"France and the World at the Dawn of 2010"
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.

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 four interrelated themes and sub-themes below.

It is important to note that while the ideas discussed in the sub-sections are held by many people (in some rare instances by just one person), they are not shared by everyone. These ideas, experiences, and analyses are juxtaposed with each other, complete each other, and can seem to contradict each other outright. Nevertheless, it struck me that a dialectical dimension to these topics became apparent on the day of analysis — and was no doubt reinforced during editing by my own personal sensibility.

Theme 1: Attendance and 'experience' of death/ Attendance and experience of life

Many people recalled deaths that had touched them personally, whether through:

- the illness of a loved-one (most often family member)
- the death of (a father, a neighbour's suicide, the French singer Alain Bashung)

These same people immediately recalled (either before or afterwards) a major life event:

- The birth of a grand-daughter
- The tentative birth of democracy in Iran
- A career change

Theme 2: The Different Areas of Society

<u>The Place and Role of the Individual</u>

- The pleasure of being recognized by people in the neighborhood: "the guy at the dry cleaners, the taxi driver that gives me recipes.../though we can be invisible to the people we work with."

- "I feel so small" in this society in crisis

- Problems with loneliness, being left to their own devices, homelessness (elderly people wandering in the city, urban homeless without a permanent address), solitude, alcoholism, suicide "Mom, come quick! A guy just jumped out the window..."

- Most of the people feel that their own individual actions are ineffective in bringing about larger social change. Most participants are very disillusioned about the role they are able to play in society.

- This is especially true for people who don't feel their causes are continued on a large scale by social and political authorities...who are usually totally ineffective or even counterproductive (see below).

- Nevertheless, some people still engage in social, professional, and political activities primarily defined by a desire to change the world.

- "I see myself as a warrior fighting a battle to the death." Even if these remarks are not representative of the general tone of the group (to the contrary), it still seems to me that they bear mentioning.

<u>Place and Role of Social Groups and Social Entities</u>

  ◦ Place and role of the youth

- ¼ of the people present think (assert, or hope) that young people are the ones who are going to get us out of this 'mess' because they can still dream of a different world.

- However, these are the same students who take financial consulting jobs once they've finished dreaming.

- Two people remembered a general feeling of utopia in May of 1968, and that event didn't change the world. History repeats itself and it stutters.

- Another person observes that many young people ran away when the man threw himself out the window because they knew the police were coming.

  ◦ Place and role of social insitutions

- Most people believe social institutions are non-existent, ineffective, and poorly funded.

- Placement of the mentally ill

- Care for the elderly

- The legal vacuum surrounding certain social problems

- The police (who immediately expected a crime when someone had committed suicide and are quick to adopt highly aggressive attitudes without showing compassion).

- Firefighters (effective, technically adept, and professional)

<u>Democracy in Danger</u>

- ◦ Failures of Governance

- On all levels, especially in relation to the global reaction to the financial crisis, which was engineered to benefit private interests rather than the common good.

- The role of banks in the financial crisis

- Copenhagen was a failure

- Obama pursues an overly cautious domestic agenda while neglecting international issues.

- The failure of integration: "When integration happens, it's by consumption."

- The debate on national identity, European identity, and global citizenship — the debate over national identity has failed entirely. We've brushed aside the big questions. As for European identity, it shouldn't be discussed in geographical terms, but in terms of a model for integration and improvement [cultural enrichment] through diversity. That has also failed entirely.

- The situation in Iran — last summer's protests following the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the massive individual and collective struggle against the power of religious extremism, and against the danger it represents for democracy. This represents hope for the establishment of a more democratic power structure and more generally of greater global solidarity.

Theme 3: From Crisis to Rupture

The globalization and financialization of society and its effect on the global workplace

Whether in France or Brazil, when it comes to privatizing public businesses (hospitals, banks), we find:

- The absolute legitimacy of economic reasoning

The renucnciation of the human dimension of formerly public businesses. Similarly dehumanzing pressure on the work of individuals given the reduction of the workforce, and of resources in general. This provokes:

- Significant psycho-social risks (stress, anxiety, suicide)

Interpersonal relationships defined by indifference and violence.

The impoverished self-esteem of people focused on workm, and cut off from the artistic and relational parts of themselves.

Feelings of disorientation; confusion over society's central values.

- Incomprehension of and 'disengagement' from the 'macro' area.

The Financial Crisis (2008-2009) caused some people to disengage. This manifested as:

- An inability to understand (actually a refusal to use intelligence).

Disengagement from abstract ideas to focus on more practical aspects of life.

The belief that nothing will change anyway (bank reform that allows the past to repeat itself).

- Loss of the illusion that 'better days will come'

No one seemed to have illusions about the answer to the question of what was in store for their children: the future could only be worse than the present.

- Feelings of abandonment and isolation/search for solidarity

While 'macro-economic and political' events inspired feelings of abandonment and isolation towards habitual frames of reference, some people also sparked a search to find new bonds of solidarity and have old ones reinforced.

They must rely particularly on younger generations, on women, and on other excluded groups….on people (groups) who have different perspectives on the world and (can imagine) other ways of acting in it.

Theme 4: Real emotions accepted by the present people but rejected by society

<u>Presence and role of emotions</u>

Many participants remarked that what they say was emotionally charged. Most of the time, these emotions were integrated into an analysis of the situation under discussion, even if participants said they were surprised by the intensity of their own feelings.

- joy at a birth
- feeling small in a globalized world
- sadness at a death
- worries about sickness
- surprise
- disengagement
- pessimism
- distress
- hope

The consensus was that these emotions encouraged and enriched personal relationships. But, as noted earlier, these notions are not taken into account by social actors in social situations: these emotions can 'corrupt' personal relationships.

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

Presence of death

Analysis: Death is irreducible, incontrovertible, an end without recourse. This fact causes those involved (or one of the tow people involved...)

- To question their relationship to others, and the role these people paly in their life.
- To question their role in society
- To refocus on connection adn spend time with others
- To question priorities (i.e. time spent doing things they don't like)
- To question the role [importance] of work
- To view work as a kind of abstraction
- To undertake renewed questioning of the role [importance of work that does not always produce concrete results.

Hypothesis: New objects for narcissistic investment

The proximity, the presence of death, its repercussion for investment in objects, and its repercussions for 'narcissistic contracts' (Castoriadis-Aulagnier, 1975) is at the origin of a change in the object investment rather than merely a modification of defense mechanisms (repression, sublimation...). Some people reinvest narcissistically in a 'narcissism of life', compared to what might be previously identified (generally a posteriori) as a narcissism of death (Green, 1983).

Analysis: Different areas of society

- I will not elaborate on what was said last year about guilt and about feelings of powerlessness in relation to the difficulty, or even impossibility or failure, of social relations, because even if these feelings are present in the views of certain individuals, they are much less prevalent.

- Today, we must ask the question of how groups can take meaningful action. This year, the general tone was more indicative of

  ◦ Partitioning
    Interpersonal relationships between an individual from one social group and an individual from another social group can be very difficult. It can seem as though the different organizations (individual/group/society) within society no longer function, and as though ties that were fragile have been cut or are extremely difficult to maintain. It is therefore quite a positive experience for people to feel recognized outside the limited peer groups in which they tend to live.

  ◦ Specialization
    Increasingly specialized structures are failing to communicate, leading to individual and global inefficiencies.

  ◦ The world and human relations are increasingly defined by technology
    There is an absence of humanity in the relationships between most people. It is as if we have withdrawn into our tools, occupations, and 'expertise' (relations included) to avoid our humanness.

- Withdrawal from complexity

- How to offer a helping hand to people
  At least two of the participants believed that it was possible to 'offer a helping hand' to people working in official settings, and to enlist them as allies in certain struggles, in order to propose alternatives to the globalization and financialization of society. "How do we reach out to Russia? How do we reach out to Turkey?"

Hypothesis: The search for safety and success

In a society shaped by the forces of production [market forces], the individual who specializes, scales down the scope of his actions, eliminates the uncertain (the unforeseen, his emotions…), and rejects the unfamiliar and un-masterable, keeps a shred of hope for recognition, success, and agency. This gives his life a little meaning.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

From crisis to rupture

Anaylysis: Renunciation, withdrawal, and refusal

Contrary to what was said last year, 'the state of the world', especially the economic situation, did not lead most people to feelings of guilt, powerlessness, or rebellion…but to a true 'rupture'. Some participants don't understand, refuse to really engage, and refuse to use their intelligence, claiming instead that 'nothing can be done.' It is as though they have abandoned set of lands and believe it useless to try to set out for another.

From feelings of powerlessness to feelings of uselessness

Present people are changing from feeling powerless to feeling useless on a global scale. While the project was once about reducing the gap between the haves and the haves-no (social fissure: to borrow words used on the campaign trail by the last president of the French Republic), today it is about reducing the risks of relational ruptures.

- The Rejection of illusions

When previously people were obliged to loose their illusion because they were obliged to face reality, nowadays they prefer to be 'realistic'even before trying something. The word pessimism has come up several times, sometimes as a nuanced 'relative pessimism', meaning that it relates only to certain areas of public, social and economic life.

- Realism and Pragmatism

The 'realism', even 'pragmatism', so disparaged by certain people in the previous years (sometimes it is the same one people) seems to have taken the place of idealism and utopianism.

- Rupture signifies an end.

For people in the group, this rupture reinforces the idea that:
- there are no more choices (when it is still possible during a crisis)
- we cannot return to the past

- there is no possibility for a common future

Hypothesis: The search for reciprocity in narcissistic bonds

Past intellectual and/or professional and/or social engagements without measurable effects have become dubious or are reduced to failure, causing narcissistic injuries. It may be thought as a 'better' maturity: 'the world is neither all good nor all bad' (Winnicott, 1971). Some attendant persons are now looking to protect their (secondary) narcissism. This does not necessarily mean a libidinal withdrawal, but to a choice of new objects of investment where reciprocity, if not guaranteed, is at least not doomed to failure.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Emotions

Analysis: For most of the people present, the emotional aspects of their life are integrated into their way of thinking about and living in the world. The place and role of emotions are important.

- They are not substitutes for thought, but enrich it
- They provide a particular dimension, a flavor, to experience
- Their diversity allows for an equilibrium between 'despair' and 'hope'

On the other hand, organizations, businesses, and public services (police, firefighters, healthcare) deny the existence of emotions. Numerous issues stem from this situation:

- Rationalization of behaviors where the relational is professionalized
- Tools, technology, or job take the foreground
- Emotions invade the foreground and chase the rest away

Hypothesis: Should man have to live as a kind of emotional amputee once he crosses the threshold of private life? Emotions and relationship have become dangerous in the social world; they are the unknown. They are the expression of drives and unconscious they also represent the eternal combat between Eros and Thanatos...and more than either thought or rationality, they help us stay alive.

By way of conclusion, I would like to invoke Albert Camus (it is the 50th anniversary of his death) who, although he is most often remembered as a philosopher of absurdity and meaninglessness, is also a philosopher of experience and of enjoyment of the present moment.

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