

"France and the World at the Dawn of 2008"



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, consultants, professors, or retired;
- According to age, from 42 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

a - The ageing population, old people's place in society

The theme of old people came up several times, from various angles:

- isolation of old people;
- the insufficiency of the current collections of legislation, and regulations etc, for effective intervention;
- the 'mere' presence of family and friends near people identified as being at the end of their lives may rekindle their taste for living and revive their fighting spirit;
- the possibility of accompanying terminally ill people in establishments where visitors can stay with the dying 24 hours a day.

b - The schizophrenic relationship between words and behaviours (loss of meaning and symbolic reference)

This was discussed particularly through reference to the gap that sometimes exists between what people say and what people do. This is observed in various fields, such as:

- ecology – there is a huge gap between words and actions. Awareness of the theme of ecology is now very high across the whole population, particularly in young people, but they do not change their consumption;
- commitment by the States to give aid and subsidies to developing countries, NGOs, etc, which will never see the promised money, or only part of it;
- Sarkozy's slogan 'work more to earn more' when unemployment still stands at more than 8% and the economy is slower;

- there are more and more laws that are increasingly difficult to apply, and are therefore applied less and less;
- Sarkozy and his personality were referred to many times (flaunting his private life, but wishing to keep other areas secret).

c - Pragmatism as a substitutive value for social responsibility

All participants have noticed that for most people today, what matters most is that goals are achieved, regardless of the resources and costs involved. Pragmatism is becoming an actual ideology. This concerns:

- the enterprise, which radically changes its decisions and behaviour towards employees the day it is floated on the stock exchange, forgetting all about the past and its social commitments.
- the golden parachutes negotiated by company managers who refuse to award pay rises to employees.
- individualist, 'hedonistic' behaviour in consumption.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

a - The ageing population, old people's place in society

Analysis: Several factors certainly contributed to the emergence of this theme:

- The debate over working hours and special pension schemes, which is omnipresent in politics and the media (there was a strike lasting more than a week in December), certainly helped to raise participants' sensitivity.
- The traumatic memory of summer 2003, which saw the deaths of more than 15,000 old people (often living alone and isolated), and the feeling that although efforts were being made in certain old people's homes, there has been little change as regards the isolation of old people living in their own homes.
- The significant presence of old people in the participants' entourage (family and friends, neighbours, etc).
- Personal confrontation with illness or losing family members or close friends.
- Palliative care hospices make it possible to accompany the dying, whereas in France this was still taboo until recently.
- Mention was made of the rising age of handicapped people and the dramatic lack of establishments to take them.

It appears that there is generally a certain shortage, if not dire lack and/or poor conception of what society can offer in response to this ageing population problem. The individual therefore has a very important role in his openness and commitment to others (educators, family, neighbours, etc). The exceptions to this rule are the hospices of palliative care (there are not yet very many, but they are remarkably well-organised) where it is possible to spend a lot of time with dying friends or family and assist them.

Hypothesis: Paradoxically, the fact that the population is getting older makes death more visible, with all the anxiety that can involve for each individual. Although there is fear, and certain feelings of guilt that they are not doing everything they could, in some people the desire to behave in a supportive, committed way in response to this question is very strong. The ageing question may in some cases be an opportunity for re-

establishing social and family links, and maybe coming to terms with one's own finite nature.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

b - The schizophrenic relationship between words and behaviours (loss of meaning and symbolic reference)

Analysis: Several causes were suggested as underlying this observation:

- Mention was made of Sarkozy, whose speeches are written by a person he admires for his rhetorical capacity but who is totally unconcerned by politics. Sarkozy sees no problem in borrowing slogans from left-wing thinkers as well as right-wing thinkers.
- Spectacle and the spectacular prevail over thought and action.
- Rigidification and excessive simplification of problems and reality.
- The prevalence of the short-term, refusal to consider the long-term, fascination with the immediate present.
- The culture of urgency.
- Uncertainty over the future.
- Denial of the past.

There is a kind of false transparency. Reference frameworks are being deteriorated. The 'work more to earn more' slogan only relates to the economic aspect of work, denying all others (social links, and particularly its desiring dimension). This gives certain members of the group the impression that the citizen is being taken for a fool, treated with true contempt. This is all the more sensitive because a few people, on the contrary, speak 'true', authentic words, are very open to others and the world, are in touch with reality, are real 'Social Subjects' committed to defending and acting to influence the world but without nurturing any illusions.

There is a kind of feeling that we are at the end of a civilisation (also referring to the fall of the Roman Empire):

- Collapse of the USA's dominant position in many areas.
- Sarkozy talks of a 'civilisation policy' (expression borrowed from a left-wing thinker).
- Democracy is flouted in many places.

Nevertheless, the sheer volume of excesses provokes reaction: lies and denial of reality come up against limits that lead those who perceive those lies and denials to speak out and commit to involvement.

Hypothesis: On one hand, all of this smacks of acting out and loss of touch with reality. In some cases there is denial of reality. Could reality, too, become virtual? It is becoming very difficult in these circumstances to find one's place. Only a political commitment based on the notion of citizenship could give it meaning.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

c - Pragmatism as a substitutive value for social responsibility

Analysis: The issue of responsibility is at stake. It is as if some people think they will never be accountable to anyone for anything. "We're no longer ashamed to flaunt

unacceptable behaviour”. There is a disconnection between action and taking responsibility. Pragmatism has become an ideology. Complicity reigns, to the detriment of solidarity.

The success of these positions is explained by the fact that people have a feeling – an illusion – of effectiveness, of 'doing something'. (This relates to what was said last year on the lack of reflexivity in contemporary society.) Feeling guilty is now something to feel guilty about. We are living in a cynical, totally shameless society, reminding one participant of the rise of Nazism in the 1930s: “Once you’ve crossed the line, there are no limits”.

While there is much reference to the behaviour of 'others', each individual's shame and guilt feelings are hinted at in behaviours that, although less scandalous than those referred to above, still derive from the same dynamics. The expression 'It's awkward' was stated several times with reference to ecologically responsible behaviours or the question of finding managerial behaviours that show consideration for people.

Hypothesis: This no doubt concerns the persistence of individualism and the individualisation process at work in society. In the previous section we mentioned psychosis; here, the term psychopathy is more apt: the weakness of the superego. Another issue at stake is the impossible renunciation of illusion of immediate individual enjoyment, for the acceptance of one's limits.

General Conclusion

The members of the group fluctuated between what they called optimism and pessimism. The temptation of positions of omnipotence / powerlessness can be heard behind this. For most of the participants, this temptation has been avoided by:

- 'Micro-resistance', to use the words of psychoanalyst Michel Benassayag.
- Political or social commitments.

This is recognition of the need for personal commitment in relationships to others and in society. It is also the recognition both of the difficulty of achieving this but also the satisfaction that can be derived from it.

Convener: Maryse Dubouloy