

Confronting Europe's Failure

Sophie Wahnich

The European Union, or the corruption of a political ideal

The dream of Europe in the 18th century was to be a cosmopolitan space where human-to-human relations and people-to-people relations would be governed by humanist and democratic norms. The fantasy of Europe involves sharing the same juridical norms with moral value, the same ways of being in the world and the project of a future not pacified but capable of always reinventing a good life. In fact, the reality of the European Union even at its beginnings is quite different. Those who built it used this fantasy to promote the organization of a technocratic club of powerful people that has nothing democratic or humanist about it.

This raw reality appears today. Not only is the dream of Europe not the European Union, but Europe turns its back on it. When peoples refuse to continue the reality of the European Union in these terms, they are either ignored and the vote no longer has any sacred value, or they are violently punished as we can see in Greece but also in the demonstrations in Catalonia in 2017, in the French demonstrations severely repressed from 2016 to 2019, whether those against COP21, against the state of emergency, against the labor law or even those of yellow vests.

Should we leave the European Union?

The United Kingdom chose to leave the European Union by a referendum vote. As a first collateral consequence, Scotland could become a dissident of the United Kingdom and separate from the country.

“When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for a people to dissolve the political bonds that have bound it to another and to take, among the powers of the Earth, the separate and equal place to which the laws of Nature and of the God of Nature entitle it, the respect due to the opinion of humanity obliges it to declare the causes that determine its separation,” said Thomas Jefferson.

For Jefferson, these causes are the violation of fundamental rights: equality between men and peoples, life, freedom, the search for happiness. According to him, governments are established among men to guarantee these rights, and their rightful power stems from the «consent of the governed». The logic of the free peoples' political responsibility towards other free peoples presupposes for each one a constant responsibility towards their own government. In fact, if the principles were no longer shared, it would be impossible to enter into reciprocal relations and, without reciprocity, relations would be tyrannical: either conquest or the vassalization of other peoples.

The displaced peoples, bearing a name that depends only on the good will of their tyrant, cannot defend any principle. They are not peoples, but mere collections of individuals who evolve according to the conquests and defeats of their tyrant.

Brexit, the desire of Frexit, reminds us that men do not make «societies of nations» spontaneously, and that it is appropriate to institute humanity as the norm of this society of sovereign and equal peoples. Historically, it has only been the process of regaining

sovereignty that led to the affirmation of Freedom (obeying the laws that one gives oneself), Equality (reciprocity of this freedom) and Fraternity (community of affections between political equals and likes, individuals and peoples).

If a constituted people or an entity did not respect these principles, it would be guilty of a «crime against humanity». For, in this reciprocal logic, “he who oppresses one nation declares himself the enemy of all”.

But today, the separation or union of peoples does not produce any immediate meaning, and especially not in the sense of the sort of cosmopolitanism promoted by Thomas Jefferson, and later by the French revolutionaries.

When economic tyranny dominates politics, the continued union of Greece in the EU affirms the vassalization of a people despised like a flock. The exit of the UK from the EU does not strengthen its own unity or defend a more solid concept of human rights. As for the enlargement countries, Hungary, the Baltic countries, they do not seem to be concerned about guaranteeing these rights. Nor does Austria or Italy... meaning is constantly blurred.

Looking at the regional scale is no less perplexing. The images of peaceful demonstrations in Barcelona where Catalans wanted to establish an autonomous state, made in 2017 a perfect contrast with the deployment of arms in Madrid. The authoritarian discourse of defending the Constitution by King Felipe VI through violent repression, seemed to make Catalonia the emblem of a desire for democracy, rejected by the right-wing central power in Madrid. Even those who did not agree with the motivations of the separatists, -the refusal to redistribute wealth from a favoured region to the poorer regions-, were frightened by the use of violent force by the Spanish state. If a spectre haunts Europe, it would be the spectre of the “arbitrary”. Arbitrary, by definition, is not “sensible”.

A contrary, sensible right would be those motivated by arguments for justice and legitimized by a public space of universal reason, a right thought to ensure a certain stability but also a protection against the arbitrariness of the powerful. It is the role of democracy to prevent the law becoming “unreasonable”. That is why the French Constitution of 1793, in Article 28, declared that future generations would not be subject to the rights of their ancestors: “A people always has the right to review, reform and change its Constitution. A generation cannot subject future generations to its laws.” But could it have been conceivable, in 1793, that a separate group of people would try to change the legality of the national state without a civil war? Well, yes, Article 26 of the 1793 French Bill of Rights stated: «No portion of the people can exercise the power of the whole people; but every section of the sovereign assembly must enjoy the right to express its will with complete freedom.» Finally, repression of the expression of opinions is not worthy of democratic and republican legality. Article 7: “The right to express one’s thoughts and opinions, either through the press or in any other way, the right to assemble peacefully, the free exercise of worship, cannot be prohibited. The need to

state these rights presupposes either the presence or the recent memory of despotism”.

In Catalonia, holding a referendum without negotiation is indeed an abuse of constitutional law. But in 2010, the Constitutional Court rejected the 2006 agreement on the new status of autonomy of Catalonia, this rejection was a mockery of the political intelligence and negotiation that were then at work to obtain constitutional reform by the Mariano Rajoy Party. As for this desire for greater autonomy, is it strictly Catalan? Is it politically classifiable? Actually, it is not.

The current Catalan question no doubt less reflects a repetition of the Spanish Civil War than a new game of global politics where legality is used to protect the powerful and not to protect democratic equality and the right of peoples to direct themselves. Catalonia is a dramatized symptom that could go wrong. Here, the situation is well dressed in the new clothes of our political condition which is no longer normalized by a universal cosmopolitan right, but by all those who drape themselves with a legality that has become arbitrary.

Triangulation of politics

The future of Europe is thus played out in a pool of three bands, on one side, we have first, a technocracy which combines representative, so-called ‘democratic’ institutions which in reality are deeply undemocratic, and second a bank, the ECB, which operates without any governmental regulation or oversight. On the other side, people who are astonished at having lost so much sovereignty and quality of life, whether it be life as such or democratic political life. Since 1993 and the Maastricht Treaty, there has been no exit from the tunnel. Faced with this oppression some credit the experts and believe that the debts contracted by the State must be repaid, they are objective allies of the technocratic establishment. Others believe that we must invent another Europe against this technocracy, with standards and ties more in line with fantasy. In the context of climate change, increased international migration, cities in transition and refuge are making a transition between technocracy and humanist aspirations.

But the critical ecology is more often inscribed in groups that are working concretely to promote another model of society on a transnational model that goes beyond the strictly European stakes. Finally, in the face of this oppression, a final group believes that we must restore popular sovereignty and no longer let technocracy decide without the people. Either they aspire to elect strong figures, and the populist adjective gives the current outline, or they aspire to reinvent the democratic condition, to obtain an authentic democratic power, through referendums, a renewal of the institutions. They want real democracy.

As such, the yellow vests did not appear out of nowhere in November 2018, but from the latest betrayal of popular classes. Not that of President Macron, who takes money from the poor and gives it to the rich in an all-European logic. He at least was elected only by his own

people and by a passing turn of vote passes from the postponement of votes to the second round supposed to protect the country from national populism. But does not this protection from national populism serve as a barrier to, as well as a normalization of death, for those who hope to reach the shores of Europe? Isn't xenophobia a European fact?

No, the betrayal here is that of Social Democracy and it was played from 2012 to 2017 and onwards. François Hollande, a socialist candidate, chose to be elected on the word "popular" the phrase "change now", asserting that the real adversary was finance and that it had no face or party. But in the end he invited a "Macron" financier to occupy a ministry and let him fabricate a so-called responsible economic policy so as not to be left or right.

The French Social Democrats understood what had to be said to be elected but they maintained the values of economic liberalism, and their belief in austerity. They did so in full knowledge that the measures promised against the speculative banking system and *finance* would be fainthearted. They have destroyed the protective right to work and civil liberties in a social context where "terrorism" is allowed for a continued state of emergency. This continuous state of emergency is capable of repressing activists, those who are worried about the planet, those who struggle not to fall into wage slavery that does not say his name, and those who invent a new art of talking at night.

The last attempt to re-engage in the electoral discourse has deepened the gulf between the governing and governed. The yellow vests say they now make the link between injustices and this bad democratic representation. This is explained by Priscillia Ludosky who had launched a petition on taxes, denouncing their falsified character in May 2018.

«They are elected, they follow their roadmap, and there is no transparency about what they do, how they do it, how they fund it.

There is also something else that is denounced, and that is the sense of powerlessness of citizens and of the nation. The President cannot do anything without requesting the authorization of the European Commission. So there is also the issue of sovereignty to be taken into account. How the country could support itself, defend the interests of its citizens, if it cannot even make its own decisions. In terms of inequality, taxation— Everything the government decides does not seem to be in the public interest.

This calls into question the system of representativeness, and increases distrust of elected representatives, and in the sense of being part of a much larger system, Europe, which is running everything.

This has gradually become apparent, as if we had been aware for years, on certain subjects, that we were being laughed at. But the link between representativeness and injustice was not made. Now we realize that if there are these injustices, it is because the decisions are not well made. »

Greece and France

In Europe, the first long-standing rulers to have lost their stipends were the elected Greeks on 25 January 2015. Pasok, supposedly socialist, new democracy, right. No one then spoke of «degagism» but of the victory of a complex coalition, which had chosen a strategy and a tactic, while knowing that Golden Dawn, the extreme Greek right, was also waiting for its turn in ambush. This victory in the parliamentary elections came after Greece had been brought to its knees by five years of austerity imposed by the troika, the European Commission and Greece's own political representatives. Austerity had destroyed all the public services that founded the social pact of contemporary democratic societies, education, culture health and even the right to food survival.

The infant mortality rate was climbing again. The country had gone through the sequence any country goes through during wartime. But this victory has in fact remained without a glorious tomorrow. First, because institutional Europe had warned it would not let a democratic vote call into question the ordo-liberalism. It thus explained that peoples were no longer called to democratic elections but to rituals which, if they did not do their expected ritual work, namely to restore order after a moment of effervescence, would simply no longer be considered. Organized yes, but no longer considered. So the war continued in Greece, the country was sold at auction, and in a frightening way, it was similar to the diabetic illness, because the Greeks couldn't get treatment they filled the public space with new "broken mouths" to the amputated limbs. In Greece, the debt is paid and it shows.

What was at stake then was the abandonment in open country of a collective European ideal already well under way. Too few Europeans felt responsible for what happened on European soil in Greece. Whether they liked all the Erasmus programs or almost none. The expressions of support for the Greek people remained sporadic, extremely weak, as if the ordo-liberalism had been internalized as the new and only human nature of Europe.

The French President, François Hollande, who campaigned in 2012 saying that he would support the Greek cause, has never wavered. The warning given in Greece was a threat to the whole of Europe: this is what will happen to you if you protest, if you continue to believe in your sovereign power as a people, as a citizen, as a human being. It does not matter that SYRIZA immediately fought against tax exemptions, tax evasion and corruption. To obtain the promised European aid, the new Greek government would have to give up the real autonomy of its policy, just a few weeks after its installation.

It is in this sequence that the assertion, like an Open Secret, has been circulated, namely that according to the major banks, the next country concerned by the need to comply more convincingly with the liberalism would be France.

Still too inclined to maintain the achievements of the history of the labor movement with its law of expensive labor, its pensions and its

social security. France, French people should understand that it was an anachronistic anomaly. The age of Fordism and colonial outlets was over and so was the way of life.

But France was not Greece, it had more people, as well as a history of revolutionary anger. It was not necessary to play with fire. They would be playing with regulations and the law and integrating social conflicts as risks to be managed. In the end, it changed very little in the model. It would be part of the model. Here too, the public debt and therefore the cost of public services had to be reduced.

In 2010, a circular already stated that all state operators, including universities and research organizations, should “participate in the effort to control public finances and employment under conditions identical to that of the State”. In plain, explicit language, this means that one in two public jobs will not be renewed. Fewer doctors, nurses, professors, researchers, public theatres, public scenes, culture, railway workers, secretaries, billings... Less civil servants, less agents, less money spent to support the pillars of democratic life after 1945, after Nazism, after collaboration. The public services founding the unity of the territory, social equity, equal educational opportunities, but also guarantors of the inventiveness, creativity still protected by an original social pact, all of this was gradually becoming a thing of the past. Change of regime by progressive glaciation. The numerical procedural reason obliterates the sensitive reason. The thought of the immeasurable vanishes in the calculation of the return on investment.

The money fetish triumphs, annuitants receive their annuities, they accumulate them in tax havens. It will be necessary to smooth the curve of public jobs and to provide "forecasts of the management of jobs" three times a year, it is necessary to bring down, at all costs, the public payroll. Then comes the supposed optimization of purchases. Others in the private sector at the same time optimize their taxes. Finally, contemporaneous with the Greek crisis, on 23 June 2015, the circular that leads to a kind of trusteeship of all the State agencies and therefore of public service is entitled “reinforcement of the management dialogue with a view to controlling expenditures”.

The reform of the State does not date from this budgetary and public accounting management voted by the right side as well as the left side of the assembly in 2012, but rather from the LOLF vote in 2001, which was fully implemented in 2006 and which reorganized the financial framework of French political life. It has been said that the LOF vote in 2001 modernized and transformed the state-ministry and bureaucracy described by Max Weber into a state-enterprise. So the manager replaces the bureaucrat. The bureaucrat sometimes applied political decisions in a haphazard way. The manager subordinates political decisions to budgetary constraints.

Public policy disappears, politics disappears with the injunctions of “Bercy”, the Department of Finance. What allowed the LOLF to become part of the mores of the public service and of the departments was its

depoliticization. The slogan that accompanied its implementation in the seminars, trainings and intranet was: “The LOLF is neither right nor left”. This was immediately stated on the benches of the National Assembly in 2001. On February 7, 2001, Raymond Forni thanked the opposition members for understanding that the “monitoring the effectiveness of spending was neither right nor left, but merely a prerequisite for political choices in the noble sense of the word”. He was applauded both by the right and left deputies. This «new public management» is a tool of the European ordo-liberalism, and is accompanied by a new language: performance, governance, Benchmark, steering, strategy, operational objectives etc. The more the new language penetrated, the more this concept of the obliteration of politics became naturalized and the more the border between the right and the left became fragile. So, neither right nor left. This is an historical situation.

Chronicle of an embedded impotence

In this situation, have all Europeans passively witnessed the (definitive?) collapse of all political hope in Europe? Have we buried the hopes of civic action and new political forces that result from this action? Was there some kind of collective preference for disaster, a race to the abyss?

There were many ways out of this passivity. We could put pressure on our governments to abandon their positions as servants of financial interests, we could build new networks of solidarity, build on the common, refuse to invoke the sacrosanct growth without worrying about its content, fight against unnecessary big projects and defend those who put human development at the heart of political and economic choices.

We cannot say that nothing was attempted.

The Greek question, for example, has led individuals in a stubborn but sporadic way to raise the alarm as if on board a high-speed train. Many accounts of unbearable pain have tried to warn the Europeans, the French, of what was happening to the Greeks. A survey conducted in December 2011 by Ariane Monnier produced a series of filmed complaints presented in the newspaper *Mediapart* and screened in 2014 at the BPI in Paris. The *Volkshochschulen* of the 18th arrondissement of Paris had taken the initiative of a political proposal entitled “De peuple à peuple, interdemos”. It was a project of political solidarity with Greece through a vast fund-raising campaign for field actions in all fields (health, food, education, culture, housing, over-indebtedness, legal advice, aid to migrants).

The whole was federated in Greece by the Solidarity for All platform (solidarity4all) which received the funds and was also linked to Great Britain. This concrete utility was also the instrument of an explicit political project in the appeal: We must be constituted as a common people with solidarity in the face of what has come to destroy the very idea of all democratic control. Let us organize true social and political solidarity as a new democratic control”. The objective of this collection was both very ambitious with a desire to collect 300,000 € minimum, and

very modest in comparison with the needs. Political action was to use the money as a means of action with human ties. Not a penny of that money should go to paying down the debt. Each euro had to express the refusal of citizens to allow themselves to be pitted against each other, a commitment not to allow our common political body to be marred by policies that lead us to resentment and abyss. A lot of money was raised, around 200,000 euros, but only 1,500 people responded to this call that only Médiapart in the French press had agreed to relay.

Laure Vermeersch, a young filmmaker, directed a documentary called *Alcyons* which shows how a marriage is prepared thanks to these new solidarities in Athens. The first talks took place in front of the landfill of Phylée, the poorest district of the city, and the ecological disaster became the backdrop of what the interlocutors called "class struggle". In this film *Georgia*, which orchestrates Phylée's solidarity, states: We are in an economic war. They want to destroy us. That's what drives me crazy, "There were fewer deaths during the war than suicides in Greece today." Where politics is torn, the civility of Phylée's solidarity restores and strengthens a society that must rebuild. It is less a matter of inventing rituals than of reinvesting them when they could disappear in this crisis. To dehumanize a people is to eliminate the possibility that it maintains its rituals around life and death. To refuse to be dehumanized is to maintain them. This marriage restores the humanity of all, from close to close, and that is why everyone finds meaning and interest in it, that is, in relation to others. Marriage is an opportunity to realize "a society of mutual and daily relief". The wedding dress at the fripier made it possible to dream this marriage and it was in fact offered to Marilena, but also to all, so that the marriage could take place as a real marriage, within a real community.

This film was screened at the University Paris Diderot, and then at Tenons et mortaises at the exhibition of the magazine of 2015, in an evening of the Volkshochschule of the 18th arrondissement, UP 18, in an evening organized in the Greek pavilion of the international university city. It was screened again as part of the Horspistes 2018 festival at the BPI in early February.

Why do we have to insist with these stubborn, fragile little gestures?

Because in Greece and everywhere else, the problem is that of European promises are permanently damaged: peace, social and cultural emancipation, and a promise for an ecological transition that would create an opportunity for a tremendous collective reinvention, but this incentive is constantly being pushed back by short-sighted lobbyists. To support the Greeks in this arm-wrestling sequence was to help create the emergence for new anti-fatalist tendency in France and more generally in Europe. To support the Greeks affirmed that another policy, another economy, is possible that differs from those that have been presented to us for years throughout Europe as natural necessities by so-called "governing" parties. It is not a question of re-establishing oneself as a citizen opposed to the economic policies decided by our leaders, who

are so authoritarian and so uncreative. Those who were involved in this movement wanted to let themselves know that it is "Beautiful traditions of popular solidarity and mutuality: modest, but perennial, capable of producing a daily outfit and perhaps a common future."

The exit from political impotence seemed at hand. For this sequence of resistance was creative. Those who were engaged in these actions knew that loosening the grip would not be enough, that it was also necessary to think about future investments, renegotiating debts by fighting against financial oligarchs or complicit governments, redeploy credit and money creation in a non speculative way, redirecting investments towards needs to be identified and measured collectively. The "shocked citizens" who had formed themselves were not resigned to the technocratic crushing of public decision-making, nor to the nationalistic and xenophobic withdrawal of those who have been left behind for too long. The historic moment we were living through seemed to hesitate between major regressions and promising renewals.

In fact, this method of doing politics has not produced the support hoped for towards the Greek people, But despite everything, numerous citizen movements have arisen in a strange context where terrorism has invited itself to the table of history and has come to hinder the first impulses, however without preventing them.

In Spain, the movement of places had given the signal to a democratic renewal, in France it was the movement of the Zads, around the Coop 21, the initiatives taken against the state of emergency, the *Nuit Debout* movement against the labor law. Each of these gestures led to the gathering, inventing, and the production of the embodied experience of a strong utopian desire. People came together and disbanded, they came into conflict and gave up, sometimes leaving places on tiptoes, sometimes explaining that the lack of strategy led to these disorderly self-governing wills in a stalemate. Far from articulating the differences between class struggle, ecological struggle, struggle for civil liberties, struggles for the rights of foreigners, the Syrian question, the long habit of choosing a specific struggle rather than thinking their intersection, has made each investment derisory because it's too fragile.

The testimony of resistant subjectivities took precedence over political action, the demon of the internalization of defeat and powerlessness finally ruled the situation. Some sincerely regretted it, others considered that they were finally not there to win against the state of emergency, the labor law, etc., but to prepare for the fantasy future of another world, so far from the present that it became despairing to continue any dialogue.

In France, in this sequence, came the idea of fabricating a citizen's candidacy for the presidential elections, of bringing out a «name». But it is the very name of citizen candidacy that has become the object of trafficking. There have been citizen candidates with a lot of rhetoric and Emmanuel Macron himself has been able to pass himself off as such a new figure who would appeal to new elected officials, from society

rather than so-called government parties. He would build a movement in motion like history and would know how to recover all the patient work of the struggles against hegemony that had spread since 2005 and the referendum on the draft European constitution, 2008 and the sub-crisis awards, 2011 and the Arab Spring, 2015 and the victory of Syriza and Tsipras. It's called pulling the chestnuts out of the fire.

Had the elections in Greece marked a turning point in spite of everything? Perhaps not, they may have been just another symptom, but in fact there was a citizen's situation unfolding in disorder, not without illusions and sometimes even stupidity. The open door, far from allowing the emergence of something new from decades of destruction, opened to an acceleration in the form of a hold-up. The populist hold-up that declares itself everywhere the people solicited is not that of a myriad of active horizontal ties but is manufactured by a vertical link with a charismatic leader figure, that we love and hate, but each of us accepts, no matter what.

In France, this populist factory was organized on the left with Mélenchon, on the far right with Marine Le Pen, on the extreme neoliberal center with Emmanuel Macron. Everywhere in Europe it is present under more or less recognizable clothes anchored in extreme right-wing traditions or in more complex forms of political arrangements when technocracy fires all fire. It is necessary to remember the French history of Uriage where Hubert Beuve Mery supported first the national revolution of the Vichy regime then played the weather vanes when the wind turned in favor of General de Gaulle. The latter entrusted him with the creation of the World, the newspaper par excellence of the elites. But every country in Europe has its demons which it works to suppress or to split with more or less happiness. The Europeans came out badly of the Second World War and populism in all its forms may be the symptom everywhere.

Victory of European technocratic standards

Emanuel Macron became president and had full powers through his majority in the assembly and through his powers as president of the fifth republic. He constructed the most destructive neoliberal policy we have ever seen. Last, the Pari airport was sold off just like Athens airport. Melenchon's *insoumis* testify instead of playing politics because without a strategy of union, they are not strong enough. Without a balance of power in society and without a balance of power in the Assembly, France is an open country. This creates a historical weightlessness of a Start-up without a past, but with a future. One could draw out the pamphlets of the seventeenth century on the sighs of slave France. The undocumented who really know what they are talking about, headline their newspaper "tyranny on the move".

An aggravated labor law is now passed, do the European banks still have France on their list? It seems to have fallen in line. The state of emergency and its myriad of measures destructive of civil liberties is part of ordinary law.

National education, university and culture are the next places that will allow us to adjust spending. The Public Action Committee 2022 is responsible for "reforming the State" in order to reduce public spending, far from democratic control. Private organizations' persons chaired it. This committee is tasked with writing a "report identifying significant and sustainable structural reforms and economies across the public administration spectrum". To this end, it added in the circular that this committee will question the desirability of maintaining and the degree to which each public policy is carried through. This may in particular lead it to propose transfers between the various levels of public authorities, transfers to the private sector, or even abandonment of mission».

That's what it says, "abandonment of mission".

Then the arrival of Emmanuel Macron to power was the smiling little *Mahagony*, of white-collar gangsters who take over the family jewels of a democratic form of life that becomes, strictly speaking, "historical".

Democracy based on the equality of citizens before the law, equity in access to knowledge, culture and education, this foundation as a sacred good that underpins the dignity of each person in a democracy, is over. For it to come back one day, we'll have to win it back and fight, but probably this time we need to accept the weapons of political strategy and tactics, lost since the 1980s, and accept that the yellow vests had to reinvent themselves gradually by regularly encountering what they did not yet know: the violence of a post-truth and post-democracy regime.

The refusal of conflict

This situation was of course up to the actors, to us, to all those who had not managed to convince us that it was necessary to avoid this and to those, all those who were finally relieved not to have to now pursue a real political fight, since with Macron we would have the perfect tool that avoids it, being neither right nor left and being able to avoid the worst by blocking the National Front. The beavers were happy. The dam could hold because the FN was no longer alive.

But what was that relief?

It was the one who was born of the possibility of living in the barred memory of the conflict, what Nicole Loraux¹ calls "the non-vectorized time of history", the one "encysted of oblivion that politics is by itself conflict", an oversight that therefore allows us to renounce democratic conflict, which allows us to refuse the victory of 99% over the 1% provided that we do not have to take risks and fight for real.

This refusal was not born with Macron. It has a long and repetitive history, and it also has strong intellectual support, those who say that actors are little in the future of a society, because the system always prevails, not the intentions. They are the ones who carry a certain renunciation of hot history. The idea that we could take charge of our tragic destiny vanishes in the affirmation that a destiny stronger than

.....
¹ Nicole Loraux, *Eloge de l'anachronisme*, Paris, *Le genre humain, l'ancien et le nouveau*, 1993.

us will always prevail. In fact, political, historical, destiny is of course a tragic destiny. But in every tragedy men play their role in history. Now it is from this tragedy that the electoral rituals offload us in favor of a hectic buffoonery, where the passions exacerbate as in a carnival and then fall back before everything returns to order and apathy. The real class struggle is made invisible. The powerful remain powerful and smiling. The barred memory of conflict makes cold history. No reworked contradiction, just the movement of the capitalist system that grows and reproduces.

This cold history refers to the vows of François Furet when he affirmed “the French Revolution is over,” drew its sources from the soil of an understanding of structures, not as components of historical life, but as an obstacle to a thought of the time of the event, of the true event, that which makes subjective and not wrinkle break on the soft surface of the monster. The event that manufactures new groups in fusion in the manner of the Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectic Reason*, the one where one is aware that one is neither simple agent nor fully actor of a situation, but that nevertheless, we are responsible for it and that we have a role to play in it on a mode other than that of buffoonery or stupidity, unable to analyze our situations taking into account our demons, *practical-inertia*, incapable of strategy and tactic, caught in the quicksand of these mists, or sometimes small lonely collectives of Doomsayers who remain inaudible and lose their voice.

That in this cold history we are only agents of a system that is born of itself explains in part the impossible strategic thinking, because the strategy involves making choices, discriminating, coming into conflict precisely, and to admit that one may be mistaken in one’s choices, but that one must nevertheless choose and thus tear oneself up on the evaluation of the strategy and yet unite upstream and downstream of the conflict, once the strategy has been chosen. Let us recognize that the debate on the left side with Jean Luc Mélenchon was nevertheless, on the one hand, a strategic debate. People constituted from the outside by the offer of imago, or patient work of a constitution in interiority by a deliberative space, these are two strategies that have clashed, that emanate from the institutions of the fifth republic, which would be radically opposed to them. But without valuing the deliberative space, there is simply no strategic debate but affirmation of a strategy that turns out to be an individual bet within the framework of the liberticidal institutions of the Fifth Republic.

The Love of Leaders

The second immobile layer of time is that which, contiguous to the first, gives it its power: it is a love of leaders. This haunting love is also repetitive, voluntary servitude said La Boétie analyzed by Miguel Abensour². For Claude Lefort³, this desire for leadership is at the very heart of democracy,

2 Miguel Abensour, *La Boétie, prophète de la liberté*, Paris, Sens et Tonka, 2018.

3 « La dissolution des repères et l’enjeu démocratique » in *Le temps présent, Ecrits 1945-2005*, Belin, 2007.

which requires many of its actors. Yes, democracy demands confronting the tragic, the responsibility, the contradictions, the conflict, the anguish of uncertainty, the disappointment in the face of the tragic error. In short, this democratic condition is not easy and Jean Renoir is right to compare love for the Revolution, the love of emancipation that comes, with erotic love. For it is the same requirements that then point and make life intense, but also uncertain, the same requirements that sometimes make us as fragile as solid.

It is in this inadequacy of democracy that leaders can find their power of seduction. Claude Lefort theorized that true democracy rested on an empty place, empty in his heart and indispensable to freedom. The playing space that appears with living democracy, disappears as soon as the place is occupied by a leader, king or party leader, a reassuring and paternal figure, this occupation causes democratic beings to return to the situation of children whom love their parents because they are supposed to protect them from adversity and uncertainty. The place of the leader can also be occupied by a solid ideology, to which everyone can identify, and democratic indeterminacy then also breaks out in favor of almost divine certainties, in fact “Jupiterian”.

With Emmanuel Macron, the country has to deal with a remarkable combination, the naturalized neoliberal ideology and the leader who is there to apply it. Explaining that the French want this empty place to be occupied from now on, means a strong and active executive which, thanks to its real will, will transform the country from top to bottom, What he’s proposing is to turn everyone to little, carefree children again. Reckless in the face of terrorism, in the face of war, in the face of entrepreneurial domination at the heart of all our public and private institutions, in spite of the slavery which once again becomes a banal evil in a Libya with a European shadow as well as in the heart of Europe with the relocation on the spot described by Emmanuel Terray. Not only does it return a time when the king was the father of his people, able to protect all his children, but it reinvents this figure by making it the height of the efficiency of democratic institutions. When Emmanuel Macron asserts that the French have not recovered from the trauma of terror, and the death of the king, it categorizes the country on the right side of the Estate Assembly that has not tolerated justice for the high treason crime of a monarch who fled abroad to wage war on his people and betrayed his oaths from 1790 to 1792. The left side was certainly sad to have to killed the king, but he knew that since his escape and his arrest his place as the paternal ruler of France was empty. He felt that not only could the king not be replaced, but that it was not necessary, no dictatorship, no powerful executive among the Republicans of Year II, no personalization of power. We will have to assume the freedom we have won. We will have to assume our human condition, our tragic condition. This way of subverting the democratic ideal born in in Revolutionary France is the epitome of our situation.

Yellow vests as a symptom

In this configuration the Yellow Vests chose the French Revolution to build their scenario, march of women, take of the Bastille, oath of palm play, guillotine, Varenne... and even trial of "the king" in reality by building a case for the International Criminal Court, also in simulacrum.

Reference to the French Revolution has of course become ambiguous when not only the signage (phrygian caps, flags, Marseilles), but even the revolutionary texts were invested upstream by the extreme right-wing amalgamation of Soral, of the march for all, then by the controversial red caps of 2013. Often like Macron, this French Revolution was presented as neither right nor left, or even presented explicitly to the right. We find this difficulty in the use that the Yellow Vests have made and make of the French Revolution. But the phenomenon of the French Revolution was itself conflictual, and the movement of the Yellow Vests had this undeniable quality, restoring this conflictual dimension to it by multiple appropriations, that it is no longer possible to make the founding event a unified myth. This does not preclude the desire for "united popular classes". But popular unity is not the homogenization of political sensitivities. The goal is to reinvent a future where these sensitivities could be expressed in conflict but without deadly divisions and meaningless.

For others, it is a question of rejecting a new slavery. "The State is our servant and we do not have to be its slaves". The feeling of being deprived of freedom of speech and judgment, of the freedom to live with dignity, has led to this will of resistance also present in the songs reinvested «resists proves that you exist». "Slavery" belongs to the political vocabulary of the time of the modern despotic state, and we think of the "sighs of slave France" of Jurieu in the 17th century. To wear this statement from a vest that covers the body is to say in a different way than with the red cap, one intends to free oneself from an oppression that has lasted only too long.

Wearing dates and then revolutionary statements on one's vest is a way to make it happen. One saw yellow vests wearing 1789/2019, others writing the full statement of Article 35 of the 1793 declaration. "When the government violates the rights of the people, the uprising is for the people, the most sacred of rights and the most indispensable of duties", others still declare "the people are hungry", reconnecting with the imagination of 1789 and the aristocratic responsibility of a «famine plot», an open-air plot now because the social and economic factors that lead the rich to become richer and the poor to become poorer are well present in the critical skills of yellow vests. "Young people in trouble, old people in poverty, angry people". "For the rich in gold balls for the poor in pasta again". Tax evasion comes to the fore: "ecological transition, stop tax evasion", but also the banking system, "to get out of the misery: exposing the real state of the banking system, separating deposit banks from speculative ones." "A Ric for a national bank and get rid of debt", "Yellow vests = global revolution against finance".

This desire for a revolution, a break at the very least, will have put an end to several evils that have undermined the country as a democracy for a long time.

This desire for revolution will put an end to the rejection of conflicts and if the beginnings of the movement have been lived under the sign of a break with an implicit moral contract between rulers and governed, this moral economy of a protective demand is no longer relevant. The Yellow Vests want to decide. They act to decide their own future and that of their children and no longer believe that they will be protected if it's not by themselves.

This desire for revolution put an end to the desire of leaders who not only fail to manifest themselves but are regularly recused by the Yellow Vests. Whether it's the chief electoral officer, the sole chief strategist, the head of assembly, the master to think, they are absent. There were only messengers, facilitators, organizers who offered their services without acquiring vertically the monopoly of the elaboration, the talent, the intelligence. This intelligence remains collective and deliberative. As Claude Lefort said, the place of power remains empty. In a democracy, he explained, the Authority basically belongs to no one. Some individuals have a limited amount of time to exercise responsibilities, but the power itself remains "unthinkable, infigurable, indeterminate". Isn't that a good definition of what the Yellow Vests are inventing right now?

The national, Europe, the cosmopolitan

There is in this social imagination a rediscovery of foundations which some had perhaps too quickly declared obsolete. To revisit the French Revolution is to affirm a desire for democratic radicality as a return to the roots of a national history. This revolution thus offers two imaginary sides that of the Frexit as Priscillia Ludosky says also that of a new cosmopolitan.

«In any case, it has raised a question: that of the «Frexit» which comes up a lot in the debates that are organized by the Yellow Vests in the departments. People are wondering whether we should continue to be part of Europe. The possibility of questioning certain treaties is a matter that goes beyond borders. There is a surge in political consciousness right now. We've been on standby for years and people are asking questions of all kinds, including the question of leaving the European Union.

«The European Union must be questioned in its fundamentals»

This distrust of Europe has increased since the 2005 referendum, which was flouted and which they nevertheless made a treaty through the Lisbon Treaty in 2007. National opinions are ignored, and that calls into question our place in the community, as well as our legitimacy in making certain decisions and giving our overall opinion. The opening of consciences to sovereign stakes is in full swing.

We had given the European Union its chance. The positive points do not prevent the global problem. The original idea was a community

that had to act collectively in the interests of European citizens. The reality is the muzzling of citizens. The European Union must therefore be questioned in its fundamentals.”

I wouldn’t call it international support. I would say that we support each other when it comes to coordinated actions at the borders, for example. On the other hand, the movements were not born out of support for France, but because they realized that there were also some things that did not work and that they had their say. The Yellow Vest movement has awakened a certain political consciousness in countries that face problems identical to ours. All citizens of the European Union must feel concerned.

This gives a little more credibility to our movement, since we say to ourselves that we are not completely crazy to go out on the street every Saturday to denounce fiscal and social inequalities. And when we denounce what is wrong with Europe, it makes sense if the European peoples speak with one voice.”

This is where we are.

*Sophie Wahnich, senior research fellow, CNRS,
August 26, 2019.*

C
R
I
S
I
S
&
C
R
I
T
I
Q
U
E

/

Volume 7 /
Issue 1