

Structure and 'Details'

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'Concerning all these observations, it may now be concluded that, although on the one hand the two concepts of the individual and of society are very distinct for the purpose of analysis, and although in practice these concepts correspond to clearly opposite trends, it is, however, impossible to move from one to the other to account for psychological or social reality, or to conceive ideal aims which correspond to these two things.'

'Every theory founded on this reduction of one of these two principles to the other, of society to the individual, or the individual to society, is one-sided; and all tenets of this kind are in one sense a veritable mythology.'

Marcel Bernès (1901)¹

If we overlook a perceptible dating of the words employed and the style of argumentation, French sociological writings published in the socially and intellectually unsettled climate of the early twentieth century acquire an astonishingly up-to-the-minute appeal at the very end of the twentieth century. It must be said that, on the one hand, the successes of socio-biology, then the cognitive sciences, and, on the other, the spectacular vogue of the extreme relativism accompanying the revival of a perennially nebulous humanism, lead us today to a picture of prevailing theoretical antagonisms which irresistibly conjures up the debates for which, in 1901, the *Revue Philosophique* provided a forum: when the very Durkehimian Célestin Bouglé put 'biological sociology in the dock' and Gabriel Tarde was challenged by his 'hot-headed friend', Alfred Espinas, the first proposing sociology as a continuation of psychology and the second wanting to place it at the end of a spectrum of natural sciences.²

But whether these discussions were revitalized or revitalizing, they were so by virtue of the hope and the passion which they exuded: it is difficult not to be struck by the contrast with our own period of apathetic ironies and sophisticated disillusion. Admittedly, the thinkers of 1900 were alive when there was all the excitement of the 'Dreyfus affair' and when the anguish of a great war seemed daily more probable. But, when all is said and done, there is no lack of such 'affairs' in our own decades in which we might profitably be involved. Nor is there any lack of trends to induce long-term anxiety. Except that, with fleeting exceptions, sociologists, historians and anthropologists now leave these analyses to television philosophers, or even to mysterious political pundits, who in general merely dish up psychological banalities to a public delighted to understand everything without undue effort: communications have been cut between live commentary on contemporary conflagrations and the theoretical debates of the social sciences.

How did this gulf appear? Did it stem exclusively from a focused succession of influential conjunctures and striking contingencies, or did it tally in part with a less superficial subject matter? One hypothesis to consider is that questions concerning the position of

social reality over and against psychology and biology have progressively blurred a classic problem by only partially retrieving it. The problem is muddled, reputedly hackneyed and certainly hard to extricate from a problematic purely philosophical, which turns on the individuality–collectivity relationship. With social, psychological and biological phenomena all beginning to take shape individually and collectively at the same time, it is clear that the theoretical contradictions between them were in no position to clarify this theme.

However, practical differentiation between the psychological–social and individual–collective relations seems imperative for an intellectual dilemma with aspirations to securing a respectable purpose at the heart of society. By writing this, the reader will have the impression of returning to the style of 1901, but surely because the ground has lain fallow since then. If academia has more or less held onto the articles by Bouglé or Espinas, that by Marcel Bernès which appeared the same year in the same periodical, entitled ‘Individual and Society’, has fallen into total oblivion. Bernès himself, with the exception of his contributions to André Lalande’s famous dictionary of philosophy,³ has scarcely impinged on anthropologists’ memory: Durkheim refers to him several times in his correspondence with deep disdain (the latter fact perhaps explaining the former).

His text (a crucial passage of which appears as the epigraph to this contribution) is without question overjudicious. One might conjecture that it is unduly conciliatory in intention, too concerned with respect for convention. Nevertheless, however little the following extract is accepted as jointly epistemological, sociological and political, a methodological approach will become apparent:

There will thus be opposing opinions and ideas, which will necessarily be translated into conflict; and the cessation of conflict would be too dearly bought if it entailed the renunciation of the thought itself which was its necessary cause.

But, as long as these oppositions claim to be absolute principles, as long as intellectual activity is based upon a mythology, these oppositions will become universal and will be irremediable: in the name of reality and of society’s superior right, any violation whatever of the right of the individual is believed justifiable; and thus the very society which one aims to defend is ultimately weakened. In the name of the sacred right of the individual, any limitation upon its own tendencies is denied; conflicts without an issue are created; and by damaging social action a blow is struck at the fullest development of the individual, which has, however, been elevated above everything else.

If, by contrast, we are firmly convinced of the importance of the idea of the relativity of these oppositions, we will always limit them to the specific point at which they manifest themselves; and these limited oppositions, which are a matter for debate, not a pretext for hatreds, should become fertile, and become increasingly peaceful conflicts which continue to remain indispensable for the life of societies.⁴

Beware: this is not a case of relativism. It is a call to set down the individual/society oppositions within physical and thematic frames of reference properly demarcated in such a way as to prevent an extension by analogy which would transform them into ‘mythified’ rules. As we shall now see, while remaining in a highly revealing French context – without any cultural narcissism, the reader can be reassured – methodical application of such prudence has been greatly lacking in the social sciences and in their capacity for retaliation: in anthropology as in history. The subject now chosen for this

study has, moreover, a distant kinship with the Dreyfus affair in which Durkheim was once embroiled.

The putrescible past: the French 'detail' affair

In accordance with its crude definition, reactionary thought is more frequently and more rapidly dangerous when it expresses itself by reflex action than when it makes a pretence of building systems. In France, the polished utterances of the clubs created by the extreme right have never had an intellectual impact comparable to some of the catchwords used by its main representative. Commentary on this phenomenon generally explains that these inflammatory remarks have the knack of awakening inadmissible ideas that had sunk into relative torpor through the upheavals of history without, however, having been truly extinguished. The interpretation is admittedly not erroneous, but it is incomplete and, all in all, timid. It in fact avoids grasping a central aspect of the process: it is through victory over hostile positions that reactionary provocation succeeds in destroying the covering of shame which overlays its convictions. The act of bravado first takes the form of confused and implicit rebellion against a propriety which could not respond to it without immediately being caught red-handed in the act of hypocrisy. And genuine protesters against the established order, who refuse to ground hope in rancour, are then in a highly embarrassing situation unless they succeed in detaching themselves from the option thus emerged between deceitful conformism and the fallacious simplicity of the objection expressed.

Different illustrations might be contemplated. None, however, is more revealing or instructive than the 'detail' affair, to use the term flung out on a private radio station in 1987 to qualify the degree of importance of the Nazi extermination camps in relation to the Second World War. Innumerable protests were immediately raised to condemn this outrageous word and posters were put up virtually everywhere displaying the face of the individual who had uttered this outrageous remark. With hindsight, it must be admitted that the latter hardly suffered as a result of this: the publicity even appeared to benefit him so much so that, ten years later, he repeated the phrase in front of the German press. Moreover, television has recently demonstrated that he need do no more than utter these two syllables in the course of a broadcast to prompt a ripple of sardonic little smiles in an audience that colluded with him, and was delighted to do so.

How has it been possible for contemptible behaviour of this kind to become a source of political profit? Two factors explain it.

The first has to do with the fact that the fate of a reactionary movement depends intimately on the notoriety and the personal touch of a single leader: the fundamental fact is not that people respect him, it is that everybody recognizes him as *the* representative of the extreme right, if only to fear him. In this respect long-winded comments on the fault which consist of 'demonizing' this kind of enemy are absurd: the success of his strategy results from his capacity to demonize himself in order to become an obsessive image, creating the illusion of a new personality which would offer something more than his vanquished predecessors. By means of this expedient, he hides his double weakness from detractors and admirers alike, namely his fatuous stupidity and his stupid banality. It is by appalling the democrats that he calls attention to himself and gives hope of revenge to

a clientele brimful of sourness. Léon Blum undoubtedly had a premonition of the problem when he refused to call the libellous newspaper which defamed Salengro anything but 'the infamous paper'.⁵ These are threats which must not be dignified with a name so that they are not given a face, the distinguishing character of hatred surely being its lack of personality.

The second factor has passed unnoticed. From humanist diatribes to outraged rebukes, we have quite simply forgotten how to formulate a correct and considered response to the appalling assertion. This was not the case when faced with revisionism because there was only a factual reality to defend and a 'duty of remembrance' to reaffirm. Nor was it the case when faced with the assertion of racial inequality, because arguments to the contrary, more or less relevant, have long been developed. The 'detail' affair, by contrast, caught the intellectuals napping and revealed a general deficiency in the broad spectrum of thought hostile in principle to all compromise with Fascism. Once a cry was given a response had to be made. It was not a question of openly repenting while blaming oneself for not having seen to it that the public was informed, but of seriously wondering whether, in this case, we still have a body of knowledge at our disposal that is worth the trouble of being disseminated. Or, more precisely, whether in the course of recent decades we have not deprived ourselves, without knowing it, of the means of refuting the assertion.

The children of Auschwitz and Hiroshima

After all, an insignificant monstrosity is not inconceivable. Can we say clearly why the murder of millions of Jews and hundreds of thousands of gypsies was more than a dreadful incident in the Second World War? Can we say why this horror exceeds the level of tragic events of the twentieth century? The two questions are worth differentiating: some people would be tempted to relate the importance of the first to the immediate 'evidence' of marks left in our own time, but that would resolve nothing. The shift in meaning between the two frames of reference is precisely what must be elucidated in order to guard against the danger of degrading history. Or to prevent history from degrading itself.

Here, we would appear to play on the two meanings of the word: history signifies jointly a reality to approach and the approach itself. However, it must be seen that the more recent the period observed, or the deeper its stamp on the historian's present, the less this ambivalence appears prone to equivocation: in this case, it is a question of an intermingling, the historian's work participating in its object. As long as there are witnesses of the 'Holocaust' amongst us,⁶ whether on the side of the victims or on that of the executioners, the history that is told of it will become part of the history yet to be revealed. Put differently, we are not only responsible for ensuring that the Holocaust becomes more than a 'detail' in the Second World War. It is still more our responsibility to ensure that it *is* not one.

We are the children of Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Only our consciousness of this past can henceforth confound the 'detail' interpretation, for the past itself has not done so. Is it in fact wrong to say that the death camps exerted no influence on the progress of the war? Their existence did not give rise to any Allied offensive, did not divert any armoured division, did not hasten any political agreement. We can 'relate' the war itself without

making any allusion to them, and cinema has not ignored this option. It is not wrong to say that the men who died on the Normandy beaches died to stop this horror, if today we wish this to be true. But to say that the orders which were issued were dependent upon the camps' existence would be excessive. The strictly military viewpoint would thus offer little resistance to the account of the extreme right: no one will be surprised at this, given that the latter is by nature led to reduce history to the destiny of its conquerors and the fortunes of its warriors.

Nevertheless, we should remember too that the *Réflexions sur la question juive* [*Reflections on the Jewish Question*] were published by a philosopher who, in the general jubilation of the Liberation, was already rebelling against his society's insensibility to the survivors of the gas chambers and cited journalists claiming that 'in the very interest of the Jews, they should not be spoken of too much at this time'.⁷ The historical avatar which Jean-Paul Sartre perceived, and against which he protested even before the total defeat of Nazism, was well and truly a presentiment of 'detail'.

However, he perhaps misjudged the causes of the silence. A new aversion factor emerged at that period, latent, derivative, indirect: the Jews were henceforth linked to a profound shame, all the more unacknowledgeable since the country emerged official victor and was congratulated on all sides for a highly exaggerated resistance. The indifference of the greater part of the French population in the face of the round-ups sank then into a hidden memory: the 'Hitler, never knew him' attitude of the following generation was the first result, before the 'detail' affair could extract from it a well-developed malignancy. For the Nazis, the agony of the Jews was a real issue, a dominant means of acquiring and then organizing their power. For the French who had dreamed during the Occupation of a secret agreement between Pétain and De Gaulle, the evil had been experienced as a sacrifice necessary for the survival of France or even, to use a formula disseminated by a new cynicism, a case of 'collateral damage'. The rancour and bitterness of an unacknowledged open secret were undoubtedly as dangerous as the authentic nostalgia for the triumphs of hatred, and in their light one is better able to understand what the extreme right has to gain in daring to use the risky word 'detail'.

As for the democrats, they were shocked above all by the provenance of a comment which leapt brazenly towards the logical conclusion – at once inevitable and secondary – of supposedly honourable turns of thought. It would be easy to be satisfied in this respect with anecdotal memories, although it would not, for instance, be superfluous to recall that in the early seventies the film *The Nightporter* (an insolent frenzy which enjoyed exploring the theme of the non-innocent victim on the basis of imaginary and torrid reunions between a former deportee and her favourite torturer) was received with complacency by a section of the French intelligentsia. These spectacularly mistaken ideas were, however, infinitely less alarming than the consequences of subtle silences, remaining relatively unconscious so that they became generalized without encountering any resistance.

Is death quantifiable?

Auschwitz, 'roughly' 90,000 dead. Dresden, 'around' 250,000 dead. Hiroshima, 'in the region of' 150,000 dead. These figures are the 'do-it-yourself' of abstraction: desperately flat representations, they come for better or worse to the aid of the powerless human

spirit, which cannot imagine myriads of death pangs as a concrete reality. In the course of these three events, children who had hardly had time to open their eyes on life died, equally innocent, equally victims. The death of a baby at Dresden was no less unbearable than that of another at Hiroshima or at Auschwitz and, from the point of view of the individuals concerned, the drama was no less serious in one case than in the other: to maintain the opposite would be equivalent to postulating a difference in kind between them, as some of their killers did.

However, a global history which wanted to relate these events to the synthesizing gaze of posterity, the 'distant gaze' of the day after or of the afterwards, could not confront them from this sole criterion. The bombing of Dresden killed more human beings than the bomb at Hiroshima, but the scientific and technical feat the latter entailed was more shocking to the multitude of those who had experienced either of these two tragedies. Dresden was destroyed by a long offensive which did not succeed in provoking the Germans to headlong flight, Hiroshima was annihilated by a single act following an elementary decision and the result has sustained for decades the images of a push-button apocalypse setting the end of the world in motion.

We can speculate that nobody would accept anything but opposition to anti-Semitism by asserting in the name of numerical relationships between the victims that Auschwitz was four times more serious than Dresden and six times more serious than Hiroshima. The absurdity would insult literally 'the whole world'. Although made by survivors for survivors, history would deny itself in conceiving such a communal grave: even if the objective pursued was that the living should have a real opportunity for equality, it would not follow that the dead should do so, on the contrary. Let life select its ties with the past through the prism of death.

The inhabitants of Dresden and Hiroshima perished as a result of the simple fact that they lived in these towns. Carnage destroyed them at the same time as incinerating their history while reducing their city to ashes. At Auschwitz, the Jews did not die because they were there: they were there because they were Jews, because their birth itself had been denied in the name of a spirit that no flowering could render excusable. War did not accidentally strike them by pouring out death onto one place rather than another: if the Nazis had built their camp elsewhere, the same people would have died, wrested from a history which was to continue elsewhere, without them, at Paris or Salonica.

The genocide suffered by the Armenians took place in a blaze of hatred: the extent of the phenomenon was new, not its logic, and the Turkish slaughter can be compared today to the recent carnage in Rwanda. At Treblinka, then Auschwitz, a cold conviction went beyond emotion by urging denial of every shred of compassion: a machine uniting in its cogs hatred with indifference, contempt for others with fear for oneself, the determination to exterminate with passive complicity. A premeditated, thoughtful and calmly executed purging of humanity, that is the invention which lays heavily on the future of our species.

These remarks would be only incontestable platitudes and platitudinous incontestabilities if we could guarantee their content in all circumstances. However, in a good many cases, the past and its dead are today debased and humiliated: pretexts for absurd jousts, ridiculous debates, inept appropriations. Consider the trial of Louis XVI in 1989: reviewed and modified by a television channel and some weeklies; acquitted by a public whose main preoccupation was the digestion of their evening meal. Or the world-wide condemnation in 1992 of Christopher Columbus who ought never to have discovered

America, for his unhealthy curiosity has been the cause of great unhappiness: the responsibility for several dozen million deaths having been laid at his door.

But, above all, we should not forget *Le livre noir du communisme*⁸ and the enumeration of victims which was its central argument. Between 80 and 100 million human beings killed. The public criticisms directed at this book took primarily two forms: on the one hand, a challenge to the causal unity (the violence activated by Lenin differed from that set in motion by Stalin) and, on the other, a denial of the term-by-term comparison with the ravages of Fascism (the problem, posed many times, of a comparison between the Soviet deportation camps and the Holocaust). The ineffectiveness of these criticisms and the foundering in discussions too vague to produce an outcome stem from the fact that people have not dared to tackle head-on the appalling question which conditioned a hope of control over thought: is death a unit of measurement?

Counting those guillotined during the Terror is one process. Adding the losses of the Vendée⁹ to that list has quite another meaning. And enumerating the deaths attributable to Napoleon in the continuation of those which were Robespierre's responsibility would make a third, to which only nostalgia for the *ancien régime* could unreservedly reconcile itself. *Le livre noir du communisme* derives its coherence exclusively from the choice which is made there to count the deaths 'of' Lenin, 'of' Stalin, 'of' Mao and 'of' Pol Pot in one and the same breath: the consistency of this genitive, in other words the fundamental unity of the responsibilities sought across the disparity of the situations, periods and places, is ultimately only guaranteed by the very practice of the operation, plus some peremptory assertions lacking real argument. Put differently, counting erases the contexts and obliterates the differences between the victims: the historian suppresses history, in the name of the unshakeable solidarity which crosses this immense, heterogenous and scattered charnel-house from end to end. An intrinsically imaginary charnel-house, despite the indubitable reality of the corpses piled there by the imagination. Sociological analysis does not exculpate Lenin by claiming him as a special case, but it might well excuse Stalin by making him a docile successor.

From the repetition of murders to the summation of carnage, the role of interpretation increases by leaps and bounds: to ignore this hiatus, deliberately or not, results in depriving oneself of an explanation as to why the Holocaust cannot be summed up as a detail of the war. 'Horror does not need to be enumerated to be established', wrote Jean-Louis Margolin in *Le livre noir*, before adding later a still more lapidary phrase: 'All that remains to be done is to quantify, that is, to understand'.¹⁰ However, the author hastens to illustrate the inconsistency of the second assertion: numbered estimates, he explains, help him distinguish the social categories on which Pol Pot's henchmen had greatest impact. Comprehension does not reside in quantification, but in the comparison which feeds on it. The step taken by Margolin in the course of this chapter has, in this sense, nothing in common with the unrealistic computations by Stephane Courtois in the introduction (nor with the barefaced superficialities of the conclusion) and the two sentences quoted might be suspected of signalling unconscious unease with enforced solidarity with the rest of the work. Let me give three brief snapshots of a failure in comprehension resulting from this frantic quantification:

a) If the count made by the latter combines the victims of Stalinist repression with those of the civil war and the famines that followed the October Revolution, what happens to the Russians and the Germans who fell between 1941 and 1945? Would recalling them

amount to conferring extenuating circumstances on Stalin? Certainly not. Nevertheless, either ineptitude is taken so far as explicitly to subtract them from the global estimate (indeed, to deduct them!) and the researcher confesses to having put his judgement into abeyance in the face of this calculation, or no account is taken of them and they are crushed into a 'question of detail'.

b) In the *département* of Gard, during the Occupation, a group of resistance fighters planned the escape of a Czech forcibly enlisted in the Wehrmacht and ready to fight beside them. Unfortunately, his unit was sent prematurely to the eastern front where it was generally believed that was killed, no news having been heard of him since the Liberation. The question is to decide precisely where his death should be filed: under Hitler, under Stalin . . . or the French and English signatories to the Munich agreement? It is a true story which reappears with these hybrid martyrs.

c) As far as we know, Lenin's government, by contrast with the regime of Stalin, was not anti-Semitic. To make a straightforward equivalence between them in the name of the dead is considered as a debasement of their identity for one section of the victims. Only the fragile help, unreliable and lethargic, of 'good sense' is capable of opposing it.¹¹ Official history has, for its part, opened the door to insults from a posterity encouraged elsewhere to turn its nose up at its own shame.

Subjects, events, structures

A single observation is sufficient to summarize the theoretical difficulty to be resolved: the current representatives of the New History are very badly placed to repudiate the image of 'detail' in relation to the death camps, when elsewhere they endeavour to explain that the French Revolution was an event to be merged into the eighteenth-century context, that the Terror was a mere contingency of social transformation and so on. It is no coincidence that *Le livre noir du communisme* is dedicated to François Furet (the authors indicating that the latter 'had agreed to write the preface').

The social sciences are affected by a disharmony (*dysharmonie*)¹² whose significance they do not evaluate and whose departure-point is located in 1975. This was a critical year of contrasts which heralded the crude antagonism between scientism and relativism which continues to the present day: in the United States, a form of extended 'social Darwiniansim' was reborn from its ashes (socio-biology) and, under the shelter of anarchism, Paul Feyerabend sketched out his relativist epistemology;¹³ in France a new 'crisis of Marxism' became apparent in the universities and, above all, the multi-disciplinary craze for structuralism ceased abruptly.¹⁴ The ambition to have a methodological unification of the social sciences then collapsed like a house of cards and the desire for a scientific approach became unfashionable, quickly ridiculed by a section of those who had made it their hobby-horse.

Although history and anthropology curricula had instead offered considerable resistance to this débâcle by holding fast to the directions in which they were already going, the atmosphere ultimately permeated their general intuitions. As a result there is a harmful contradiction today between the fiercely defended allegiance to certain methodological options imposed in the sixties and the abandonment of the scientific framework which gave them meaning.

Thus, at the time of the structuralist triumph (in the broadest sense of the term, thus the most vague), the New History and ethnology advocated the dissolution within the structure of the event and the subject respectively. The expressed wish then consisted of promoting means of research opening onto little-known levels of reality, and not of devaluing philosophically the importance of the subject and of the event. There were ambiguities, of course, but those which continued briefly after the generalizations produced by external commentators rapidly destroyed those of scientific undertakings in the proper sense of the term.¹⁵ And the decline of the original ambition facilitated discreet amalgams between lines of argument in the social sciences and philosophical reasoning.

Put differently, freed from the requirement of a scientific approach, the mergings of subject and event into structure were transformed into ideological conviction and came to a standstill as veritable principles. Their solidarity should not, however, be accepted as fact: the historical event must, a priori, dissolve in a diachronic structure supporting an evolutionary reproduction of social issues; by contrast, the absorption of the psychological subject is demonstrated to us in the synchronic structure of an underlying and veiled logic. No one seems to have questioned this point: nothing indicates that the two 'dissolutions' occur within the *same* structure. Truth to tell, it is difficult to see through what medium this hypothetical consistency maintains contact with the real world.

Fernand Braudel's approach to the 'long' period and Claude Lévi-Strauss's to myth are neither commensurable nor independent: although the subjects for research are radically different, the 'long' period tends to reveal structures of thought which are sustained with glaring variations, while the coherence of myth is revealed in a stunningly vast spatial and temporal frame of reference. Nevertheless, the tendencies towards analogy, fallaciously dressed in the virtues of philosophical synthesis, have combined these exercises in dissolution into ideological rejection: the subject is displeasing and the event an encumbrance.

The intention would verge on caricature if it aimed to characterize professional practices perceived world-wide: in their daily exercise, if only at the level of data-gathering, the historian and the ethnologist are of course unable to ignore these two parameters. The distortion induced by the 'atmosphere' is proportionate to a subsequent elevation of the interpretation where the desire for abstraction at once sees subject and event as inferior concepts to be eliminated. Worse, it views their effective eviction as an index of success.

A concrete example of theoretical drift is provided by the reversal of Alphonse Karr's phrase, 'Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose' ('The more things change, the more things stay the same').

First stage: in 1977, Jean Pouillon mischievously entitled an article in *La Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*, 'Plus c'est la même chose, plus ça change' ('The more things stay the same, the more things change').¹⁶ He criticized there the idea of 'traditional' immobile societies in the mirror of a civilization characterized by chronic metamorphosis and concluded: 'as far as change is concerned, everything depends on the viewpoint and the criterion'.¹⁷ The frame and the significance of reasoning do not in the event give rise to any confusion nor to any bold expansion.

This did not continue with the second stage, when Marshall Sahlins published *Islands of History*, a study which became famous for the structure–history pairing through meetings between Europeans and Oceanians. In the final chapter he wrote, 'In the upshot, the more things remained the same the more they changed, since every reproduction of the categories

is not the same. Every reproduction of culture is an alteration, insofar as in action, the categories by which a present world is orchestrated pick up some novel empirical content'.¹⁸ The 'In the upshot' is worth stressing. Between the event and 'the' structure, Sahlins interposes a 'structure of conjuncture' which is 'the practical realization of the cultural categories in a specific historical context'.¹⁹ Granted. But does the realization occur with or without change? In these pages, the complicit intuition of the reader is responsible for making regular allowances for anthropological discourse, contrary to the crafty mind which is embarrassed by the constant suggestion of a single structure, isolable or, to pick up a word current in the contemporary climate, 'reified'.

Finally, the third stage is anecdotal: at the beginning of the nineties, a journalist very much courted by the media published a big 'sociological' volume and presented on various radio stations the opposite of Karr's aphorism as the fundamental explanatory principle of contemporary society – the end of the proposition's journey towards ideology, this enigmatic demand of which we know at the very least that discourses are changed to protect their meaning and that messages are altered when they are repeated elsewhere.

Structure is neither our target nor our horizon: it is our sky. Unshakeable, it goes without saying. Inevitably the sole remnant of an old pious wish for the unity of the social sciences, it no longer continues as a useful tool but as parasitic vegetation. The mould will be destroyed when the tools are disinterred and a specification drawn up for their use. Meanwhile, the artificial structure ignores horror, because horror dwells in the confrontation of subjects and events. Current problematics in social science no longer make it possible to talk of the Holocaust without dissolving six million Jews into a distant, insignificant and inert coherence. A kind of paradisaical irresponsibility. Such an expedient would not, however, be applied to Auschwitz without seeming to be a compromise of the most shocking kind: hence the circumventing of the pitfall by a discreet transfer of thought into the register of humanist 'good sense'.

The extreme right has not taken to structuralism, not even as a novice. Moreover, its leader does not remotely call Monsieur Jourdain to mind. In the image of a shady dealer doing off-the-cuff deals, he reacts to the weaknesses he scents rather than analysing them. Once more, his strategy succeeded when he again calmed the resentments of his clientele while at the same time provoking his enemy to anguish.²⁰

The anxiety of hope versus the authority of repentance

The great theoretical manoeuvres of the sixties produced a great loser in the field of the humanities (philosophy excepted, of course): Sartre. Not as a writer, nor as an intellectual, but rather as a thinker concerned with the subject, attentive to this historical event which crept up 'like a thief'.²¹ Curiously, his influence declined at the very moment that philosophy took the driving seat among disciplines connected with social issues. The reason is twofold. Sartre is a candid philosopher, that is to say, he never conceals the solution of continuity between his argumentation and intellectual discussion. His thoughts are therefore not directly translatable into the language of anthropology and history: their recovery through research is consequently optional. The restriction admittedly holds good for Heidegger and Nietzsche, though heaven knows their works have scarcely suffered.

The difference is that the intelligibility of history that Sartre watched for runs counter to contemporary aspirations by fixing itself in subject and event. The ironic smiles over his political involvement were to come markedly later, although, in fact, the end of non-reception was at once linked to it.

It should be seen that the social sciences have thus killed two birds with one stone: rejecting a dialogue between the deaf and the philosopher, they have benefited from it to free themselves from the necessity of embedding a place at the heart of their programme for the objects which Sartre dealt with. The structure thus became the sole focal point, despite the fact that no one dared support the non-existence of subject or event.

As far as anthropology is concerned, the consequences were glaring in a world crippled by the sudden end of East–West antagonism, the notorious duel which imposed its dictatorship on regional conflicts, checking them here, channelling them there: for ten years terrifying centres of violence have broken out virtually everywhere, destructive and sterile, which no longer bother to equip themselves with an official ideological covering. What has this discipline to say about it? Nothing, or virtually nothing.²² It has information at its disposal that journalism ignores or knows nothing of. It knows that certain factors are dangerously underestimated, that others are overvalued or distorted. That is not unproblematic. The carnage of Rwanda is going to join the fate of the 'details' of collective memory, if it has not already done so.

Racial grouping is not a structure, and to 'reify' it would be, according to the best authorities, the gravest mistake. In any case, the Hutus, the Tutsis, the Serbs and the Croats do not constitute true racial groups. They would not do so even if ethnicity had a definition: as, moreover, it is a false concept – since its imperfection has been unmasked – ethnology has no time to lose in expressing an opinion on these contingencies. Between the individual and humanity, this discipline has resolved to repudiate all notions capable of evoking a group of men, beginning with 'society', 'ethnicity' and 'culture'. So be it. For others there will still be the family, the (biological) population and the nation: is there anything here to trouble anyone's sleep? French ethnology still prides itself on a tradition anchored in the recognition of the 'total social fact' dear to Marcel Mauss, but there is an increasing reluctance to shoulder the tasks of comparative sociology. Redefining social issues in an extraordinarily restrictive way would undoubtedly be the best solution, but there would be a serious danger of reviving a debate with unforeseeable consequences.

Why this absurd and apparently irrepressible shrinking of intellectual curiosity, at the risk of an inability to rebut the insult of 'detail'? Anthropology testifies to a refusal to assume the responsibilities which follow on from the occupation of an intellectual field. Another part of the response is probably located in the context of *Le livre noir du communisme*. And, more precisely, in the considerable proportion of former militant communists among the historians inclined to devalue or humiliate the upheavals of the past. Let us be clear: if the problem boils down to the normal desire of the repentant to transform their repentance into a source of supplementary authority, it would be superficial and, when all is said and done, pretty risible. But there is another hypothesis to take into consideration: would peeling back 'the past of an illusion'²³ not be an expedient leading to the conception of one's own past as illusion? Is excessive devaluation of the shock of the event or theorizing superfluous revolutions – of 1917 or of 1789 – not 'dissolving' one's own responsibility and one's own conscience in the omnipotence of a structure? In short, is it not justifying one's own course by a *vanitas vanitatum*, or by

litanies ultimately expressing solidarity with 'the more things change, the more things stay the same' and with 'the more things stay the same, the more things change'?

To deny the subject is the equivalent of oneself becoming identified with an illusion, except that (surprise, surprise) the author accedes to the status of authentic subject by denouncing the deception: the empirical competence proclaimed at the issue of a repudiation (defined as demystification) secures a prodigious tactical advantage. The trouble is that this strategy leads to mingling with the (subsequently classic) shame of a bourgeoisie which forgives itself a little less every day for having acquired its power through the creation of disorder and which takes advantage of its bicentenary to rehabilitate the good Louis XVI, humiliating Robespierre in the process. There we would fall back into the coils which Sartre tried patiently to disentangle at the very time the French intelligentsia were attributing his thought to a generation whose time had passed.²⁴

Poles apart from this derision, let us turn to a breath of fresh air: *L'histoire socialiste de la Révolution française*,²⁵ written by Jean Jaurès in the very midst of the Dreyfus affair. A vibrant, enthusiastic history, which ceaselessly seeks coherence without disdaining either actors or ruptures and which in its final pages asks, 'How can the revolutionaries be judged?' One can never tire of citing the sentences where he replies in advance to historians wanting to elevate their own disdainful viewpoint (and where, additionally, he ridicules his own contemporary image as tranquil socialist and peace-loving pacifist).

For its time, however, the most vivid passage is in an earlier text, precisely because it was written before Jaurès was a supporter of socialism, at a time when he still believed that his philosophy should be backed by a theology. For he feared, rather, a hope without reason than a reason without hope:

Whoever has no faith or need of faith is a second-rate soul; whoever has a system or a doctrine to support his faith is a dull-witted scholastic. Similarly, in the social order, we are pleased to speak of justice, to dream of human brotherhood, to display appealing attitudes of pity towards the humble. But if one encounters systems of equity which noble-hearted men of good-will would wish to have prevail, one experiences nothing but disdain for the fanciful illusions and tender feelings are nuanced with irony: the rainbow drenched in tears sends its caustic arrows into space.²⁶

By contrast with so many intellectuals of the twentieth century who received their hope from one party and who later rejected hope along with the party, Jaurès was led towards a party by an increasingly rebellious hope: the difference is not inconsiderable and, at the outset, equally concerned the intellectual, the militant and the researcher. There are those whose vocation forges involvement in the name of a scheme, and there are those who ape a vocation after becoming involved in a scheme. Whether intellectuals or partisans, the second group will never, as they look back to the past, have anything to contemplate other than an illusion upon which subject and event are contingent. They will then be constrained to silence when they cross paths with people for whom the coldly organized annihilation of the individually distinct destinies embarked upon by millions in Germany, Poland, Greece, Yugoslavia or France but completed *en masse* in the gas chambers cannot be an essential fact in history, since only conquest and domination matter.

What Marcel Bernès appears to have seen and which was subsequently underrated was that society and the individual, or the structure and the subject, acted as consecutive

centres for analytical focuses which were themselves consecutive. There is no final reference. If we put a full stop after the structure, the door to the picture of the 'detail' is half-open. If we stop at the individual, history is reduced to happenings. Both perversions are equally appalling. Anthropology and history must at all costs seek, define, compare and categorize all the structures which are within their range. They should also not forget that their success will subsequently be judged by the yard-stick of their capacity, by this means, to illuminate consciences and lives, men and their deaths.

Georges Guille-Escuret
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(translated from the French by Juliet Vale)

Notes

1. Marcel Bernès (1901). Individu et société, *Revue Philosophique*, 52, 478–500; 495.
2. Célestin Bouglé (1901). Le procès de la sociologie biologique, *Revue Philosophique*, 52, 121–146; Alfred Espinas. Être ou ne pas être, ou le postulat de la sociologie, *Revue Philosophique*, 51, 449–480; Gabriel Tarde. Réponse à M. Espinas, *Revue Philosophique*, 51, 661–664.
3. André Lalande (ed.) (1902–23). *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*. 1st edn in fascicules; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
4. Bernès *op. cit.* (1901), 499.
5. Roger Salengro, a Popular Front minister, committed suicide in 1936 after repeated defamations in the extreme right-wing weekly, *Gringoire*. The intellectual socialist Léon Blum was at the head of this government.
6. The term 'Holocaust', currently used in relation to the Nazi extermination camps will be retained here to facilitate reading of the text, in the absence of an expression as comprehensible or less ambiguous. It must in fact be indicated that, according to a recent work, the word is historically imbued with considerable connections to Christian anti-Judaism. See Giorgio Agamben (1999). *Ce qui reste d'Auschwitz. L'archive et le témoin*. Paris: Payot and Rivages, 34 ff.
7. Jean-Paul Sartre (1954). *Réflexions sur la question juive*. Paris: Gallimard, 86. The original edition dates from 1946, but a note indicates that this passage was written in October 1944.
8. Stéphane Courtois, Nicols Werth, Jean-Louis Panne, Andrzej Paczowski, Karel Bartosek and Jean-Louis Margolin (1997). *Le livre noir du communisme. Crimes, terreur, répression*. Paris: R. Laffont.
9. The Vendée witnessed a counter-Revolutionary revolt in favour of the French Crown in 1793–6.
10. Jean-Louis Margolin, 'Cambodge: au pays du crime déconcertant', in S. Courtois *et al.*, *op. cit.* (1997), 643.
11. This could be observed at the time of the discussions which accompanied the publication of the *Livre noir du communisme*.
12. A medical term indicating dissociation/schizophrenia, is intentionally used here, a term to which Claude Lévi-Strauss resorted in different circumstances, as opposed to 'disharmony' (*disharmonie*), a vaguer expression, which itself signifies a chronic characteristic of the sociological disciplines.
13. Paul Feyerabend (1979). *Contre la méthode*. Paris: Le Seuil. The original English edition appeared in 1975.
14. For the abrupt nature of this retreat, see François Dosse (1992). *Histoire du structuralisme*, vol. 2. Paris: La Découverte.
15. It is worth recalling that Claude Lévi-Strauss always kept his work apart from the upheavals of a broadly 'structuralist' sphere of influence for which he did not feel himself in the least responsible. The reader should bear in mind that the criticisms addressed here to a structuralist ideology transforming formulas into slogans (following the example of the existentialist fashion which had preceded it) should not be confused with the criticism of a theory in its applied field.
16. Reprinted in Jean Pouillon (1993). *Le cru et le su*. Paris: Le Seuil.
17. *Ibid.*, 90.
18. Marshall Sahlins (1985). *Islands of History*. London and New York: University of Chicago Press, 144; translated into French in 1989 as *Des îles dans l'histoire*. Paris: Gallimard–Le Seuil, 149.

19. *Ibid.*, xiv; (1989), 14.
20. On this point, the strategy and reflexes of the French extreme right cannot be distinguished at all from equivalent cases which current events present us with from time to time. The reader will understand that my insistence on the French case is justified solely by its singular importance in the field of sociological theory: it is the non-existence of an effective or pertinent intellectual response which is interesting here, given the confrontation between a banal political force and an intellectual achievement which is considered original in the whole of the western world.
21. Jean-Paul Sartre (1985). *Critique de la raison dialectique*, vol. 2. Paris: Gallimard, 408 (first published in 1960).
22. There have been some exceptions. Françoise Héritier, lead figure of structuralism 'qualified' in anthropology, has also gone on the attack concerning pregnancies resulting from rape in Yugoslavia – confirmation that the evil with which this article is concerned does not stem from any one theoretical school, properly speaking. It is a fog of the period covering the social sciences as a whole.
23. François Furet (1995). *Le passé d'une illusion. Essai sur une idée communiste au XX^e siècle*. Paris: R. Laffont. François Furet, a former militant communist who became very hostile to his old ideas, was a specialist historian in the France Revolution and an eminent reference on the problems critiqued here. The *Black Book of Communism* was dedicated to him a short time after his death.
24. In this respect, medieval historians can be differentiated symptomatically from their colleagues in contemporary history: archaeological discoveries make the subjects who lived in the Middle Ages appear an enigma inextricably intertwined with the structure – a necessary object of research if one is not to be confined within the analysis of the event. One question stands out as a result: that of the theoretical and methodological consistency of the New History across broad historical periods.
25. Jean Jaurès (1972). *Histoire socialiste de la Révolution française*, 6 vols. Paris: Éditions Sociales (first published in 1904). Jean Jaurès was an emblematic figure of French socialism. Together with Emile Zola he was one of the great intellectuals who defended Dreyfus and he was assassinated in 1914 because he had tried to organise a working-class battle against the imminent war.
26. Jean Jaurès (1994). *De la réalité du monde sensible*. Paris: Éditions Alcuin (first published in 1891), 74. We should note that the theological dimension of the text has attracted the attention of commentators strangely moved by extremely obscure intentions.