Thinking in Dark Times

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An examination of the role of the intellectual in the twenty-first century requires us to question ourselves about the value of our work, its place in the world today and its future—possible or impossible—in a world subject to the automatization of minds by technology and to wars of religion that encourage archaism and terrorism. The work we do daily cannot be disassociated from this vast horizon, a horizon that brings me to consider three questions: What power do the humanities wield today? Do today’s religious conflicts discredit humanism, or, if they are accelerating its reconstruction, what would be the role of our disciplines in this possible resurrection? Finally, has the “French model” gone up in flames?

The “intellectual” evoked in the title of our forum is a figure from the Enlightenment of which the prototypes date back to the French encyclopedists Rousseau, Voltaire, and Diderot. In the aftermath of the crisis of religion to which the encyclopedists are connected, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries gave rise to new forms of thought that were to become the human and social sciences. These disciplines progressively filtered into the university, notably the American university, where they were given a more or less favorable welcome in language and literature departments. “The public intellectual” is only a variant, sometimes pertinent, sometimes hackneyed, of this radical reshuffling of Western thought

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that has been going on for more than two centuries. Is it now condemned to disappear beneath the empire of images, dragging down with it this whole economy of thought we call the humanities? This question underlies the crisis of culture and also, concretely, the menacing job crisis our disciplines are now facing.

What I examine more deeply here is this overhaul of thought that began in the eighteenth century and that continues today in a more underground way. The Norwegian government’s creation of the Holberg Prize, which grants an award for achievements in the humanities, a category ignored by the Nobel Prize, is proof of the vitality of Europe, and I am proud to have been chosen as the first laureate in 2004, followed by Jürgen Habermas in 2005.

Allow me to reformulate my initial question: If it is true that the intellectual bases her thought in the human sciences, what is her place and her possible power in our troubled world as we enter the third millennium?

In taking over from theology and philosophy, the humanities replaced the “divine” and the “human” by new objects of investigation: social bonds, the structures of kinship, rites and myths, the psychic life, and the genesis of languages and written works. We have acquired an unprecedented understanding of the richness and risks of the human mind, and this understanding disturbs and meets with resistance and censure. Still, as promising as they are, the territories thus constituted fragment human experience; heirs to metaphysics, they keep us from identifying new objects of investigation. Transdisciplinarity does not in itself suffice to reconstruct the new humanism we need. What matters is that from the outset the thinking subject connects his thought to his being in the world through affective, political, and ethical transference. My practice as a psychoanalyst, my novel writing, and my work in the social domain are not “commitments”; rather these activities are an extension of a mode of thinking I look for and conceive as an *energeia* in the Aristotelian sense of thought as act, the actuality of intelligence.

Moreover, in my experience, the interpretation of texts and behavior, notably in the light of psychoanalysis, opens up a new approach to the world of religion. The discovery of the unconscious by Freud showed us that far from being illusions, while nevertheless being illusions, different beliefs and forms of spirituality shelter, encourage, or exploit specific psychic movements, which allow the human being to become a speaking subject and either a locus of culture or a center of destruction. Examples include the importance of law, the celebration of the paternal function, and the role of maternal passion as the child’s sensorial and prelinguistic support. My work as an analyst has convinced me that when a patient is committed to psychoanalysis, he is coming to ask for a kind of forgive-
ness, not in the sense of erasing his malaise, but in the sense of finding psychic or even physical rebirth. It is the possibility of this new beginning, through transference and interpretation, which I call *for-giveness* (in French, *par-don*): to give and to give oneself a new time, a new self, unforeseen ties. We can henceforth not only recognize the complexity of the interior experience that faith cultivates but also bring to light the hate that takes the guise of lovers’ discourse as well as the death drive channeled into political vengeance and merciless wars.

A new conception of the human is thus being constituted with contributions from the fields in which we work, these new humanities where transcendence is immanent. This conception is synonymous with the desire for meaning, which is inseparable from the pleasure rooted in sexuality and which commands both the sublimity of culture and the brutality of acting out.

It is clear that today the intellectual is confronted with a difficult, historic task commensurate with the crisis of civilization: coaxing this new type of knowledge to emerge progressively. We should not hesitate to use technical terms, but we should be careful not to reduce them to their strict meaning, which is always too narrow. By positioning ourselves at the interface of these diverse disciplines, we give ourselves the chance to clarify, even if only a little, that which remains enigmatic: psychosis, sublimation, belief, nihilism, passion, the gender war, maternal madness, murderous hate.

Does our understanding of humanism still have a place in our world caught in the grips of religious wars and technology? Having remarked the failure of rationalist humanism in twentieth-century totalitarianism and announced that it would fail again in the economic and biological automatization that threatens the human species in the twenty-first century, two prestigious spokesmen, Joseph Ratzinger (now Benedict XVI) and Jürgen Habermas, recently declared that our modern democracies are confused by the lack of a reliable higher authority, which alone can regulate the frenetic pace of liberty. This joint declaration by the philosopher and the theologian implies that a return to faith is the only recourse possible to establish the moral stability required to face the risks of freedom. Since constitutional democracies need normative presuppositions to found rational law, and since the secular state does not have any unifying bond, to use Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde’s terms, it would be imperative to constitute a conservative conscience, one that would be either fueled by faith, as Habermas believes, or a correlation between reason and faith, which is the position held by Ratzinger.

To counterbalance this hypothesis, I suggest that we consider that we are already confronted, notably in advanced democracies, with prepolitical
and transpolitical experiences that render obsolete any appeal for a normative conscience or the reason-revelation duo, for these notions head us toward a reconstruction of humanism derived from \textit{Aufklärung} without any recourse to the irrational. It is precisely at this key point of modernity that the Freudian discovery of the unconscious and the literary experience—an experience inseparable from theoretical thought—are positioned. We all know that their respective contributions to the complexification of Enlightenment humanism are not understood, in their pre- and transpolitical impact, as likely to found this unifying bond that secular, political rationality lacks. And yet I defend this hypothesis—an alternative to the Böckenförde–Habermas–Ratzinger trio—in my work.

Contrary to what we’re led to believe, the clash of religions is in fact merely a surface phenomenon. The problem we’re facing at the beginning of this new millennium is not one of religious wars but rather the rift that separates those who want to know that God is unconscious and those who prefer not to, so as to be pleased by the show that announces he exists. Our globalized media coverage buys into this second preference, fueling it with all its imaginary and financial economy, not wanting to know so that they may better enjoy the virtual, that is, take pleasure in seeing promises and being satisfied with promises of goods guaranteed by the promise of a superior good. This situation, because of the globalization of denial, which is integral to it, is without precedent in the history of humanity. Saturated by enterprises, seductions, and disappointments, our televsional civilization is propitious to belief. Thus it has encouraged the revival of religions.

Nietzsche and Heidegger warned us: modern man has undergone “the absence of a sensible and supersensible world with the power to oblige.” This annihilation of divine authority, and with it all authority, be it state or political, does not necessarily lead to nihilism. Nor does it lead to its systemic flip side, which is fundamentalism and its attack on infidels. Hannah Arendt remarked that by making the divine a value, even a supreme value, transcendentalists rejoin nihilistic utilitarianism. But how can we know this today without deluding ourselves by adhering to strictly rationalist humanism or romantic spirituality? I claim that the alternative to this mounting religiosity and limited nihilism, its counterpart, can be found precisely in these places of thought that we try, not to occupy, but to make live.

Our implication in languages and literature secures this vast continent of human sciences. Literature and writing constitute an experience of language transversal to identities (sexual, gender, national, ethnic, religious, ideological, etc.), and, whether open or hostile to psychoanalysis, they elaborate a risky, singular, and divisible understanding of the desire for meaning anchored in the sexual body. Thus literature and writing
upset the metaphysical duo reason versus faith on which scholasticism was once founded. They invite us to construct an interpretive, critical, and theoretical discourse in response to developments in the human and social sciences. This discourse is a decisive element in the reconstruction of the humanism we need.

Those involved in the literary experience and, in a different but complicit manner, those who are involved in the psychoanalytic experience or who are attentive to its issues know that the opposition reason/faith or norm/liberty is no longer sustainable if the speaking being no longer thinks of himself as dependent on the supratangible world and even less on the tangible world “with the power to oblige.” We also know that this *I* who speaks reveals himself as he is constructed in a vulnerable bond with a strange object or an ekstatic, abject other, the sexual thing (what others call the object of the sexual drive, whose carrier wave, according to Freud, is the death drive). This vulnerable bond with the sexual thing and within it—by which the social or sacred bond is shored up—is the heterogeneous bond, the very fold between biology and meaning on which our languages and discourses depend and through which they are modified so that they, in turn, modify the sexual bond itself.

In this understanding of the human adventure, literature and art do not constitute an aesthetic decor any more than philosophy and psychoanalysis claim to bring salvation. But each of these experiences, in its diversity, offers itself as a laboratory of new forms of humanism. Understanding and accompanying the speaking subject in his bond to the sexual thing gives us a chance to face up to the new barbarisms of automatization, without seeking recourse in the safeguards upheld by infantilizing conservatism, free of the short-term idealism with which a mortifying rationalism deludes itself. And yet if the adventure I’m depicting, which lends a ready ear to literature and the human sciences of the twentieth century, suggests an overhaul or even a reconstruction of humanism, putting such a project to work and dealing with its consequences could only be, in the words of Sartre, “cruel and long-drawn out.”

I was part of the generation that objected to soft humanism, with its vague idea of “man” emptied of his substance, linked to a utopic fraternity that harks back to the Enlightenment and the postrevolutionary contract. Today it seems to me not only important but also possible to deal with these ideals differently, for I am persuaded that what we call—too often disparagingly—modernity is in fact a crucial moment in the history of thought. This thought, neither hostile nor indulgent to religion, is perhaps our only chance as we face, on the one hand, mounting obscurantism and, on the other, the technological management of the human species.
It is probably even more difficult in America than it is in Europe to plead for the reconstructive role that the humanities can play in the highly threatened social and political realm such as we experience it today, differently but in a similar manner, throughout the world. I insist, however, on our need to plead, not only because my intellectual work is supported by this conviction but also because I am persuaded that the knowledge one shares, researches, and teaches is implicated in these very stakes. It is important to be aware of this implication, to have a proud awareness in order to fight against the temptation to give in to depression, in order to make our case heard in the public spheres by participating courageously and appropriately in this “democracy of opinion” that our modern society of the spectacle has become.

Finally, I address the third theme: Is Paris burning, and is all of France burning with it? Among the many causes that led to the burning of Paris’s suburbs, I cite the denial of French society and also—what concerns me as a parent, writer, psychoanalyst, and intellectual—the “malady of ideality” specific to the adolescent throughout the world (Kristeva 447–60).

Undoubtedly you’ve heard of this “malady of ideality” since teaching puts you in contact with adolescents, and often with what we call difficult youth. Contrary to the polymorphous perverse child who wants to know where children come from and who constructs himself as a theoretician, the adolescent is starving for ideal models that will allow him to tear himself from his parents and meet the ideal being, the ideal partner, the ideal job and to turn himself into an ideal being. Seen from this angle, the adolescent is a believer. Paradise is an adolescent invention with its Adams and Eves, Dantes and Beatrices. We are all adolescent believers when we dream about the ideal couple or the ideal life. The novel as a genre was built on adolescent figures: enthusiastic idealists smitten with the absolute, devastated by the first disappointment, depressed or perverse, sarcastic by nature; eternal believers and therefore perpetually rebellious, potential nihilists. You know them: they’ve been chiming their credo from the courtly novel to Dostoyevsky and Gombrowicz. This malady of ideality confronts us with a prereligious and prepolitical form of belief; it is a matter of needing an ideal that contributes to the construction of the psychic life but that, because it is an absolute exigency, can easily turn itself into its opposite: disappointment, boredom, depression, or even destructive rage, vandalism, and all the imaginable variants of nihilism that are but appeals to the ideal.

Civilizations commonly referred to as primitive have long used initiation rites to assert symbolic authority (divine for the invisible world, political for this world here) and to justify the acting out of what we would qualify today as perverse by condoning initiatory sexual practices. Me-
dieval Christianity, among other religions, used mortification rituals and excessive fasting to channel the anorectic and sadomasochistic behaviors of adolescents and, in doing so, either downplayed or glorified them.

Unlike these diverse ways of dealing with adolescence in the past, modern society not only fails to innovate but also accompanies the destruction of the family fabric and the weakening of authority, for it is entirely incapable of understanding the structuring need of ideality. This incapacity is even more blatant in France’s current crisis, which involves adolescents of North and West African descent who are victims of social misery, discrimination, and broken families in which authority is no longer valued. How could we have imagined they would enter the established order without satisfying this structuring need of ideality? How can we imagine restoring order by repressing these tattered psyches? Certainly those who led the riots as well as the younger participants need to be firmly sanctioned. For French law to be accepted, however, it must address the psychic lives capable of integrating it, and these psychic lives must urgently be helped to reconstruct themselves, beginning with the recognition that, beneath the vandalism, there is the long-neglected need to believe. Is this incapacity the fault of the “French model”? Or is it its terrible advantage? Contrary to what our friends abroad think, France is not behind the times regarding the crisis of adolescents from immigrant milieus; it is in fact ahead compared with analog situations elsewhere in the world. Thus the malaise is felt to be even more worrisome since it arises from a more radical depth.

Although the religious manipulation of the pyromaniacs and the communal reflex underlying the need for recognition expressed by the fires must not be underestimated, the riots in the suburbs are not a religious conflict, nor are they a backlash against the law forbidding the wearing of religious signs. France’s religious authorities disapprove of the violence, and parents in no way condone their children’s delinquent behavior. These riots are not a case of violence between ethnicities and religions, as we see elsewhere. All parties concerned strongly denounce the failure of integration to which they aspired. The objects burned are envied symbols: cars, supermarkets, warehouses full of merchandise, signs of success and wealth, things valued by their families and friends, and schools, day care centers, police stations, signs of the social and political authority they would like to be a part of. Does one want to destroy a secular France when one boos its previously adulated minister of the interior? Does one attack Christianity when one burns a church? The blogs are saying “Fuck France” in a furious frenzy that fails to clarify any discourse or program or concrete complaint. On the political side, this need for an ideal, for
recognition and respect, is crystallized in a unique battle—an enormous one, judging by the suffering it has uncovered and by the extent of the changes it necessitates—the battle against discrimination.

Is it that we have not reached the clash of religions? Are our adolescent pyromaniacs incapable of donning a religious cloak to satisfy their need for ideality? Those who uphold this notion go so far as to incriminate French secularism for abolishing religious norms as safeguards. I do not share this opinion. I believe that the crimes of these underprivileged teens reveal a more radical phase of nihilism, a phase that announces its arrival after and beneath the clash of religions. This violence is more serious because it seizes the moving forces of civilization at an even deeper level, in the prereligious need to believe, constitutive of the psychic life with and for the other. It is to this space that the parent, teacher, and intellectual are called. While demanding pragmatism and generosity from the political spheres, we must come up with ideals adapted to modern times and the multiculturalism of modern souls.

Adolescent nihilism makes it abruptly apparent that from now on the religious treatment of revolt finds itself discredited, ineffective, and unfit to ensure the paradiasaical aspiration of this paradoxical believer, this necessarily nihilistic believer, this shattered, desocialized adolescent afloat in the pitiless ghetto of global migration. Indignant, we reject him, until he threatens us from the inside.

The French government finds itself facing a historic challenge: is it capable of confronting this crisis of belief that religion can no longer satisfy and that affects the foundation of human bonds? The anxiety that paralyzes the country at this key moment reveals our uncertainty before such colossal stakes. Are we capable of mobilizing all our means, economic as well as punitive, keeping in mind those who offer us an understanding of the human soul, to deal with sensitivity, careful listening, generosity, and an adapted education system this poignant malady of ideality unleashed on us by our adolescents inhabiting these “rights-deprived” zones?

Seen in this light the French crisis cannot not concern you as Americans. I’ve tried to explain how it concerns me and those I consider intellectuals. Am I optimistic? Too optimistic? I would define myself as an energetic pessimist who in terms of thought values only active intelligence or the actuality of intelligence.

NOTE

1. “L’athéisme est une entreprise cruelle et de longue haleine” (210).

