

AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

France and the World at the Dawn of 2014 Report of a New Year's Listening Post



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Paris 2014

As an introduction to this summary report, it is important to point out that this Listening post didn't work in the usual way. While the evening before, 14 persons were still expected, at 4 pm the next day when the event was supposed to take place, only 4 persons had confirmed their participation. The Listening Post was therefore cancelled and this summary report includes the written comments from 8 persons (out of the 18 persons who had initially mentioned that they would participate).

This illustrates, in my opinion, several points, such as the growing unpredictability of our lives (including our private life), the pressure of the instant which makes it difficult to meet commitments, social disengagement, social activities perceived as not being sufficiently engaging on a personal basis, and therefore a low solidarity beyond one's own tribe(s), a reduction of reflectivity and of the will to reflect upon the world, as well as the capacity of lying, when one looks at the reasons given (several interesting articles have been published these last days on this matter).

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 Two, the aim was collectively to identify the major themes emerging from Part One. From several presented these have been drawn together under the following interrelated themes:

1. Multiplicity and Diversity of Demonstrations

Several participants noticed that there had been numerous

demonstrations in Paris and in other big French cities in 2013. Demonstrating seems to have become the prime way of expressing one's opposition to the decisions of the ruling political class and to exercise pressure on it.

They particularly mentioned:

- The demonstrations against marriage for everyone
- Horse riding centers against the increase on VAT
- The « pigeons », entrepreneurs being taxed when selling their business
- The Red Caps against the ecotax

One participant underlined the demonstrations in Kiev against the Ukrainian government.

Is there really such diversity in themes and issues?

Most of the time, these demonstrations aim mainly to defend the interests of some economic group and are not related to societal issues (except for the demonstrations against "marriage for everyone", which might be considered as a broader societal issue).

The demonstration of horse riding centers against the increase in VAT shows how a fiscal problem affecting a lot of people (and often those who are economically vulnerable) can be diverted by a small group playing a very limited social and economic role.

Parisians and the society as a whole are being taken hostage. Instead of paying attention to real societal issues, public attention is directed towards small interest groups.

What is behind all these movements? Is it about giving up or grieving the loss of something?

Yet, one person is wondering what kind of revolution is going on?

The violence of these demonstrations (against other people, the police, and the destruction of public goods) is also noteworthy.

One participant also notes the lack of interest of the European Union about the demonstration in Ukraine.

2. The "Cahuzac Case": Lies and Dissimulation

Regarding the "Cahuzac Case" (the French Minister, close to François Hollande) which had some bank accounts in Switzerland but denied it for a long time, the average French citizen hardly reacted. People saw this as lies and dissimulation. They went on claiming that the political

class is rotten, but isn't really concerned about the issue of conflict of interest in politics, or by tax policies and their consequences as long as they are not directly affected.

3. The Intervention in Central Africa

Two participants mentioned this event.

It was a fundamental intervention to prevent a slaughter such as the one in Rwanda, but there is a danger that there may be no easy way out, as is often the case with such foreign interventions which do not address the core problems and conflicts between local communities. This poses the problem of how to live together when people are different.

One participant also brought up the issue of the demographic and economic development of Africa which will make French the third most spoken language in the world 50 years from now. The world's center might shift from Asia to Africa.

4. Death and the Dead: Discovering Love and ... Inhumanity

6 persons out of 8 mentioned the death of somebody.

- A participant's father who would have been a hundred years old in 2013
- A person who told about her mother's death in 2013
- Care for a dying friend, followed by his death
- This painful situation revealed that it is possible to share lots of important things with a perfect stranger, while being completely detached from members of our own family with whom, in theory, we should be close to.

Somebody said that, for her, the most striking event was the death of Mandela. Mandela's death is the loss of a real icon, representing democracy and the fight for freedom against oppression. He was embodying intelligence, ethic, and the will to repair and reconstruct.

The person quoted him twice: "it always seems impossible until it is done".

"I learnt that courage is not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it."

The person who talked about the intervention in Central Africa mentioned again the slaughter in Rwanda.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 2, 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.

1. Violence and the End of a World?

1.1 Analysis

There is no more room for debate. Dissatisfaction is expressed in the street and can reach such a high level that there is only violence left to be heard.

Dialogue seems impossible. Worse, politicians lie and cheat (Cahuzac Case).

It is as if there were no other ways to make suffering heard besides these claims.

The so-called economic austerity measures lead to a feeling of loss without knowing precisely what has been lost and what might replace it. There is probably the feeling that a world is ending definitely with no way back (the recurrent theme of death).

1.2. Hypothesis

The feeling of lost and end of something (relating to the theme of death which came back frequently) is everywhere in the society, but unsaid. It generates some suffering that is impossible to express, because the object of the loss has not been clearly identified, but is essential nonetheless because of the absence of informed and sincere interlocutors. This suffering is thus put into action and transformed into the destruction of the other, in order to avoid one's own destruction.

2. People Turning on Themselves / Social and Political Withdrawal

2.1 Analysis

There is a real withdrawal from society. The social and political life, the notion of living together are disappearing.

This is why the marriage for everyone movement (which was aimed to

create greater equality and fraternity) resulted in a violent rejection of homosexuality. Homophobia is trying to regain its legitimacy. The French citizen is only moved by things that relate to him/her personally.

Even worse, people are only interested in protecting their economic and financial interests. In the current context of crisis, for many people, money has become the only value.

The opposition to growing taxes is a way of contesting politics and the society as a whole. Every man for himself, and those who have the most to lose are those with the loudest voice at the expense of the weakest and poorest.

The media encourage the trivialization of these social phenomena. They are presented as events among others, in the most spectacular way possible.

They deal with these issues without taking into account their social, economic, ethical and political complexity.

Reflection and reflexivity are outdated. The show must go on.

2.2 Hypothesis

There is a very thin frontier between life narcissism and death narcissism.

3. From Disappointment to Hope

3.1. Analysis

Caring for a dying friend is an illustration that mutual support and sharing are still present, but often in different ways than expected. Strangers may bring about pleasant surprises.

The future of a world which seems to be dying may come from today's poorest continent: Africa.

If the European Union seems unable to rebuild social and political cohesion, and is only interested in financial and economic conditions, the demonstrations in Ukraine remind us that Europe means also democracy and freedom, by contrast with the power of Russian Oligarchs which maintain this country today under their domination for economic reasons.

If Mandela's death raised concerns about South Africa's capacity to survive him, it reminded the whole world that he was a universal symbol of reconciliation, love, and in his capacity to resist imprisonment, oblivion and hate, during so many years.

3.2. Hypothesis

Between Eros and Thanatos, Eros seems to have the last word. However, life is a long struggle against destructive urges and temptations.

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