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## History, Critique, Social Change and Democracy. An Interview with Charles Taylor

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**In your works, you make a strong claim about the usefulness – if not inevitability – of historical approaches to the social sciences and philosophy. Before we go into more detail – do you think there is a central reason of why to make use of history in general?**

There is a central reason: the inevitability of the narrative as a way of self-understanding. You could put it this way: as a theory of natural science, the inverse-square law is completely timeless; it does not just apply here and now. You don't need to talk about development. So it may look as though a, let's call it, 'human' way of understanding is sub-scientific and you should get rid of it. Why I am so and so? Why do I act the way I do? The ideal seems to be to come up with timeless statements of what you believe or what motivates you. But this turns out not to be so. Alasdair MacIntyre says that understanding is narrative and that seems plainly true; but why? It has to do with the manner in which we actually understand things, which is in the order in which we grasp them, moving from an early state of confusion or disorientation, until you get the point. So the issue is: can that understanding be separable from the process of getting at it? In very many cases in life it can't be, because we understand what we now see as a truth as a result of an error-correction in relation to an earlier view. When people say in the modern secular age: "human beings stand on their own feet", this idea is what I would call a 'transitional understanding,' an understanding based on a transition from the old days when we were under the thrall of traditions. Descartes really does this: ordinarily what we believe is what we were told by your preceptors, but I must take a step back and ask "what do I know now?". I get a sense of my own orientation as coming about through that radical shift, and here I discover a method. But the method itself only makes sense in terms of that transition: I'm understanding myself in opposition to a supposed past. There is an inescapable narrative dimension to this. So much so that you upset somebody's view of their history by upsetting their views of the past, which is why 'history wars' are so central to political and intellectual life.

**So you're saying that just as individual lives and identities are narrative-like, the understanding required in social sciences is narrative-like as well?**

Yes, there is an element of narrativity that can't be entirely cancelled out. Of course you do have also things like supposedly general laws and they are part of the understanding in the social sciences, but narratives are nevertheless essential. Take economics: the modern centrality of markets arose in history at a certain time, it didn't exist before. Furthermore, the markets themselves are differently embedded in a different society, and all that is understood in terms of transitions from earlier situations. Karl Polanyi re-writes the history of the modern market in a way that was not what the classic economists understood, and this new story upset the whole previous understanding.<sup>1</sup>

**In opposition to the prevailing dictum of 'historical objectivity,' Nietzsche sets the following task for the historian in his second Untimely Meditations<sup>2</sup>: to go beyond the passive observation of the flux of 'events' (Ereignisse) and grasp the 'forces' (Kräfte) that animated the past, assuming what were the 'instincts' of previous generations. Do you see a similitude between Nietzsche's notions and your own concepts in your historically oriented works? A likely candidate could be what you called "idées forces,"<sup>3</sup> aiming at the**

**efficacy or prevalence of usually political or moral ideas in a particular society – a notion maybe also parallel to Weber – and their motivational power. How important is such an approach to you?**

I don't see a close relation to Nietzsche in what I call 'idée-force,' but it's difficult to doubt that these exist. If you get back to the times of Luther, everybody was debating how salvation actually works, by faith or by works, in different theories. It was absolutely unchallenged that salvation was a goal. Today it's human rights and democracy. In our society there are a very small number of people who dissent from that. Even when they are doing something terrible to other people's human rights, like going to war in Iraq, they find some justification precisely in the name of human rights: "They are violating human rights! They're against peace!" How do these things become unchallengeable? I wish I had the answer! But the reality of these idées-forces just seems to me to be evident when you look around.

**But you have made a great achievement in trying to catch explicitly those ideals which are prevalent or dominant or 'wirksam' in a given society. You are one of the few focusing exactly on this: why a notion becomes inevitable.**

Yes, and you can perhaps see from transitions why the development from a very faith inspired age to an age where there is a morality that transcends all situations took place: 'Natural rights' is very much the same thing as 'human rights,' though people don't like to accept this, and human rights define a very fundamental sense of what's right and wrong. You can make a description of these fundamental transitions to our present form of modernity, but beyond that it's hard for me to offer a deeper explanation.

**Towards the 1990s you begin to make increasing use of the notion of a 'social imaginary:'**

**"As well as the doctrinal understanding of society, there is the one incorporated in habitus, and a level of images as yet unformulated in doctrine, for which we might borrow a term frequently used by contemporary French writers: the social imaginary."<sup>4</sup>**

**You identify this with a kind of understanding that exists somewhat 'between' the explicit and the implicit levels, and that refers to "whatever understanding is expressed in ritual, in symbols (in the everyday sense), in works of art."<sup>5</sup> How can we understand the greater importance you seem to have given to this concept over time, and its internal development – supposedly a broadening of the notion, including much more than the 'symbolic'?**

Yes, I never meant it to have a restriction. The notion of the social imaginary was meant to lift a previous frustration with too theoretical understandings of society. How do we understand society? We have a theory. We read Rousseau, we read Locke, that's very often part of the understanding, and societies differ in the degree to which there is theoretical foundation. Modern Western societies are much more theory-entrenched than others, but even in our case, there are understandings of what we are doing that are carried in our sense of what's appropriate to say, how it is appropriate to stand, and so on. A good example is a demonstration. People just have a very precise feeling of what's to form a demonstration: this very delicate boundary where there's some element of threat, but it must not proceed beyond that, as we see for example in the anti-globalization demonstrations that people had in Seattle and elsewhere. There's a very delicate understanding of the protests as a speech act which has a lot of aggression but which stays this side of violence. I'm theorizing now, but people just know how to do that: There's something that has developed as a mode of action. Another example: how far to stand away from somebody when you speak. Only anthropologists theorize here, but people just develop an ability to lay back and find the proper distance in a conversation. That's part of the common understanding in the society. But that's not a social imaginary in the full sense, because the latter is not just a shared understanding, but a shared understanding about how society works. So how to stand in a conversation doesn't tell us anything about how the whole society works, but something like a grasp of demonstrations is closely linked to that: that kind of society where people are free to do that within certain limits.

**Looking at some of your very original concepts dealing with more or less similar issues – can or should the concept of Social Imaginaries be distinguished from that of Horizons, Mentalities or Moral Maps? Are they highlighting different aspects? Is their relationship rather one of refining, or addition, or substitution?**

They refer to different aspects of the reality. Horizon is when you want to talk about the whole understanding of one culture regardless of what the issue is. Supposing I'm into anthropology, and I find people are doing a sacrifice. Is this their religion? At first, I don't know; so you have to get over a too easy familiarity with religion and only then can you see the horizons: the whole surrounding understanding within which distinctions of religion/non-religion could figure, and then you have to try to find a way for building bridges in a language of perspicuous contrasts. Horizons figure in that kind of broad context, but they don't focus on particular issues, like how political society actually works. The study of Mentalities is in a similar way about the ethnographic dimension. I find the work of the 'Annales'-School, especially Braudel and Ariés, particularly useful, without sharing all the structuralist implications. Now the Moral Maps that people build are defined by what we are constantly referring to as important distinctions, like "I'm being original, you're just being influenced by other people." These are moral distinctions of worth. What all these things – social imaginaries, horizons, mentalities, moral maps – have in common is an attempt to do some phenomenology. We attempt to understand how agents are understanding the world when they are acting in one or another way. Phenomenology and hermeneutics belong together. In a strict sense, phenomenology – going back to Husserl – is purely first-person description of how the world looks like. When we try to work out the social imaginary, we are not dealing with the first-person singular but with the first-person plural: we're trying to get clear what a language could be by which we can express our self-understanding related to that plural self. There lies the big opposition in the philosophy of the social sciences: some people think that the ultimate account has got to be in third-person terms, and these must be mechanistic terms. On the other hand, there are people like myself, who think that that's a delusion – you give away really good material of understanding of what people are doing for this fool's gold of reductive explanations.

### **Did the notion of social imaginary evolve through the years in your work? Did you work it out further?**

It always gets worked out more when you apply it to different situations. In 'A Secular Age'<sup>6</sup> and in 'Modern Social Imaginaries'<sup>7</sup> I'm interested in the transition to Western modernity, but then I became interested in something else now – part as a result of discussing with my Indian colleagues. What I discuss in those works certainly is the case for the West, but some of that didn't happen in India at all. On the other hand, Indians also have something like the modern state, something like modern democracy. People begin to work out what are the elements of the Indian social imaginary that allow them to have continuing democracy in contrast to Pakistan, which despite the fact that it was part of the same empire, went in a completely different direction. This is just to show that the whole idea of what the social imaginary could mean comes very differently when you have to work it out in different contexts.

**Trying to get a clearer picture of what should be the proper relationship between the historian and the past, we would like to ask you about your estimation of the British philosopher and historian R. G. Collingwood, who also regarded history as an activity rather than an object, claiming that the historian has to re-construct history:**

**"The past as such is not known, either in historical thought or in memory, in any kind of sense in which knowledge could guarantee real existence (...) the work of interpreting [the sources] proceeds according to principles which [the historian] creates out of nothing for himself; he does not find them ready-made but has to decide upon them by an act of something like legislation."<sup>8</sup>**

### **How close you feel to this view?**

I can see what he's trying to get at. When you're dealing with the gap between yourself as the knower, a twenty-first century person, and, say, the eighteenth century, that's where the hermeneutical element has to come in. You can be talking, for instance, about religion and then you start to get insights – sometimes by reading a text, by reading a novel – that the place of what we would call religion is very different in that society; and that is the creation of a new scheme. That's the truth behind what Collingwood is getting at. The other side of the coin is: You can argue that developing a scheme gives you better insight, certain things that were totally puzzling now make sense to you; so some of the rhetoric he is using makes it sound like a matter of complete invention. However, he is saying something very important, and we can enlarge it further by what Kuhn says about paradigms.<sup>9</sup> Paradigms are invented: suddenly the idea comes to you. They sometimes release you from certain puzzles that you couldn't solve at all, and then you have a new way of resolving these anomalies, and this enriches your knowledge. So there are these two sides.

**Very prominent in the field of the history of ideas is the so-called Cambridge School. You are both a long-time interlocutor with many prominent figures and named as an important inspiration by them. This is the case most notably with Quentin Skinner and John Dunn. This Cambridge approach is usually associated with focusing on how to make sense of historical texts, focusing on their role as political action or intervention in a certain context or discourse – famously, ‘The Pen is mightier than the Sword’ – instead of examining ‘eternal ideas’ or purely contemporary uses of concepts. This approach is thus, following Nietzsche,<sup>10</sup> tracing struggles for rhetorical re-descriptions of evaluative terms. How would you place yourself against this approach, do you see more similarities or differences?**

There are lots of similarities. I certainly agree that it is very important to get back to what was actually at stake, and I’m less critical of John Dunn – his “Setting the People Free” is an excellent book<sup>11</sup> – than I have been of Quentin Skinner. It seems sometimes that Quentin is assuming that people have interests in sort of the same sense we recognize our contemporaries as having an interest; he has trouble in making that kind of really big shift Collingwood wants to make, where you see that it all works together very differently. In other words, what’s lacking is a little bit of the ethnographic insight, to understand people in their different cultural contexts. If you make appeal back to interests and so on, very often what you are doing is seeing them the way you see the modern situation, which makes a lot of sense for them, but it doesn’t necessarily make a lot of sense to people in this very different situations. It’s that ethnographic sensibility, which applies for the past as well as to distant societies, which I feel is essential for this kind of work.

**The crucial importance of presenting history in a certain way is often neglected or ignored. Among others, there is the aforementioned style of narration, the telling of a story, which is very present in your works. By acknowledging this, one might say that history isn’t merely concerned with assumed ‘facts’ ordered in a seemingly neutral way, and less interested in maximising accuracy – a view radicalised by the ‘linguistic turn,’ and Hayden White in particular,<sup>12</sup> who admonished that everything is literature – but in providing a convincing interpretation. Would you say your approach is rightly understood that way?**

Yes, Hayden White has made a very important intervention in making you see the tremendous analogies between various ways of ‘emplotment,’ and that doesn’t surprise me so far as I’m always stressing the importance of narrative forms. There is some analogy between writing history and writing a novel. However, this doesn’t mean that we’re doing something different from trying to adjudicate truth. As I was saying earlier about paradigms: one paradigm is superior to another one, because when you understand the events in the structure of this paradigm, a lot of things open up and you can see causal dependency that you didn’t see before, which you can track and thus get closer to the truth. And there isn’t any detailed event that is irrelevant to this. If you reconstruct the French Revolution the way François Furet<sup>13</sup> does as against the way Albert Soboul<sup>14</sup> and the Marxists did, a lot of things that you were trying to ignore before, are possible to be made sense of now; and the more detailed the account the better because what you’re doing is trying to get at things wie es eigentlich gewesen ist.

**Given the powerful influence narratives have in defining our identity, are narratives social imaginaries themselves?**

Yes, a very important element in any social imaginary is the narrativity. It’s very interesting to look at this in the political debates. Today everybody is invoking – all the different parties, all the different outlooks – another story. Social imaginaries are focusing on our political society, and an extremely important part of their self-understanding is the narrative element. Look at the Americans. Obama takes this phrase from the first line of the American Constitution (“We the people of the United States in order to make a more perfect union...”) and uses it as a powerful narrative: “it’s been for about two hundred years we have been in this business of making a more perfect union and made certain steps: we got rid of slavery and now we are going to have a better health system;” and on the other hand the Tea Party says “No, in the past, Americans stood on their own feet, but with Roosevelt and the Democrats and the Welfare state, it has been downward all the way, and we have to get back to that original moment of steadfast independence.” Here we have a completely different reading. This example shows how essential narratives are because they both lay claim to all the legitimacy which for Americans surrounds the founding of the Republic.

**Is it then that social critique should be mainly directed to the narratives that we tell to ourselves as opposed to the institutions by which we actually live now?**

We have to do both, because either you support the institutions or you undermine the institutions by your narratives. The Tea Party narrative is undermining the whole development of the very feeble American Welfare state – much less imposing than anywhere else in the Western world – whereas Obama’s story is saying “yes, it is feeble, but it needs to be completed.” If you took the narrative out of this, it would all fall into two economists debating whether this policy works better than that other one.

**The most powerful version of a historical critique thus is the procedure of “Genealogy,” which can be – as you put it yourself<sup>5</sup>– immensely destructive and subversive, as in Nietzsche and Foucault, by showing an arbitrary, contingent or violent emergence. Potentially, though, this genealogy might also be done with affirmative intent or even as a mixture of both – a key element of your normative stance towards historical development seems to be in highlighting its ambivalent nature, which can be a critique in itself – but in any case aiming at an effect on the legitimacy of an institution, a value, a practice. How would you see the importance of these effects in general and in your work in particular? Would you say your work has also a genealogical quality in some sense?**

I agree. It can be a very powerful form of critique, and it can have an affirmative side as well. I don’t take genealogy as necessarily always debunking, although it very often has such debunking elements. So the question we might ask is: “is it always worth it?” And I think that it’s always worth it, because, first of all – I’m taking my stands with Aristotle – human beings desire to know, but also because there is even a moral goal here besides of just knowing, which is being able to live with the truth. If we have trouble living with the truth, it’s probably that we are attached to certain things that we shouldn’t be attached to. Does it do people moral good to come to accept this? Yes, because otherwise they are living in a paradise of their own exceptional goodness which is not morally healthy. Acceptance that some terrible things were done in the past triggers reconciliation; there’s something very positive and moral about that in human life: that you can live without these dreams of unreal goodness and face the full truth of history and still not collapse morally in this. This implies as well that there are still values that you rightly appalled and still things to be done – that you aren’t perfect.

**Would you say that your quarrel with ‘subtraction stories’<sup>16</sup> has some genealogical elements? Actually you are not claiming right away that the contemporary mainstream stance on secularity is just wrong, but you are showing it in a historical way.**

Yes, because I think what’s wrong with subtraction stories is that they don’t understand at all how history actually works, which involves new fundamental understandings of human agency, which means that you become different people. The subtraction story assumes that we were exactly like we are today, except that they had a couple of extra beliefs that we threw off. But that’s not how it was like. We are very different kinds of beings, based on individual responsibility and freedom. We had to reconstruct ourselves in a certain sense to become what we are.

**How radical can and should social and political thinking be in its historicising, if anything can be said about it in general? This question reverberates in the interpretation of your works, which are on the one hand seen as some kind of invariant substantialism – stressing anthropological factors, and on the other hand as some form of cultural relativism – stressing the contingent role of ‘western’ modernity?**

The whole difficult issue is to reconcile those two. There is obvious cultural variation with, it must be said, certain constants. Evidently, the task is how to define them – and that is at the heart of the problem. My intuition is that we’ll perhaps never get it totally right, but we get nowhere at all when we just say: “Everything is totally variable.” The opposite way, to rely, for instance, on things like selfish genes, doesn’t help either because that’s not the way that human beings are actually motivated. What we really need is some understanding of how cultural variations, very different from society to society, come about. We need historical accounts how they can happen.

**Are firm standards of critique necessary for taking up a critical stance towards contemporary conditions? For reasons of scientific accuracy one might be tempted to exclaim “yes of course!”, but in debates about different forms of critique,<sup>17</sup> a more nuanced picture emerges. Focusing on promising candidates in relation to your approach, there is the aforementioned genealogy, working merely through the description itself; there is ‘interpretive critique’ (Walzer), relying on already existing meanings and values in a specific political community; and there is ‘reconstructive critique’ (Habermas, Honneth), grounded on a deeper level, that is based on formal human constants like rationality or recognition, which tends more towards definite standards without the need of having a “view from nowhere” (Nagel).**

Effective critique has to identify what you can build on in the present situation, and what needs to be overcome. Just saying: “The whole problem is that human beings are too selfish” – very insightful! Where do you go from there? Certain views of human beings, merely proposing that one should comply with reason, are almost as irrelevant as to say: people are just selfish. Especially someone like Michael Walzer, on the contrary, is a positive example – without saying that I agree on all the details. He poses crucial questions like how our society is worked up, what the things are that move people, and how we can channel that to get over the identified wrongs. One needs to take into account that he’s speaking, like every critic inevitably does, from a certain position, with certain commitments, in this case as a Social Democrat. So he claims certain obvious things from that point of view, like, very basically, social justice. His essential contribution lies in the suggestion to build on forces of motivation which are already present and could be released by making this and that change. So, a really effective critique has to identify what’s empirically given, what’s valid, what’s valuable, as well as what needs to be changed. It’s really of how you get from here to there.

**Following up on this: what is your stance towards the Frankfurt School in general and the different stages of its development in particular? There seems to be some potential for quarrel on the level of political theory with more recent trends towards a thoroughly liberal orientation, invoking what you call a single principle doctrine. But especially with Honneth – maybe due to his more Hegelian approach – one can easily identify a lot of connections and common themes with you.**

The older Frankfurt School around Adorno/ Horkheimer has done very insightful work on how the rational is to be understood and on its limits. Honneth’s work goes very deeply into the same issues I’m concerned with – like recognition, which was even developed at more or less the same time. What I find indeed as implausible is the idea that you could have a single principle of morality, as in subtraction theories and even some current strands of Critical Theory. That’s because ethical life or “Sittlichkeit” is very different from the way that it’s imagined by people who have either a Kantian or Utilitarian outlook. Those are similar in the respect that they offer a single principle or a set thereof, in short usually maximising utility or some version of it. There are very sophisticated versions of the Kantian point, like that of Tim Scanlon.<sup>18</sup> Still, everything is supposed to be justified in terms of rights and duties. Why do I think this doesn’t make sense? Well, that’s not the way morality actually develops in human life. What we have to take into account is the complex development of the whole range of virtues and senses of the good, and how these are being invoked and acted out in practices. In order to make this slightly less confused and complex, you can separate out two dimensions: One does indeed deal with what we owe to each other, but there is another whole range of things when we talk about good ways of being human: being brave, courageous, generous, kind, understanding, sensitive to other people. The various attempts of the single principle doctrine only take in the first range. The kind of thing that arrives when I ask myself “How should I live my life?” is not simply exhausted by the Just. Proponents of the first strand, like Habermas, actually take that out of it, and say that the question of the good life is, and should be, outside. They are making a strong distinction between ethics and morality. You can’t separate that strictly, and you can’t simply abstract one side and say: that suffices. We’re left with a totally different kind of rationality, which I think is what we actually do, as I’ve been arguing in “Explanation and Practical Reason.”<sup>19</sup> This deals with supersession: I come to see that I had a very self-absorbed understanding of myself, so I didn’t understand what friendship was really about. Now I come to see a narrative transition, I come to see better what’s involved in this code of friendship, or what real courage is, or what generosity really is. Iris Murdoch is very convincing on this.<sup>20</sup> That is a way in which we can correct ourselves and get a more valid grasp of some of these goods.

**Are your differences with Habermas abating?**

The difference now has become less big. Already in an early stage he began to peel off the good life, which you can’t do. The difference was greater when he said: “It’s all morality,” and some of that still remains. I think that we’re not likely to close the gap any further. He’s very deeply committed to that kind of rationality. I respect the human experience underlying all this: the way he grew up, being 16 when the war ends, struggling for a robust break with National-socialism in post-war Germany, appealing to the nation in order to change it for the better. Under these circumstances, he thought that we have to have this very firm basis for our moral reasoning. Hypothetically, under different conditions, I could have easily bought his direction, but I just don’t think it works.

**Let’s shift the focus to social change. In relation to the account of modernity given in ‘Sources of the Self,’ you wrote: “For the moment I confess to lacking a very clear and plausible diachronic-causal story.”<sup>21</sup>**

**Some fifteen years later in ‘Modern Social Imaginaries,’ you have tried to give an explicit account of historical change, acknowledging multiple factors operating behind the rise of modernity. Could you say some words on the problem of causation as you see it today?**

I still think that there couldn't be a single answer to the question of causation. All we're left with is trying to trace particular changes. The more we trace many different changes, the more we have the sense of a bigger picture. One very important way that change comes about that we've seen in modern history is the inculcation of certain disciplines: of self-disciplines like controlling my behavior, of social disciplines like controlling ourselves, of military kinds like parades and battle formations, or just organizational savvy concerning our financial system so we can raise more money and produce much greater power. You see this happening with Russia under Peter the Great after being defeated by the Swedes: a great motivation to find the secret of their superiority arises. There is this very powerful kind of exogenous impulse to change, which may have been based on nothing within the “Vorstellung” of a given society, but virtually becomes irresistible, with certain elites obviously playing an important role. In other cases, there's something completely different happening, though always entangled in manifold ways. Take Max Weber's famous Protestant Ethic book, there's still a lot of truth to that.<sup>22</sup> Critics constantly fall below the level of sophistication of Weber. He didn't say: nothing else mattered. He said: of course there was a double-entry book-keeping, which was a very important background condition of the move to another kind of capitalism, and he brings in the patriot kind of religious aspirations. He was very aware of the incredibly multi-faceted causal story, but what is really fascinating is his idea of narrativity. What's interesting to him is the trigger factor that pushed this in a new direction, and that he tries to bring out.

**Is it helpful to think in more formal terms? In opposition to unilateral idealist or materialist accounts, a formalist solution could be to focus on the incoherence between different levels of self-interpretation – explicit/implicit and societal/individual – in order to explain a momentum for change?**

That could be, but I'm suspicious of any formalism, and idealism versus materialism is a totally bankrupt discussion. You're closer to the truth when you're saying that it takes both – as if just a single formula could do it all. If you have the perspective of what's the base and the superstructure in a Marxist sense, then economic organization would be the base, but of course there is a great deal of self-understanding involved as a necessary condition thereof: you've got to understand yourself and everybody else as individuals, you've got to understand the contract as the sacred link, and other features of self-understanding without of which this so-called base wouldn't exist. One can't simply explain the superstructure by the base or the other way round. Ideas are powerful because they are woven into practices. However, you're right that in certain cases, this notion of incoherence could be utterly true. Maybe our democracies are decaying because certain kinds of individualism arose which were inimical to the sense of individual responsibility. But alongside of that was the idea of a society of equals, which is portrayed magnificently by Pierre Rosanvallon.<sup>23</sup> Maybe a certain kind of individualism is breaking us away from the sense of importance of being equal. You can see it in the continuing spread between the rich and poor: various subcultures of the rich develop a life behind gated communities where they keep the others out, and there are sections of the society in various ghettos that are in real utter need. Maybe we're developing modes of life, of self-understanding, which are completely incompatible with our democratic structure.

**The birth of the modern culture is characterized by a radical transformation of the way we view man and society. In your historical works, though, you even draw lines of continuity that stretch back to the development of the ‘axial religions’ (last millennium B.C.) where a slow process of ‘disembedding’ of individuals started to take place. This prepared the way for the modern individualist, ‘disengaged’ worldview, a necessary precondition for the rise of modern institutions. The continuity lines do not fully help us understand the sudden rupture with the past, why for example only in Latin Christendom there is momentous dissatisfaction with what you called ‘hierarchical complementarity’ (a feature shared by all ancient civilizations, referring to different functions of unequal social groups), which leads to ‘Reform’ (a key concept in “A Secular Age,” referring to the aspiration to make over the whole society)? How can we make sense of this relation of continuity and discontinuity?**

I wish I knew. One issue which is very crucial and people have asked me about is: I assume in “A Secular Age” a long-standing vector towards “Reform” that kept going. You can understand that in terms of a basic notion of empowerment through certain kinds of disciplinary forms in societies, which others want to imitate or to intensify. However, the answer to your general question could only be given by a micro-story, because when you're trying for example to look back on the 11<sup>th</sup> century from the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the changes are so massive, and of course it didn't

happen at one moment. In trying to figure out some elements, you get a certain stance of the church towards the state, or the investiture controversy, the attempt to centralize power of the papacy, and so forth. So you get a series of micro-steps, and if you follow it very closely, the sense of a surprising moment might arise, and one might get an idea of how this vests. It's in that kind of way that I would probably resolve the issue of discontinuity. The question remaining being: Why does this vector continue? To understand why, you need to know what it starts. Let's say, catastrophically, in 2030, our democracies are totally gone. What happened? The micro-moves of the 1970s and '80s, where you have a very unfortunate "Ethics of Authenticity" in the context of capitalist consumerism, led to a new kind of individualism, and this got expressed in Reagan and Thatcher. It looked like a pretty unimportant change at the time, but could have catastrophic consequences, maybe becoming understandable only by looking back from 2050. However, there are risks in combining the big picture and various micro-stories: historians are always saying this or that fine detail of my story doesn't work. I recognize that I'm never going to have the time to do this, but I do recognize that the story I'm telling is fallible.

**Social movements appear to be a key feature of modern societies. In connection with the theory of the eminent ethnologist Victor Turner, you speak about the phenomenon of protest in the following terms:**

**"One of the places that anti-structure [as, in pre-modern times, the Carnival and other medieval rituals which broke the existing social codes of behavior and roles] has migrated is into the private domain, and the public spheres sustained out of this. But this is not all. The call of anti-structure is still strong in our highly interdependent, technological, super-bureaucratized world. In some ways, more powerful than ever. A stream of protests, against central control, regimentation, the tyranny of instrumental reason, the forces of conformity, the rape of nature, the euthanasia of imagination, have accompanied the development of this society over the last two centuries. They came to one climax recently, in the sixties and seventies, and we can be sure this is not their last."**<sup>24</sup>

**On the one hand, social movements are embedded in a modern culture of voluntary participation in the public sphere; but on the other, their 'emergence' requires an additional explanation – like crises, political opportunities, resources etc. How can we make sense of the appearance of social movements?**

Talking of anti-structure, you also have festivities like mass concerts today which have a certain analogy with earlier forms. Some of them don't have a particular set of goals, but social movements do. Let's take the example of the "Occupy" movement: they are on the boundary, having a certain element of festive occasion, but they have a definite point in protesting against something. In a way, there isn't an issue in explaining why these arise, as there are always plenty of motivations: terrible things happening in our society and we're drifting towards even more terrifying consequences. Half the inhabited world could rather soon be under water, or the major rivers in Asia could dry out, or the ice cap in the Himalayans melt, and you could go on and on. Plus the fact that there are these outrageous differences between rich and poor, which is what "Occupy Wall Street" and the other local versions all over the world protest against. It's so frighteningly obvious that something needs to be done. It would really be surprising if no one were out there.

**However, for social scientists, it's sometimes puzzling why protests don't take place despite the existence of those terrible problems, even within countries with a culture of participation. Why is it that at a certain point these movements emerge? In the aforementioned quotation, you pointed out that in the '60s and '70s we witnessed a strong wave of protests. Looking at the better part of the last decades, it seemed to be rather quiet, but now we have this new world-wide wave of social movements.**

I was giving an explanation at a very easy level: here are these terrible wrongs – of course people are going to protest. Why they protest right here, right now, is very hard – if at all possible – to pinpoint. Sometimes spectacular events happen, which obviously have an effect in triggering protests, and you can make a closer connection to their targets. That also concerns the dating of their emergence, like relating "Occupy" to the 2008 collapse of the economy. Still, in many cases, you can't explain the moment properly – for example, why do nuclear disarmament movements start in the 1950s, why didn't they start in the '40s? Trying to look into the future, with all caution, I venture to say that there are going to be more spectacular events in the field of global warming, which are going to trigger off even more powerful movements.

**In terms of political and social theory, could there be a defining feature of our contemporary predicament, like the crisis and dysfunctionalities of Capitalism, or like Post-Democracy as hinted at for example in**



**your “Legitimation crisis”<sup>25</sup> or “Malaises of Modernity”<sup>26</sup> – not the formal opportunities for participation are decreasing, but rather the will to participate, or the effect participation actually has?**

There is something to the Post-Democracy thesis, and maybe it's related to problems of capitalism. Each age cohort, in general, votes less than the previous one. We've seen it long enough to know that it isn't a life-cycle; it seems to be a pattern that people keep throughout their whole lives. It's worrying, and part of that is a sense that it doesn't make any difference, that I can't affect anything. That's why the Obama movement in 2008 was very significant with its slogan “Yes, we can.” The idea was: you might feel helpless alone, but we, all getting together, can affect change. Frankly, I was very hopeful when Obama was elected, but very disappointed later on. Many people didn't vote in the mid-term elections, which produced a house of representatives that is hostile to Obama, and thus a deadlock. People might have felt some kind of a magic sense: get Obama there – it'll have to break. It could have been a wonderful government, but the people didn't really understand what they were doing – real change is only possible if you hang in there. However, the original movement was very powerful, and it shows that there are lots of people who are not just disinterested. But, talking of Post-Democracy, we don't know fully the reason for this decline. Maybe it's reversible, but to what extent remains unknown for now. Certainly these changes are characteristic, and they delegitimize democratic institutions. The fact that a decision has been taken by the parliament or the government will cease to weigh as the legitimating argument.

**A major debate in contemporary political philosophy is about the notion of “the Political.”<sup>27</sup> This concept aims at capturing the constitutive role of antagonism in social life, focusing on highly politicized moments of founding and superseding of normative orders. The concept itself is supposed to challenge liberal thought, namely rationalist, universalist, and individualist outlooks. Mostly invoked by adherents of radical democracy, the notion of the Political can be divided into two main traditions, identified with Carl Schmitt and Hannah Arendt. Yet, it can be found in the field of the history of conceptual change as in Pierre Rosanvallon, who you appreciate a lot, and also in Cornelius Castoriadis, who was of some influence for your concept of social imaginaries that we discussed earlier. Would you place yourself in one of these traditions, or can't we have one without the other, or is it necessary to go beyond those distinctions?**

Perhaps an ideally healthy democracy is one which is traversed by one big class conflict or cleavage. That's neither Schmitt, nor exactly Arendt. Perhaps understandably, I have more sympathy with Arendt than with Schmitt. Nevertheless, the reality is between those two. It may be the case that democracy requires some kind of class struggle, as already Machiavelli saw it, but with certain limits. There's something to that, in which case neither Schmitt nor Arendt is completely satisfying. The real power of Arendt's work is focusing on the moment of revolution. She was very excited about what happened in 1956, the revolutionary councils developed in Hungary and elsewhere, and of course the significance of a founding event. In Schmitt, simply put, the founding sense is that you have this division between foe and friend, which is essential to all political situations. In a way, the Political is about continual re-emergences of such founding moments. I'm more and more convinced that what I've called somewhere else ‘tolerable conflict’<sup>28</sup> - this mode of conflict which will not destroy our reaching collective decisions - is perhaps the healthiest condition for democracy. However, it's always worth going beyond the given level of theoretical reflection, as the mentioned debate about the Political aims to do. That's why I find the work of Rosanvallon constantly interesting; he's always taking up different aspects. In “La Contre-démocratie”,<sup>29</sup> he makes an important point about our democracy which consists in the stopping of things from happening. How do you combine that with democracy resolving the big issues? “The Real World of Democracy”<sup>30</sup> is endlessly very fascinating, and there are so many different facets and dimensions to it.

**To conclude: At the dignified age of 81, looking back at your own history and a tremendously impressive body of work, would you still call yourself a “monomaniac”?<sup>31</sup>**

Yes, I'm still on the same issues, but I see much more needs to be done. I would be very pleased to do so living till 150, there's easily enough work to fill the whole period, if I were to do it myself. I feel that I've just begun to address the real questions. All the things that concerned me really relate to the understanding of what human life is. What is this work against? It has a clear set of adversaries, that is, people who have reductive, mechanistic, plus – these go together – atomistic understandings of human life. There's a whole other philosophical anthropology which I'm trying to work out, that's the monomaniac. It may not look monomaniac simply because it's handled from different angles, by sociology, by philosophy, by linguistics, by history – but that's an illusion. They actually are one set of problems and issues which are very closely tied together. You can only answer these questions at the borderline of all these different disciplines, and that is what needs to be done.

## NOTES

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