

# Introduction

*Alain Caillé*

We all share the contradictory feeling that something of what had hitherto been considered essential to humanity or the sense of being human is in the process of being irrevocably lost: that everywhere there is emerging a feeling of disgust or weariness towards the old Man that is bound to lead to his destruction and into a disturbing future. But at the same time we do not really know what is being lost nor do we not even know whether we are truly attached to it. We do know that, like us, each generation since the earliest times has had the same feeling, as it grows old, of the inexorable loss of something indefinable that made the past better than the present and *a fortiori* better than the future; but we think we have objective and justified grounds for real concern, and not just because time is going by and we have to make way for the young and the new.

Indeed it seems, or at least we can assume, that the world is in fact changing radically, as it had never done before or only once or twice since the beginning of human history. We worry about what is over the horizon without really knowing why. And it is probably this very fact that concerns us most. For though we do not necessarily jib at accepting the idea that there is some sort of human nature – and even though this runs counter to the tenets of the ‘constructivists’ and relativists who are so dominant these days – we at least know that we do not know what it consists of, or in any event that no convincing argument exists on this matter.

So there is a strong temptation to give in to the evolution of the world as it is taking place before our eyes, and not put up any resistance, particularly as the stance of the critical intellectual, spouting precepts, appears increasingly untenable, and in any case increasingly widely rejected. And in addition the gap is becoming a chasm between the old morality, which was still current only a few years ago, and what now seems self-evident to the younger generation.

Holding our tongues, stopping the eternal wailing over the loss of yesterday’s world, welcoming the change that life and the world are embarked upon, may therefore seem to be the best bet. Here two precedents among many others spring to mind with exceptional force: Tocqueville and Le Corbusier. When Le Corbusier came back to Paris in 1924, he described how at first he was terror-struck by the volume of the traffic that was driving pedestrians from the city and destroying what the streets had previously been for him, the streets of his youth where you could stroll in peace chatting to friends. He felt like running away. Then, in order to exorcize his terror, rather than resisting the change, that quintessence of movement that motor traffic then represented, he suddenly decided instead, in a kind of conversion on the road to Damascus (a kind of ‘letting go’, as Buddhists would say), to give in to it, which meant, as we know, giving way completely to traffic and the motorcar and giving up the street in favour of the highway.

Thus, in Le Corbusier's eyes, motor traffic took on the guise of an irresistible providential force such as Tocqueville claimed was the property of democracy, hatred of privilege and passion for equality, explaining that there would be no use in trying to resist them. The very most that was possible, he said, was to attempt to defend democracy against itself, but not try to escape from its influence. So we simply have to go with the flow and put our trust in it instead of trying vainly to swim against the tide.

But today change has become its own justification, its own purpose and means. And it is precisely this that concerns us. Somehow it moves by itself, under its own steam. We cannot oppose it in the name of any representation or paradigm of humanity, such is the predominant mood. And this means suggesting – and it must be by implication, since the nature of this self-generated change is such that it makes any debate about its nature pointless – that the only mark of the human is its infinite plasticity, and that the only fragment of human naturalness we can still cling to lies in the idea of its infinite artificiality. There is no true humanity except in the ability to deconstruct and reconstruct at will, according to the mood of the moment, any acquired or received idea of humanity until there is not a single one left. Theurgy, the wish to influence God's decisions through human actions, has become universal self-referential anthropurgy.

However, despite all the doubts that beset us, the untenable aspect of this enforced acceptance of change is quite clear. If we believe Hannah Arendt's in-depth analysis, the only kinds of society we know of that have set up change as fundamentally its own end and justification have been totalitarian ones. And they alone have set out as their principal tenet the idea of the infinite plasticity of human beings. Because this is no longer forced upon us nowadays by terror and propaganda, but instead in the form of the humorous humane complicity imposed by the media and advertising, should we therefore accept without protest the prospect opened up by technology of new superhumans, whether they emerge from genetic manipulation or hybrid human machines or human animals, and this without mentioning that the production of new superhumans inevitably presupposes the production of a new underclass in infinitely greater numbers. If resistance to change runs the risk of seeming sterile and ridiculous, submission courts the risk of abjection.

The reference to Tocqueville is not accidental. As democrats (and how could we be anything else?) we might argue against current developments only by pointing to the jeopardy they expose democracy to. But they seem rather to signal its final realization. Or even its apotheosis. It is here, however, that a doubt torments us. Is the seemingly irresistible trend towards the dissolution of the markers of the human in fact the necessary result of the democratic aspiration? Does it constitute its highest point or the opposite, in one of those paradoxical reverses history is full of, its very negation? If dehumanization and democracy go together in parallel, should we, once a certain stage is reached, give up on democracy? or humanity? or more probably, if we are going with the flow, letting go, should we give up on both of them? And with what aim in view? Between ridicule and abjection, is there a middle way to be found?

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