, a kind of "Super Ego". There seems to be something psychopathic about many subjects who belong to that generation. Because the future they feel is promised to them does not fill them with hope, they want it all, and now. They are well into immediate consumption when most parents, in 1968, fought against the very principle. They are in the immediate enjoyment. It is practically as if they incarnated the return of the repressed of the previous generation. It had been able to both sublimate in ideology and live their drive through the "sexual liberation" in the early 70's. However, we can ask if May 68 is not an alibi, and is used instead of deep reflection. This illustrates the ready-made thinking, the refusal of thinking we shall talk in the next section.

The youth is acting out. Now, they cannot find the words to voice their frustration and rebellion nor the motives that result in them. There is also enjoyment in destruction. We can note that they destroyed what they are excluded and which represent the aspirations of the previous generation. It looks like destruction, revenge and self-destruction. It may very well be the only outcome in front of the contradictory, paradoxical injunctions, which they have to face. They have to succeed but nobody gives them the tools to achieve it. This youth, in a way, symbolizes the fear of 'the other', of difference. The violent attitudes and manifestations from these suburban kids only shadows the violence they themselves are victim. They are brought back to the limits and the rules or confronted to them, in an extremely violent way by the institutions (schools, police, firms, job industry at large) if not simply excluded from the system.

The paternal authority is strongly questioned, if not in total decline. The father is jobless, away or just unavailable (because he works too much - the disillusion of May 68 having pushed him in the opposite direction, he now finds himself power-driven and obsessed by economical success). For some of them, work has become a way of running away from a too disappointing world or the only place of social recognition.

The "older brother" replaces the father but has not the experience nor the legitimacy according to adults, neither the symbolic place. More generally, institutions no longer assume their representation of the law. They no longer act as exteriority

- Exclusion

The ageing of the population amplifies the obvious gap between generations and justifies the normal conflicts that arise from them. Unemployment amongst the young is high because of companies more concerned by their profit than by people and by the adults employees who still feel perfectly fit for the job and refuse to give it away because they do not want to be excluded from the socioeconomic system. These people also feel threatened by the young motivated and ambitious employees, cheaper and more qualified in the new economical areas that they do not comprehend. Meanwhile,

these same young and ambitious workers are told that they will have to pay for the retirement pensions of this older generation, who ironically already is in a comfortable position.

The republican democratic school has now become a school, which excluded. Even teachers no longer know which method to use to teach and to facilitate the integration of these "kids of diversity" (a reference to the debates, within the ministry of education, on the methods used to teach how to read, which have been going on for decades). The institutions, which were supposed to compensate the presence and education given by parents no longer support the youth.

Frustration, failure, powerlessness and guiltiness of the adults. We fail to listen to them, when we do, we do not understand, when we think we do, they send us back to our incapacity and failure to build them a future filled with our hopes and dreams (frustrated by a better world). "They do not fulfil our desires". The youth, today, expects that which adults cannot or will not give them. Children are sunk into the politico-socio-economical reality of the XXI century, when certain (many/most) parents still live with the disillusion of having failed to build themselves the life which they always dreamt about (which they fantasised about).

Hypothesis

There is a huge discrepancy between the present-day imaginative world and the previous generation one. Today people are concerned by individuality, immediacy, virtual reality, and immediate enjoyment. They cannot dream together. It is as if there was both no past and no future for this generation, stuck in an unpleasant and disillusioned reality (present). It really seems like the Imaginary and the Real will not tie so well with the Symbolic any longer. There is a definite lack of Symbolism. Today's youth lacks a playing space (in Winnicott's sense).

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Collective Action

Analysis

Fragility due to identity crisis and a communitarist withdrawal.

Identity no longer is defined by the tensions between the identical and the different, between the "Me" and the "Not-Me". It no longer seems to be in perpetual construction, feeding on the exchanges that the individuals has with his environment. "The other" in his difference, has become a source of dangers and various threats. These differences are driven by logics of exclusion and non-complementarity. People are looking for sameness. At the hospital, for example, there cannot be a logic of both health care and economical profit: it is one or the other. The Muslim represents a danger for the Catholic, the black person for the white, and reciprocally. The group has become a place of fusional regression, one of illusion and narcissistic comforting. It is the return of the notion "small is beautiful. Because people need to feel in control of all their immediate actions whilst they also feel that these are important and significant.

Hypothesis

The transitional space (a mother who is both reassuring and frustrating) no longer applies today, for the outside world is perceived as threatening. The situation can be defined as a groupal narcissistic regression.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Communication

Analysis

For some time, the group used the word "communication" instead of "information", which underlies the current tendency to give more importance to the content of the message rather than to the person it was addressed to.

Dependence, solitude and illusion

When on the one hand it is difficult to communicate, contemporary media want us to believe the opposite, that communication is a simple thing, an easy science. There is a true dependence to mobile phones as illustrated by the scene in the restaurant, where the fear of having missed something is clearly demonstrated.

The new vectors of communication act as prosthesis, revealing incapacity to be in touch with the people close to us. Their utilisation is frenetic and addictive and proves the incapacity of these vectors to compensate a lack of true love. They illustrate the deep loneliness of individuals.

Increase of anxiety and helplessness

It is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish the real from the false. We live in a world of image and appearance (myth of the cavern - Platon). We no longer have access to the real (World of Ideas). We are constantly manipulated by the media and have practically no way of doing anything about it. The news and information we are subjected to contradict themselves and the truths and lies grow increasingly hard to distinguish (Weapons of mass destruction in Iraq).

Difficulties in accepting our lack, our own limits and the limits of others

Everyone/everybody seems constantly connected with someone else, with an "other reality", as if the reality at reach, the present time and place simply isn't enough anymore, the professor, the friend etc can no longer satisfy or suffice to one's happiness. It is practically as if the limits of the other or of the situation itself are unbearable; as if, by just being there, one is missing something greater or essential elsewhere. However, this also sends us back to our own insufficiency.

Hypothesis

The feeling of unrealness regarding today's world as it can be felt (or not) has something to do with psychosis. The narcissistic fragilness's are awoken by what seems to be the omnipotence of the media in everyday life which are put in the Other's place. It is as if the Other is pulling the strings, People strive for Ego Ideal. This illustrate the difficulty of "being alone in the presence of someone else".

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