

**"France and the World  
at the Dawn of 2011"**  
Report of a Listening Post  
held in January in Paris



**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.

It should also be noted that for the first I felt there was a ‘contamination’ effect between 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. From several presented these have been drawn together under the following interrelated themes.

It is important to note that although many people share the ideas discussed in each sub-topic (in a few rare cases ideas belong to one person), they are not shared by everyone. These ideas, experiences and analyses juxtapose each other, help complete each other, and even contradict each other. Even so, I am struck by the dialectical quality of the themes that came out of our day of analysis, a quality that is surely being strengthened at the time of writing by my own personal sensibility. The other point that emerged that evening – and which is again being highlighted during the writing of this report – is that the tone of discussion is much less depressive and despairing than it was last year, even if the assessment of ‘the state of the world’ remains the same (see below). It is as if the bottom has been reached, and this has allowed us to kick-start a new ascent towards the surface (see André Gide), all while continuing to be struck (even knock out) by these assessments and experiences. For many people, the anchor-points of their lives seem to have shifted towards the family (either in the form of roots or new generations).

**a. Roots, anchors**

- Family

This theme was addressed in multiple ways (family, home, wedding, native country and culture...) illustrating the complexity of the concept.

- The ‘beloved daughter’: during the presentations, one person used the phrase, “I have a daughter and I love her,” and it was then used many times by many other

people. The theme of marriage was omni-present: a couple with two children who married after the earthquake in Haiti; Marriage and lineage, the growth of the family unit: to what extents do the bonds of matrimony allow parents to recognize a new bride or groom as family members? Can a family grow only by procreation? The pleasure of spending several days with family in preparation for a daughter's wedding. Birth and assisted reproduction: a person was shocked that a friend from Burundi cannot accept that babies could be born with un-natural method. The family that no longer acknowledges his children. A person of the group has been contacted by a hospital that did not know who to notify following the death of a person (a journalist) on a public street in Paris. The person contacted was the neighbor of the deceased in a small apartment building of four units where everyone knew each other. The deceased was homosexual and had experienced significant social, economic, and psychological difficulties. The family (smalltime noteworthies from the provinces) were finally contacted but refused to take care of the funeral arrangements or to attend the burial but they were agreed to pay. She and other friends took care of the arrangements. This was a drama of solitude and un-employment finally ended in a family drama.

- Generations follow each other without resembling each other (see below: the son of an **anti-militarist** tradition family who joined the army). The family that is proud of the child because he has succeeded more than his parents. The (implicit) laws of inheritance, which mean that the 'estate' is transmitted to the oldest child in the family, to the detriment of the younger ones, who must 'exile themselves' to the nearest large city.
- The 'fate' of different branches of a family. The formerly privileged branches of a family find themselves impoverished once those who were forced to leave accumulate cultural, social, and economic capital. Biological families and families of affinity: Some of the (Brazilian and Turkish) students of one professor identified as their spiritual sons, and affective ties were formed. Last hope for a despair man : “My daughter gave me the most beautiful gift I have ever received: a little girl.” Family takes priority over work life for a young female consultant who gave up on commitments that were close to her heart.
- The precariousness of existence can become very disconcerting when we think of those closest to us. “Feeling of rebirth” of a participant when her **grandmother** gave her her ring. The family that determines the places and roles of its members: “My Burundian grandmother wanted to die because the family had given her a role she did not want to take on.” This idea was unacceptable to the family because [they believed] a person cannot make decisions about their fate or their life. The collective assigns the individual a place, a role.
  - Country of origin
- A 'final return'. The father-in-law of one participant returned to Italy in 2010 for the first time since he had come to France in the 1950s. He became a naturalized French citizen after a surge in rightwing influence (1980) led him to fear that he could be deported. To him, Italy was the country that had failed to provide for him; that had chased him away. He did not want to go back there. He was afraid of returning. But his son convinced him.

- Forgotten origins: The son who had 'succeeded' socially and economically had never thought about his family history. His father's return [to Italy] pushed him, even forced him, to look into his origins. The place and the role of individuals are different from one country from another (developed by a person from Burundi arrived in France when she was 3). When the cousins of one participant sold the family home, the family's 'more or less mythical' Jewish origins resurfaced.

#### **b. The mother tongue and the “words to say it”**

- A mother tongue is the language par excellence for the expression of emotion. Certain immigrants cut themselves off (or are cut off) from [their mother tongues] as part of their assimilation process, and thus cut themselves off from a part of themselves. Some people are unable to express what they think and what they feel because they lack the vocabulary and concepts necessary for this expression. They are cut off from themselves and cut off from others.
- “I listened to all the speeches that Obama gave to Congress, and that reconfirmed the positions I take on a daily basis in my work life,” said a medicine doctor who worked for the Regional Health Agency (the organization in charge of putting the government's new, neo-liberal policies in place). “I don't know how to talk about everything I've seen in the six months since the creation of that organization. Humor is the only thing that keeps us afloat.”
- Despite a seeming consensus between participants, ‘the state of the world’ was never defined, although it was cited on many occasions. This was surely in reference to the economic crisis, changes in democracy, internationalization, globalization, the dehumanizing effects of business, the ‘Roms episode’ (when it was decided that all of them will be expelled from France without any trial), “what's happening in Germany,” and workplace malaise. These things are seen as ‘scandalous’ and unacceptable, but they are not really analyzed. Emotional responses take primacy of place, facts are only rarely cited, and rational analysis is largely abandoned. It is a luxury to have the words to express oneself.

#### **c. Paradox**

I should note that I did not wish to make this a central theme. I thought it was an analytical theme. However, given the insistence of certain people in the group, I am going to give it the place they wanted.

- Trauma and daily life
- A woman who survived the volcanic eruption, and then the earthquake in Chile, was terrified several days later by the prospect of presenting herself to the French Embassy in an environment that was unfamiliar and unsettling.
- In a similar vein, a person was troubled that a couple who survived the earthquake in Haiti experienced later a number of petty and “rather uninteresting family squabbles”...like all families.

- Between origins and what is to come
- The family with (very distant) Jewish origins had a number of anti-Semites in its lineage.
- The last surviving members of an ancient line sold the family home (theirs since 1850), preferring the modern comfort of a 'bungalow'. The poor, disadvantaged branch of one family acquired intellectual, cultural, social, and in a small measure economic capital, which contrasted with the old branch of the family whose economic capital (linked to land) lost all its value. The son of one participant whose family followed a humanist, anti-military tradition chose a military career; the participant found this deeply destabilizing and began asking herself questions.
  - A changing world...but not that much!
- Two participants stated that they were overjoyed that the United States was implementing a healthcare system similar to the one in France, while the French government was progressively distancing itself from that system in order to privatize healthcare and open it to the free market. The price of 'generosity' was sharp political sanctions for Obama.
- “Nothing has changed”: a person (consultant in organization) of the group notices that, in spite of all what has been said about the crisis, nothing has changed in the organizational talking and practices. People are still stressed, manipulated. It cannot go on!
  - A withdrawal which is not selfish
- A participant, who is usually deeply involved in question of governance, was surprised that he did not feel 'egotistical' when he abandoned his normal preoccupations in order to take care of his loved ones.
  - Surprising solidarities
- The younger generations showed solidarity with older people during the social actions around the rise in the retirement age. Although logically it is parents who support their children, this was a way for older people to stay active. It's surprising to see the 20-something generation, who live for the short-term, think about their retirement when most of them have not begun to work, and 25% of them are unemployed. A strange battle!
- After the earthquake in Haiti, West Indians who formerly had very little regard for Haitians showed a spirit of real solidarity. And yet despite the resources that were mobilized for Haiti, the country has not managed to rebuild. “We are incapable of doing things right. It's a kind of powerlessness. We're asking ourselves what we can do.” The response from one member of the group: “Get Indignant.” (Another reference to the book by Stephan Essel.)

#### **d. Disengagement/ engagement/ living in the world**

- The presence of fear and anxiety

- Finding oneself among strangers, in a different social milieu, can be terrifying for some people (more than a earthquake). One participant felt a fundamental insecurity after her son was sent to Afghanistan, which reminded her of the stories her father had told her about World War II. She was experiencing exactly the same kind of fear he described. “Death can come from anywhere.”
  - How do we survive? Latching on
- One participant, who was formerly quite politically engaged, latched on to the younger generation as represented by her daughter in order to keep on living. Often, the trivial qualities of daily life are what allow us to survive in a world we no longer understand.
- “As long we’re alive, we have to live!” A statement made by a young woman while she was talking about her grandmother. “I latched on to Essel (author of the recently published “Get Indignant!” which sold 600,000 copies in a few months) but I don’t know...” “I have a strong awareness that I might die is at once. This idea is a source of joy and...I don’t know what...it pushes me to be more engaged. But it makes me anxious when I think of my family”.
  - Disengagement from the macro/ engagement with the micro
- Activism and protest. One participant with a long history of political activism took part in several protests this year. He stated that he felt very much on the outside. He was alone, even though he usually attended protests with other people. He tried to shout along with the other protestors, but he lacked conviction. Finally, he took photos to send to friends abroad. What he usually thought of as 'a party' and “one of the best places to learn solidarity” had lost its feeling of collective struggle.
- Disengagement from the world/engagement with loved ones. A young female psychoanalyst asked whether it was legitimate to care for just one person when so many are suffering (this thought was connected with her origin – she is from Burundi).
- One person who was formerly very interested in the world of ideas is now interested in body therapies.
  - “I fight to protect the human element within organizations”
- “Essel’s book is a manifesto for mobilizing around this issue”. “I fight to make sure that the human sciences don’t contribute to the exploitation of people in business.” “I plan to go to Rwanda to help the social workers who are helping people to live after the genocide.”

### 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.

#### **a. Roots/ anchors**

No matter what form they take, roots are always present and are most often experienced as reassuring. They allow people to fulfill their potential, as in the old example of the tree that cannot grow branches without roots.

### ***Analysis***

#### **The Family**

- The family is the site of reproduction and conformity.
- The family assures the continuity, the permanence of life...the immortality.
- The locus of security and withdrawal; but maybe also a source of strength against the harshness of the world.
- Transmission: the family is undoubtedly the locus of transmission par excellence (values, fears, capital, behaviors, etc.).
- The adoptive family: those who recognize us as their own and have transmitted important things to us; those who are allied with each other (marriage).
- The locus of everyday life.
- The locus of rupture with values (the son of the pacifist family who enlisted and is now serving in Afghanistan).
- Site of rejection: the journalist who died in the street and who was rejected by his family because he did not conform (homosexual; non-valued profession).
- The family is the microcosm of the world; it experiences the same events, on a reduced scale, as the larger world. When the world feels inaccessible because it is too far from personal values, comprehension, or the limits of action, the family becomes the place where we live and survive, (potentially) while waiting to once again expand our existential boundaries.

#### **Country of origin**

- One participant raised the idea of an 'obligatory presence'. Even if we want to cut ourselves off from our origins, they are always there and will ultimately impose themselves. The family and the country of origins always link the individual to the other. He does not choose this. It's a process similar to fate. He does not decide his origins, but he must make something of them.
- And yet emigration can make some people feel as though they are 'from nowhere'. No matter the country of migration, most emigrants never feel at home – not in their country of origin, which they fled, and not in their 'country of refuge'. Being cut from his/her roots from his roots, the individual feels the most profound and untenable solitude.

#### ***Hypothesis 1:*** The family as a defense mechanism against the un-tenability of the world

Today, the place and the role of everyone is intensely examined to the extent that the meaning of events is concealed and the powerlessness of action is perceived. The participants asked questions about where they received their feelings about existence; what defined them and pushed them towards action? Was it the core family group? The social environment? Politics? The individual itself? It seemed that people looked to the past and to the relatively limited environment of the family, which allowed them to resist meaninglessness and despair.

The family is certainly a locus of regression but also of resistance against the destruction and destructiveness of the outside world and the death drive, but also a locus of rootedness in self, and undoubtedly also a locus that provides the hope and vitality to live (to survive)...to act. It allows to maintain relations between individuals, between the past, the present, and the future. It allows for self-questioning and the welcoming of difference. In this way, the family provides a transitional space as defined by Winnicott.

Will it be a place for creativity ?

In effect, the basic issue is the articulation of the different levels of recognition and engagement: self, the immediate environment, society, the world (see Hegel and Axel Honneth's approaches to recognition).

## **b. The words to say it**

### ***Analysis***

- The absence of words makes impossible for some people to speak, and maybe even also to think about their life and the world.
- There was a weary repetition of the same few phrases about the current 'state of the world', which has not changed despite all the speeches that have been made, the articles that have been written, the efforts that seem to have been made.
- This is certainly why Stephan Essel's book, 'Get Indignant', has been so successful (over the course of the evening, 6 people referred to it): in only a few pages it manages to put a feeling into words, to speak and make it known.
- The dominant emotion seemed to be weariness, a kind of minor depression, an anomie.

### ***Hypothesis 2***

The absence of words is the result of a perceived powerlessness to act, the repeated impossibility of establishing dialogue, of being heard, in certain cases an inability to think clearly. It is the reflection of a form of depression. The Paradox

### ***Analysis***

- One participant stated that she had lost interest in the things that had constituted her social identity up until that point, and yet she maintained her place in the world, in her relation to the other.
- The unthinkable, the scandalous, crops up everywhere (the son pursuing a military career, disasters of monstrous proportions like the earthquake in Haiti or the eruption of the volcano in Chile, the death of a loved-one).
- The theme of paradox cited by many participants seems to be the reflection on changes that had surprised them, especially the arrival of the unfamiliar in their daily lives or their way of thinking about the world.
- Change became rupture.
- Choice is no longer possible in this kind of crisis. Events take their course; the individual realizes he has no choices.
- This theme is an extension of the previous theme (absence of adequate words to say things) and a bridge into the proceeding one: how do we continue to live?
- This theme reflects incomprehension.

- This theme depicts the world as black and white, a world which cannot be black and white. It seems as if there is a rupture in our representations of self and world, and there are difficulties to integrate these seemingly major changes.

### ***Hypothesis 3***

The paradox confronts the individual with the limits of his/her representations, in his/her ways of acting and thinking. It steers him/her towards feelings of powerlessness. In certain cases, it might also have to do with the irruption of drives and the difficulty of thinking it. The paradox seems to be a kind of cleavage, but also a defense mechanism against things which can make the individual mad.

#### **c. How do we live in the world? Disengagement/ engagement**

##### ***Analysis***

- The loss of meaning. The meaningless of certain events can push some people into a state of deep confusion, a state of anxiety in certain cases.
- Faced with incomprehension, surrounded with destruction and destructiveness, desperation and despair, some people 'take refuge' in the familiar, in daily life, in order to survive.
- In a same dynamic, certain people facing their inability to change things on a social level state that they are more 'effective' when their actions concern people closest to them.
- Certain people accustomed to caring for others are now accepting when other people take care of them.
- This occurs with varying degrees of guilt feelings. However, this sentiment was less present than last year.

### ***Hypothesis 4***

This is about a battle between the life drive and the death drive. The life drive meaning emotional and relational experiences strongly linked to the other. The other is a close person made of flesh and blood, not an abstraction. The sensual and the sensory seem to have again taken a place in the foreground. It seems that there is a certain renouncement to the world of ideas.

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