

# Lost Paradigm or Inhibited Projects?

*Bernard Michaux*

“As for common practice, I don’t see any sense in it at all. What I need is a new common practice which we shall institutionalize immediately: the practice that consists of reflecting anew in each new situation ...

What can be done? What the child says, if it is not heroic, it is at least sensible.

Brecht, *Der Neinsager* (The Naysayer)

“I urge you to write down your ideas too.”

Baudelaire

Who are we? Never have so many of us asked this question, nor so few been able to answer it. What is happening to us? Already we miss those who are not asking the question along with us.

We all were sure of ourselves in our respective groups – some aggressive, others tolerant – but sure of being these ones and not those ones as we crossed paths with others or with us, in business and in war, and who were always ready to tell us which of all of them we were.

Suddenly the voices fail to sound and the clear distinctions between exploited and exploiters, outsiders and insiders, South and North, subordinates and leaders, men and women, old and young, become blurred ... “Who are we?” knows no specific site, because it is everywhere. And now it is all of us who are in question, but an answer is lacking. Or rather the old answers, the predominant assertions of identity are still there, frozen in theoretical criticism and practical rejection, but not forgotten in people’s attitudes or thoughts. At the same time, among different groups and the human race as a whole, we see the appearance of new stakes of identification, freedom and reproduction of power. Are they really new or are they still the same, merely transposed into new customs, instruments and institutions? In any case, these stakes do not appear one at a time but are linked in a network, from the start.

And we have a hard time finding our way in this complex web. Have we lost the blueprint to the house?

An identity crisis, we call it when pressed. But it takes very little time to cut through this cliché. Identity is not a quality, it could never be healthy or ill, perishable or restorable. Let us not speak of it as a possession, for it concerns us and what we do. Do we recognize each other as both similar and different, and capable of searching for ourselves within this constant paradox? Identity belongs to no one. But we all seek to identify ourselves continuously, trying to isolate a human identity through the unfailing and yet ever-changing combination of similarities and differences. The relationship between like and unlike can bend and fold back onto itself in many different ways. Analysis has shown the symmetrical axes in this dynamic; all people express the human in their own ways. Inhuman behavior begins when sameness begins to separate itself, when it defines itself through its nature and attributes, thereby forcing the other both inside and outside itself to conform or perish.

No, the idea is not new, but it never gets old either; it indicates something which, as aware of the past as it may be, as aware even of the contradictions of its own past, remains ever at the beginning. We need to learn what we once were over and over again. Who are we? This cry is always practical, concrete, urgent. Yesterday's breakthroughs do not lessen today's perils, today's brutal or mild hegemonies, the exterminations, poor treatment, the exceptional and daily segregations. Each pause, each illusion of acquired rights would be an absolute regression.

We know all this. But knowing is one thing, doing another. Why are we so hesitant? Have we lost the way by our own doing, lost all contact with others because we've forgotten God and death without which there can be no concept of the other? Or are we so fascinated by the competitions and paralyzed by the contradictions of our future that we are incapable of modernizing our forms of cooperation and inventing our own solidarities? A lost paradigm and/or inhibited plans: does one term exclude the other?

## When Diogenes Jostles Kant

Among all the questions related to human identity, "Who are we?" is not the most often heard. We hear others much more frequently, the most frequent being "*Who am I?*" – a question essential to the individual subject himself. It doesn't in any way preclude relationships to others, in fact it assumes them. In the play of mirrors and the formation of identifying images, in response to the parents' wishes and the incessant children's "why," this question accompanies the individual, is transformed as he is transformed while likewise transforming him each step of the way, intertwining the consciousness of death with the matinal joy of being alive. "Who am I?" is a question that does not require knowledge; while it certainly seeks an answer, no single answer really suffices. It is not a theoretical question, but rather an endless existential quest. It remains open in the way the subject remains open in intersubjective relationships; if this subject ceases to be other, it ceases to reach itself and becomes frozen inside itself – with the identity of a tombstone or the confusion of a mass grave.

"Who am I?" is not a question without precedent. It is a question that has been provoked, in as much as it is prompted by a provocation. In the beginning there is a confrontation and an immediate response: "What does he take me for?" The man or woman who rises up against insult or subjugation asserts his identity with a protest born of his sense of self-esteem. He does not know what he is, but he knows what he is not: "Not that!" With this he affirms who he is: he is not just anybody, not someone who remains passive when attacked. But if the attack is repeated, if the subjugation becomes prolonged, the justifiable pride of "I am what I am" is called into question by self-doubt. Who am I, then, if someone continues to scorn me in utter indifference? My protest falls apart, maybe I am nothing. This nothing is not opposed to "something," but to "someone." For us humans, to be nothing is not to be in the void, but rather to be something that does not count. Identification cannot proceed without a sense of self-worth.

"Who am I?" is not a question without illusion. The act of asking it immediately gives rise to two. First of all, as a probing of the self, the question appears clear and lucid, yet this clarity is in fact

part of the self-esteem I attribute to myself. My insulted consciousness confirms my existence and I prize it. On the other hand, a shadowy clarity conceals personal affronts, voluntary submissiveness and complacent abasement. Yet they are no less part of me. In shadow or light, I am always within the aura of my self-evaluation. The construction of identities requires this, but the identity in question has nothing to do with self-knowledge. The second illusion also comes from the questioner. I question myself, which is to say that to question myself I proceed from within myself, from within my scraps of experience and limited view of the situation. I think of my relationships with others only from my own point of view. Here is another man, a single man or all men, treated as a single man, as the Other, the Other Man. This duo becomes a duel from the perspective of a third, a familial trio, a civil war. But who can reassure me that the social relationships that make up my world end at the horizon-line of my own perception? What must I know about social relationships in order to formulate a question about my uniqueness? The question "Who am I?" always risks overlooking the larger circle of my social being, repeating over and over a description of intersubjective relationships reduced to a formal combination of positions, affects and images.

For its part, the question "*What is man?*" involves other issues, but no fewer of them. Let us look at the diversity of human identities self-proclaimed by ethnic cultures, religions and political doctrines. First of all, they do not form a motley and mirthful jig. Rather they present everyone who considers himself different with the same warlike expression, the same attack poses, the same bristlings of suspicious tolerance, the same culture of intimidation. Nowhere on earth is it easy to ask the question, however delicate, however ambiguous, "*What is man?*" However, in spite of the immense effort required to do so, and the weariness it may entail, we must not allow the impulse to flag. For this question, by including us all as the question's object, brings us together. In this way, by unifying us, it creates man, this universally precarious category and a late-comer to consciousness. But when it does come, it immediately situates itself within the parameters of law, demanding equality. The abstraction of the idea of man finds logical expression in orderly practices and institutions. It offers the

peoples of the world a framework within which the struggles for an increase in rights and their concretization can take place. As such, it opens up history, our history, to "we the people," the history of successive liberations from imperialisms and the hegemony of market forces.

Many have denounced this "What is ... " question because, in this case, it turns the questioner into an object when he or she by right is the subject. These critics have correctly identified in this question an aspect of power-grabbing, of the reification of the human being that goes hand in hand with its manipulation as a specialized worker, an average consumer, a typical TV viewer or numbered convict. Herein lies an irreversible critical insight: the question "What is man?", by seeking an essence, human nature, is self-contradictory. On the one hand it tends toward reification and domination, whether this is the result of the coupling of metaphysics and religious hierarchies or the human sciences and their associations with businesses or governments. On the other hand it is a universalizing and liberating question, for it formulates our inquiry into man instead of blind thinking in any given herd-identity. Rational humanism – as an ensemble of practices, evaluations and representations implied by the question "What is man?" – is not a peaceful shelter of theory and political discourse. It is a field of confrontation, to be sure, but it has the virtue of provoking discussion, and in this way each can be his or her own judge of the criteria involved in the search for human identity.

Beneath the many and thick layers of these debates, can the question "*Who are we?*" rouse Diogenes? Can it, through its calculated shiftings of the theories of man, its neat and joyful paradoxes, clear a path for a humanistic revival?

From the question "Who am I?" this revival would make use of the demand for a consciousness turned on itself as it seeks an identity, a demand for self-examination that could be abandoned only at the cost of a terrifying reification through industrial exterminations or a day-to-day renewal of banal dominations. But, as distinct from "I", "we" would avoid two dangers: that of preorienting our answer toward an individual Self that thinks that what it is is in or of itself; or that of an intersubjectivity (the I-thou relation) in which the lived experience of the "I," in the final

analysis, would preserve a central position. The “we” is directed not toward a collection of “I”s but toward the network of social relations in which our activities take place and in which the pattern of each individual subjectivity takes shape in acts of solidarity and responsibility.

From the question “What is man?” the question “Who are we?” would take the need for knowledge, objectivity and going beyond the limits of the manifestations of self-consciousness, which is to say its illusions. But as a question of “Who” and not “What,” it would refuse to be satisfied with explanatory and deterministic schemas according to which the promptings of conscience and evaluation would be mere accompaniments with no effect. It would leave open the debate on intention, finality and the meaning of practices. The distinction between the question “What?” and “Who?” does not cover the distinction between the collective and the individual. This opposition is no longer convincing. Neither in terms of opposition or reunion are they two different things. While the individual who finds himself through self-awareness and who is dazzled by it could very well represent society to himself as his opposite or fatal adversary, we cannot corroborate a substantial duality between the collective and the individual. Psychic singularization is the ultimate effect social relationships have on a human body. In this process, identification plays a major role. As for the social sphere, for the most part it is outside of the field of human consciousness and will. In this sense it can be called objective reality. But its reality is not that of a thing, but of an ensemble of relationships. One can give oneself the task of researching these relationships, abstracting them in order to imagine them, but their concrete mode of existence is the single human subject, who is psycho-social through and through, capable of positing himself as an “I” only when among “us”, even when he proclaims himself solitary or unique.

Situated between “Who am I” and “What is man?” as if on a force field, the question “Who are we?” draws its energy from the alternate pull between these two poles. A question that cannot be constructed by itself but is instead constantly reconstituted from its inherent polemic, “Who are we?” would be the magnetic question that ever allows for the reproblematication of the human.

## Complexities, Perplexities

The answers are already there: "We are ... the people from here, not from across the way; who have always been here, not just arrived; the happy few, not the crowd; the pure-blooded, not the half-breeds; the men, not the women; who are like this, not the others." In truth, the answers came before the questions: they are not answers, but assertions of group identifies. They come perhaps in response to another question, asked by the people from across the way, in fact: "Who are you?" – a question that is rarely calm, since it is the twin sister of unexpected cruelty. By the "We are ..." a group announces its identity with a declaration of possession, that of a shared attribute, definable according to any given category of being: place, time, quality, quantity ... And this possession of sameness minimizes all the rest, the differences between self that no longer matter, since the essential is that which distinguishes us from the others: "Don't expect to divide our ranks!" The "We are ..." presents itself first and foremost as a flow of identifying assertions of specific groups. To define oneself, to articulate one's nature, or what one believes it to be – this is being sure of oneself, which is to say being ignorant of the role of the other in oneself, the other who is nonetheless necessary in any process of identification. Difference precedes nature. The other is within us, this is very common, and this is what "we are" hides or denies.

The "We are ..." comes before "Who are we?" for it is the answer that matters to us, it is the most selfish answer there is. Nothing matters more to us than the assertion of identity. Socrates was wrong: universality does not attract. It is not only far from certain that the question "What is ..." is the most radical, but when it relates to us and transforms the injunction "Know thyself?" into a research project, it ceases to be a model of objectivity, and acquires, even in its logical form, the most extreme subjectivity. To assert and reassert group identity through an effortless act of self-identification is a terrifying and fascinating form of social celebration. Being is attested here by verifying the presence of ownership (goods or attributes). Thus we know who we are by knowing which ones we are. And even if we are not much today, we are nevertheless not just anyone. Our past splendor will blos-



som again ... The "We" can sanction nationalism, irredentism, ethnic purification, the irrational condemnation of all mixed bloods.

At the risk of indulging in atrocities, this "we" finds its distinctive identity (we, not the others) in an exclusive attribute (language, customs, religious affiliation).

To share an exclusive quality, such no doubt is the greatest pleasure of the closed group. And it is terrifying in two ways: for those not in this group – since they are not taken into consideration, and their exclusion condemns them to annihilation sooner or later; and for the members of the group – since this belonging will constrain them to extreme conformity and forced assimilation, whether conscious or not. The domestic politics of the identifying "we" is no less authoritarian than its foreign policy. And this process can be repeated by degrees within the group: in any nation that defines itself in these terms, a minority sub-group may in turn secede in the name of its own self-proclaimed identity. A minority group may want to separate from a larger nation in the name of the same principle of self-identity as the nation itself when it detaches itself from an even vaster empire. Nothing prevents the question "Who are we?" from encouraging the strengthening of closed communities, with their authoritarian regimes supposedly adapted to their nature, and their inter-community relations ranging between aggression and very low thresholds of tolerance. The "We are ..." can lead to the most inhuman practices.

"Who are we?" – the question can also be asked by an elite or aristocracy that sees its privileges taken away, recalling its rank one last time before its decline. Or this question can express the demand for special treatment by a corporation that considers itself mistreated. It is a patrician or plebeian question, depending on the circumstances. But in all cases, this restricted "we" seeks its self-identity through distinctions from the outside and fusion within. It is only in the presence of another, after all, that one can arbitrarily formulate an exasperated question that cannot be satisfied and that exasperates itself even further with this dissatisfaction.

The question "Who are we?" can ignore human universality, judging restricted identities sufficient to give life meaning. But when a certain universal consciousness of the human is formed – and one does still exist today, no matter its contradictions – then



we, in our diversity, are overwhelmed, and the question “Who?” is no longer the same. It is now, whether in large or small groups or in the name of all humanity, that we begin to ask about ourselves from within the universal category of the human. And this universal identity that still questions itself is already in something of a hurry, since it is not so fragmented that it can not form the collective subject that asks the question. “We, all mankind” – these are not empty words, for this universal “we” affirms the equal quality of us all. The question and the premonition of universal identity do not merely enlarge the field of consciousness. They set a higher standard than any other specific standard.

Even if we still pursue special interests when pronouncing the words, “We, all mankind,” we nevertheless grant ourselves a universal moral right and set a legal standard requiring judgment of our actions according to a sense of legitimacy other than that of a restricted group. This moral code is very weak, and even illusory, when faced with the reasonings of special interests (State imperialisms, the private universality of financial organizations). But its weakness, and our own when it comes to making our actions conform to this code, does not diminish it in any way. First of all, we can always try harder to conform to it; the obstacles themselves do not let us off the hook. Furthermore, as weak as we may be – we, all mankind – this universal consciousness remains the only legitimation for discussing others, those legitimations particular groups demand as their due. We, all mankind, have very little existence when confronted with the reasonings of States and businesses. But this however little or not-yet is definitively precious anyway: this universal consciousness is the only thing guaranteeing that brutal acts and iniquitous uses of force do not remain unjudged. It is also this universal consciousness that allows us to reject the confusion between globalization and universality! Were a special interest group – some specific type of socio-mercantile relationship – to take the whole world as its parade ground, thereby imposing a uniformization of customs and institutions, this would not prevent the “we”, the people, from calling for another kind of globalization, one without uniformization or a short-term vision of development, but a universality of diversification and cooperation.

“We, all mankind” – in this universal identification, specific identities are not suppressed; they are transformed. They are recreated differently. No longer do they reflect substantial differences, but rather a diversity within the universal. All men speak a language, but the functioning of language is based on the diversity of languages. All men have culture, but the functioning of culture is based on the diversity of cultures. As a form of internal diversity within the universal, the differences are not outside the common run, but rather the common run is manifested in diverse ways. “We, all mankind,” demand equality among us all, which is to say the equality of each of us. Could this prove to be more than a mere protest against global uniformization? Could it be a project involving cooperation and diversity?

People often confuse equality with sameness. When a particular group posits the equality of its members, in one way or another it bars access to others. Equality is therefore the prerogative of some, due to their rank, their nature; they are the Equals, which is to say Similar. A universal consciousness of the human allows us to go beyond this confusion. Universal equality is clearly neither a socially given condition that is present at some point in time, nor an historical result that one can consider acquired and irreversible at any given moment. In the complexity of social relationships, inequalities do not disappear of their own accord, they move on. Some endure, while the ones that are destroyed are replaced by others. Equality is not a fact or a stage, but a task here and everywhere linked directly to the consciousness men have of themselves universally. It is a morally demanding and historically unending task. It requires only our obstinacy. But we have moments when we are “absent” to it. And these “absent moments” correspond quite exactly to regressions of universal consciousness, when a whole segment of humanity leaves the field of the consciousness of others, as if the lack of events at home lessened the persistence of its iniquitous fate; or else when in the name of a respect for a supposed identity of its own, a minority demands a separate status.

If universal equality under law remained an abstract affirmation it would poison our social relationships with hypocrisy, since they are so charged with inequalities. But this principle does not

remain an abstract affirmation. Indeed, everywhere that it is affirmed – even if it be by a group or a conglomerate of groups who initially were interested only in their own self-promotion – we can observe the appearance of a general historical movement devoted to the concretization of rights for everyone and which opens up a space for public protest and popular projects that will not close again no matter its fate. “We, all mankind” – this declaration never stops universalizing itself; it does not describe and could never describe a complete universality, but it orients the struggles for freedom and emancipation. This declaration will always be weak in comparison to the perspective it opens. It will always be caricatural, and its perversions will cause it to be doubted. But this does not invalidate its legitimacy, for it alone allows for the permanent criticism of discriminations.

“We, all mankind” – this declaration is still the only one that instigates the critique of the confusion between differences and dominations. If the differences among us reflected differences in our natures, then some of them would be used to establish a supremacy over others, and dominations would be facts of nature. Nothing, or almost nothing, could be done about it by a social or political struggle. But if our differences reflect diversity within the group, the different ways of being human, the different ways of creating a genre that exists only in combination of these ways, then no form of domination can any longer be granted legitimacy. All dominations, whether economic, political or cultural, are mere historical facts. Their material and social balance-sheet must be evaluated without prejudice. It does not justify them. In the name of universal consciousness of the human, their overthrow is never illegitimate; it is up to the revolutionaries to be better than their former masters and to the other peoples to help them in this.

### **Contradictions, Irresolution**

The question “Who are we?” therefore has no real unity. Those who ask it have none. Nor do those in whose presence the question is asked. The demand for identification can pass through opposing and even antagonistic routes. In the complexity of the

social relations existing within in any one country – as in all of them – the search for identity is articulated and interwoven with customs whose only cohesiveness lies in their contradictions. This is perhaps why the question “Who are we?” cannot be reduced to the interpretation of a small model of intersubjective relationships: “You and I, who are we in the presence of this third?” or “You who live among us, so near and yet so far away, you who love us or hate us, who feed us or whom we feed, tell us who we are.” This intersubjective miniaturization would ignore the complexity of the relationships and social practices in which the questions “Who are we?” construct and confront each other.

The question “Who?” is different from the question “What?” and the question of identity is separate from the question of essence, provided that it always inquires into its links with the latter. All information available about man, the species, the body and societies are necessary to this inquiry, as well as reflections on the methods of human scientific knowledge. Fundamentally, it must return over and over again to the question of man-as-object in order to reproblematicize, without trivializing, the ambition of the human-subject. Freedom does not stand apart from necessity. On the contrary, the field of possibilities is made larger by a knowledge of the complexity of determinants, the very activity of humans being one of them. One must better understand the determinants of the processes to give the very fragile question “Who?” a chance, the enticing challenge of what one calls “anti-destiny.”

The question “Who are we?” has no answer, for it is not a question of fact. It is a reminder and a request. *A reminder* that all specific identity is part of the diversity within the universal human; that when one of the two terms becomes absolute, barbarism threatens. *And a request* – that the question remain open-ended. That which has begun to be universalized among men as identification and evaluation of everyone among everyone can make the intolerable withdraw. At least for now. And next time? The same question returns, phrased differently perhaps, but still the same. Its irreducible protest is already a plan or, rather, the force behind a plan, the protest against that which we no longer want, that which we will no longer agree to be. This refusal mobilizes us, but in what direction? Any plan calls for goals, without which the plan

not only sinks into powerlessness, but ravages the subject's consciousness of himself, because the space and the time of creation are in this way offered to his desire but refused to his actions.

Even if no single project can achieve the human by itself, even if in fact the question "Who are we?" unceasingly probes the dark side of any project, protesting over and over against the inhuman verso of any project, even one that is humanist on the recto, the formulation of any project requires a definition of its transformational positive goals. Standing up to the intolerable is not one of them, and sooner or later the position collapses. A fraction of humanity nevertheless can no longer – with the universal becoming concrete in consciousness and institutions – develop itself at the expense and sacrifice of others, either through violent segregation or cowardly abandon. In order to deploy its force of protest to the greatest extent, and even to prevent it from regressing into an easily satisfied clear conscience, the question "Who are we?" demands the formation of projects for cooperative (non-hegemonic) and diversifying (non-uniform) developments. Herein lies a vigilant reminder of the need for human universality in any collective action. If one separates the question of identity from the question of activity, it risks turning speculative, thereby surrendering these activities to a world frozen by constraints and short-term calculations, a world of "fatalities."

"Who are we?" means "What do we want to do together?" By this question the "we together" is ceaselessly reproblematicized to denounce hypocritical contradictions, reproblematicized by enlarging its contours and intensifying its internal relations. Nothing is more urgent than to form or reform a plan of action, where it does not or no longer exists. No man can free another without his consent, nor decide on his own that another is to be freed. But it is nevertheless morally necessary and socially expedient to contribute to the free reconstruction of such projects, favoring the emergence of new solidarities in this time of desolidarization. No man can spare someone else political temporization or error. Nothing gives anyone the right to make decisions for someone else, nor involve himself in another's motives for choosing to act or not to act. Rather it is a question of giving back to each individual the responsibility he has always possessed, even if having

unwittingly relinquished it under pressure. This responsibility can only be taught by becoming responsible, which is to say by discovering and cultivating oneself by making decisions for oneself within a collective, in doing what one has decided oneself, in controlling the delegation of power conceded to others, and in righting one's own wrongs when they are noticed. An evolutionary interaction can be established between the development of individual personalities and the social concretization of the "we."

To try everything technically and socially feasible, to encourage every activity that might help to un-inhibit the initiative of individuals as autonomous subjects in collective democracies: such would be the categorical imperative of today's humanity, which is so uncertain not only about its progress, but about its very survival. This idea is not based on an unrealistic hope, on a belief that is always ultimately disappointed, purveyor of its opposite, despair. Certainly hope reinforces action, but *it is the setting into action that, alone, can give birth to hope*. Without action, no constraint can be overcome, the real becomes fatality. Through action strengths become honed, constraints are mastered one by one, the awareness of time is recast and its perspectives enlarged. The development of action is a process in time. It opens onto more distant horizons, onto panoramas with different views, leading toward more ambitious goals those filled with a hope made more concrete little by little. Urgency does not abandon long-term concerns; if we do, we will treat only the symptoms, renouncing the struggle against the causes of the problem. Who will we be, if we do not make time more livable?