

**"France and the World
at the Dawn of 2009"**
Report of a Listening Post
held in January



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experience in their various social roles, be those in work, unemployed, or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood or voluntary or leisure organisations, or as members of families and communities. This part was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives', that relating to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was for us to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. The following represents a clustering of at least some of these themes.

Theme 1: Relationship to reality in a bubble – closeness / distance / detachment / involvement

Several themes lay behind what is experienced as a 'strange relationship with reality.' The following expressions signifying this relationship with reality came up several times.

- Being on the outside/inside
- A restricted view of the world
- Being in one's place, finding one's place
- Being in a private bubble
- Feeling comfortable where one is
- Being in a private bubble

Very surprisingly, a third of participants said that when they thought about preparing for the meeting, no situation or event came immediately to mind. "We don't even realize any more that we're living in a world." One person mentioned that she felt as if she was living in a 'bubble,' and this expression was later used by 3 other people. Most of the participants did not feel personally concerned by the financial and economic crisis. "Whatever has to happen will happen, I'll manage to make something of it somehow," even some people mentioned that the crisis could have very serious financial consequences for their personal assets.

- The shrinking world

The election of Barack Obama, the invasion of Georgia, the war in the Congo were only referred to late in the discussion. For others, there was a perception that the world in which they feel directly involved and concerned is shrinking. One participant who had

previously been very involved politically and socially, acknowledged: “I do not feel concerned any longer by solidarity to be able to get interested in major issues of society.”

- Getting involved only where it is possible to be effective

Their preoccupations (and satisfactions) are centred on pupils, patients, and close friends. This is the sphere in which most of the people present find meaning, feel useful, are involved in sometimes-difficult ‘fights.’ “Where I am, I feel proactive, a desiring social subject, further along, everything I’m not in direct contact with is virtual, non-existent.” For several participants, involvement is important in their field of action and they enjoy it, but to do so they have had to change their environment or position. They have had to redefine the question ‘Within what boundaries do I feel that I am a social subject?’ The question of ‘energy’ was mentioned several times: “I don’t want to waste my energy on things I can’t influence.”

- Yet it is difficult despite everything to find one’s place and define the right position

The question of a person’s place in society was raised in relation to young people in the metro who not only refuse to give up their seats to older people “as I was taught to and did”, but on the contrary, actually rush to take empty seats. “But perhaps it’s only to be expected, since we take up all the places in companies and they can’t find any work.” (This question of awareness and guilt over certain phenomena will be developed further below.)

- Submitting or revolting

The question of the respect due to norms and habits has previously been mentioned with regard to the respect due to old people by young people: the daughter of one participant had fallen out with her grandmother because she considered the grandmother did not show her enough respect, saying “I don’t want to bow down.” This idea is also present in the film that won the Palme d’Or at Cannes, ‘The Class’ (*Entre les murs*), in which pupils criticize their teachers for not respecting them in the first place. Several participants remarked that young people are very sensitive to the respect shown them, or not shown them. The same idea was taken up by one participant who had been ‘summoned’ that very day by Mr Sarkozy to attend a speech given by the president on a topic that concerned her: teaching in France’s top higher education establishments (*grandes écoles*). She and her colleagues, (deans of university and *grandes écoles*; head managers of large firms) were particularly badly received (with long waits, no room in the lecture theatre which was reserved for students and journalists, etc). “Either we went, or there were worse measures of retaliation. I think things have worked like that since he became president and we don’t even notice it any more.” She talked about her rage at feeling manipulated by the political power. What is at stake is awareness of the world in which we live and her responsibility for her commitments.

Theme 2: Awareness, responsibility, guilt

The question of responsibility came up several times; the young generation / older generation; what space does the ‘older generation’ leave for the young generation (see above)? “Some of them are clinging on.”

Theme 3: Playing at sorcerer's apprentice

- One person who is preparing a thesis on sustainable development wondered about the true impact of his work
- Several participants felt they had played at 'sorcerer's apprentice.' Initially they felt the satisfaction of a job well done when they became aware belatedly and in very concrete ways of unanticipated effects. This was the case for one person who had led seminars on negotiation in the Democratic Republic of Congo 2 years ago: the participants are killing each other today. This delayed awareness comes with various powerful affects (such as doubt, guilt, and anger).
- The end of a civilisation / In-depth transformation of society
- Recognition of a hypermodern society
- It was recognised that we are living in a hypermodern civilisation (Aubert, 2004) with a range of symptoms, particularly excess, exaggeration of matters. The current president of France is seen as an illustration of this, as mentioned by several participants.
- Faster pace of time
- Ephemerality: "information is no longer kept after 2 years"
- Urgency of responses: "for 20 years now most decisions have been taken as a matter of urgency, without any real thought"
- Immediacy
- Fraying of the social fabric confronted by the crisis, rise in individualism and rise in the feeling of loneliness
- Feeling of working too much, stress, "I feel on the edge of burnout, like many in my entourage", mentioned by almost all participants
- The institutions that no longer play their role, the individual left to cope on his own (postmodernity)
- "Pragmatism is replacing politics"(listening post 2008)
- Loss of meaning, the performance word, display: The president is an illustration of that, outward display is more important than the result", "we're no longer dealing in the symbolic but in the real, and that's much more violent"
- "Our hyperactive president with a hyperattractive wife"
- The omnipotent ecological discourse that lets people believe the planet could be saved by turning a tap.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts One and Two, with a view to collectively identifying the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at the time; and developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here the members were working more with what might be called their 'psycho' or 'internal' world. Their collective ideas and ways of thinking that both determine how they perceive the external realities and shape their actions towards them.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1: Relationship with reality

Analysis: involvement / sense making / commitment and transitional space.

Many participants have given up the idea of an ideal society, utopia, and have distanced themselves from their illusions. More than ever, current political life in France when it is incarnated in its president is looking like agitation, activism, manipulation, in which it is impossible to recognize oneself. The same is certainly true for the 'global world,' the illusion of sustainable development, as it is practiced by some (the question of outward display).

There is development of reflective analysis, production of meaning, but less involvement. Once people understand the operation and stakes of what is called politics (managing the city) as practiced today, there is a refusal to submit, refusal to be in collusion with such power. The individual thus stands back from society as a whole. He is looking for places where it is possible to think.

Therefore, the scope of commitment is reduced, since most people really want to make commitments and want their actions to lead to real, concrete change.

This produces an overall depressive tone to the discourse, although those who have found places to get involved also show certain serenity.

Hypothesis: painful process of subjection

For some, this is a process of subjection: the difficult rediscovery of the subject's freedom and creativity in the social context. "Subjection, meanwhile, is a more improbable process through which an individual (or a group, or maybe a class) sometimes manages to occupy places other than those assigned to it socially and institutionally" (Roche, 2007, p.164). This happens in a transitional space in which people give up the illusion of a totally good world, a world we could have a hold over. This is reflected in a retreat of the feeling of powerlessness, a fall in the associated complaints and development of capacities to get involved creatively.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2: Responsibility/ Guilt

Analysis: If 'being responsible' is being 'accountable,' responsibility begins with awareness of the impact of the individual's actions, no longer in the short term, but in the medium and long term. The point is no longer to "do what I'm paid to do well, but analyse the consequences of my actions after the event, beyond a restricted scope and over a period of time." This is the collapse of the 'easy conscience.' This generates feelings of guilt. Guilt is presumed to be connected to: The fact of having, compared to someone who has nothing (work, security, etc); A sort of easy conscience that is too

quickly and easily satisfied; Lack of reflection on the long-term consequences of these actions; The question of the distance separating apathy from indifference or obedience and submission to authority. Guilty feelings also relate to internalisation of certain external norms, internalisation of power, of certain social requirements, values and norms which are in contradiction with personal convictions. There is also arguably a desire for reparation in certain persons who are aware of this (Klein, 1968).

Hypothesis: The feeling of guilt experienced by some in relation to their actions is the first stage in becoming aware (rejecting repression) of their true place rather than their imaginary place in society. It is one of the factors of subjection of the individual, not the fruit of a Freudian superego, and contributes to reconstruction of the social fabric.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3: Process of mourning for a certain form of society – from hypermodernity to chaos, roaming desir

Analysis: While hypermodernity has always been a subject of complaint for many people (excess is becoming hard to bear), today it seems to be a very disorientating, even anxiety-inducing, factor. This society's illusion of omnipotence is increasingly clearly perceived. They are worried about the growing absence of the symbolic and the increasingly violent invasion of the real (the reign of pragmatism). They say they wish this society would disappear, but do not see what could replace it. Many participants admit that they no longer understand the events of the world around them.

Hypothesis: The loss of meaning concerning the society in which we find ourselves seems to have reached the limits of what is bearable. There is also a kind of failure of the imagination. If there is still a little desire, it is having great difficulty in finding its objects of investment. It is as if society was entering a process of mourning for its previous objects of investment (denial, disconnection of impulses, guilt, violence, depression, fear/rejection of the future, acceptance and recovery), and as if the members of that society were at different stages of this process.

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