

Utopia or Utopias in the Gaps: From the Political to the 'Domestic'

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We all face the requirement to put our knowledge in perspective. If there be an intellectual questioning it is because there is in fact already a questioning of societal values, a popular concern, a lived recognition of Paul Valéry's accurate but simple phrase: 'We civilizations know that we are mortal.' I think that questioning of the two great indicators of modern civilization in the tradition known as 'Judeo-Christian' – or, as I prefer, 'semitico-western-modern', to rightly include what was a cultural exception in the Semitic world – requires, over and above critical thought, radical thinking, thinking that goes to the roots.

The *figure One* is the first of the great indicators at the root of that tradition. And when I say 'the figure' I am joking, since I mean 'figure' in an esoteric and quasi-exoteric sense: the phantasm of the One, Monotheism, Universalism. The second great indicator is the 'Paradise to come', the Project in the simple sense of the word.

St Augustine – and I am not forgetting St Augustine was a Berber – has a saying that reflects this first great indicator: 'Human reason leads to unity.' He bases monotheism in reason, which was shortly to be at the very root of all theological constructions and later all constructions of theodicy, then of course the basis of politics which – to use Marx's phrase – is the profane form of religion. Echoing this idea nearly 2000 years later, Auguste Comte, a universalist if ever there was one and heir of the Enlightenment, who defined society and the sociology that describes it, said – in the Latin expression – 'Reductio ad unum'. Reduction to the One. In this connection the word 'reduction' is interesting in itself.

It reveals a logical instrument fashioned from a very simple word, one that expresses cutting, separation. Here again I would point to a founding sentence from the Bible, the first one: 'God divided the light from the darkness.' And later there is a long series of variations on that initial separation, a whole succession of many dichotomies, body/spirit, nature/culture, etc., culminating of course in the great Hegelian concept of separation, which could equally be compared with the Freudian

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concept of *Spaltung* (splitting), the basis of what might be seen as that tradition's epistemological individualism. The individual, in the etymological sense: *indivi*, is in fact the smallest piece once everything has been separated, divided.

In this tradition a constant refining is carried out: taking away, cutting out. And this leads to something I notice increasingly in intellectual debates – which has been said in various ways by many authors and is a cultural exception – substantialism. In fact god is a substance acting on the world. The individual is a substance acting on the object, the great Cartesian idea being that the human being is the master and possessor of nature: the state acting, the institution acting. In short, Being must be One. It must be stable, labelled and unified in order to be.

As it happens George Steiner made a very subtle distinction between other cultural conceptions, for which Being is the infinitive of the verb 'to be', and the cultural tradition in which that Being has been 'nominalized', the 'noun' being the fact of naming, being someone, something, god or an individual. In my view it is this 'naming', this substantialization of being that then logically erases what is multiple, paradoxical, ambiguous, in the constant process of becoming. There is a word to describe that refining structure and it was Gilbert Durand, the French anthropologist, who first used it when he called it a 'diairetic' (that is, cutting) structure. We might say a discriminatory structure, or even, from an epistemological viewpoint, an analytical structure, a schizophrenic regime of the imaginary. I think it is important to come back to that basic schizophrenia of monotheism, or mono-ideism. Amusingly Nietzsche called that monotonous aspect of theism 'mono-tono-theism', in which we find the reign of the homo-social, a homosociality where what prevails is the same, something that is essentially logo-centred.

The second indicator of this tradition, as was mentioned earlier, is the project in the simple sense of the word: in the end true life is elsewhere. We remember the Augustinian stance on this when he talks of the City of God, and we also remember the echoing 'Marxian' position where it is the perfect society that counts. There is a very fine book by Karl Löwitz, called *Histoire et salut*, that shows clearly the analogy between history and salvation, messianism. I see in that a great characteristic of what was to culminate in the myth of progress – and I do not believe we have done with the myth of progress. It is a great transcendent idea, which is transcendence itself. I mean in its religious or political guise, but it is important to bear in mind the religious origin of the political form. It is not for nothing that currently that religious origin is coming back, in a distorted form and in force, as we are aware. The scholarly term for the conception of the world that characterizes the project is 'soteriology': there is salvation in it. And to achieve that salvation there is a saviour or mediator, be that a prophet, Christ or the proletariat, there is a structural homology here. It is matter of saving oneself, healing life and I would say even more ironically, a matter of *curing oneself of life*, since it is structurally evil.

Based on this structural schizophrenia and this transcendent project, can we talk of a humanism? Is this tradition humanistic? I would say no, it is not. We have been fundamentally deceived in referring to that famous western humanism, since it is structurally a negation of the human in favour of something transcendent.

What I observe empirically when I look into the street is a saturation of that whole model. A civilization, a long period of time, even two millennia, can cease to be. And

in many respects this re-orientalization of the world shows us that there is not necessarily a creation and an end to the world, and that there can be both 'impermanence' and continuity without there being creation and an ending to the world. I prefer to use the sociological term 'saturation'. This saturation translates into a polytheism of values, to borrow Weber's expression. This hypothesis stems from my empirical observations, even though the protagonists themselves do not use the word 'polytheism'. Here are just two details: the fundamental disaffection with the political and the immanence of the sacred, something that counters transcendence: a proliferation of forms of religiosity is the expression of it. And it is this immanentism that I personally call 'utopia in the gaps', that is, not the search any more for a distant utopia, somewhere else, but simply, to use an expression from Lévi-Strauss, existential *bricolages* (makeshift forms), something that lodges these little utopias – be they sexual, religious, cultural, musical or otherwise – in the little interstices of existence, in other words daily life. So I would say there is an inversion of polarities: no more the distant but the close.

Taking up this notion of the domestic is for me a way of describing the transfiguration of the political. I did not wish to go back to the idea of the end of something but, after all, what used to be the figure of the political in its etymological sense, that is the *polis*, the city, was quite clearly in the realm of the *close*. The idea of the domestic would thus be a Latin way of linking with that *domus*, what has to be managed. And here even the Michel Foucault of *L'Usage des plaisirs* or *Le Souci de soi* would stress localism, territory, *terroir* (native area), *terreau* (humus), something that belongs less to the domain of the constructed, that great construction paranoia. For – and it was Baudelaire who said 'God, the biggest paranoiac' – God acts on the world. The individual acts on the world. In contrast to that great idea of construction, the given, what is there, that place where I am with others, is no longer something 'logo-centred' (God who, in naming, creates what he names) but loco-centred. There is a shift between logocentrism, the creating verb, and lococentrism, the place I share with others. Then of course it is no longer a matter of progress. In French I know we have no word to translate that idea of something that does not belong to the domain of progress yet is not part of the status quo. So we need a neologism like 'ingression', in other words a progression that is inner and does move towards the outside. If Progress moves towards the outside, 'ingress' would refer to a dynamic that is not directed towards a distant project but, for better or worse, promotes the expression in various ways of something to do with the emotions: a culture of the feeling of belonging based on a given place.

I think we need to adapt our words to that reality, otherwise we will fall into incantation or stigmatization. In France, as soon as you mention the word 'community', you see communalism raise its head, and that is quite obviously a way of stigmatizing this culture of feeling. But more generally I think the words we use – 'citizen', 'democracy', 'freedom' – no longer have any meaning. It is not that the reality they indicate has no meaning – for those words emerged from particular moments, based on characteristics I mentioned earlier. So it is not pointless, and it is our task, to find the least hollow words we can to describe, not what we would like to see or what ought to be experienced, but what is. It is not pointless to throw off, in a sense, a moral perspective in order to observe.

Insofar as what characterized this semitico-western-modern modernity was basically a negation of the human, I would tend to talk of 're-emerging humanisms' rather than 'emerging humanisms'. Thus it would be about the re-emergence of something that for a long time had been blanked out, forgotten, even denied. Along with Rafael Argullol, I am also thinking of a form of polytheism, paganism, pantheism, something that connects with what is structurally plural, what is the entirety of being versus schizophrenia, splitting and separation. It is an archaism in its etymological sense: *arché* in Greek means what is fundamental, primary. Of course we are talking about the archaism that treats the human animal seriously. And when I say 'human animal' I am pointing to a semantic closeness between *humus* and human. In the human there is obviously *humus*: affects, passions as opposed to what was purely cognitive, purely rational.

In *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* Durkheim spoke of the 'piacular' function, a word it is hard to understand in French. One might say the weeping function, but I would prefer the function of social moods, social secretions, maybe compassion. Something that in fact links up with what I would call a re-orientation or re-orientalization – but in the sense of the mythical orient, as Henri Corbin or Gilbert Durand revealed it, an alternative to the monovalency of western culture.

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Note

This text reproduces the author's spoken contribution to the Alexandria conference (see page 3 above).