

From the internationally bestselling author of
Time for Outrage: Indignez-vous!

S T É P H A N E
H E S S E L

The Power of
INDIGNATION

The Autobiography of the Man
Who Inspired the Arab Spring

Translated by
E. C. BELLI



THE POWER
OF
INDIGNATION

THE POWER OF INDIGNATION

STÉPHANE HESSEL

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Skyhorse Publishing

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[The Universal Declaration of Interdependence](#)

Stéphane Hessel's words reach beyond the boundaries of a mere book. His is a cry meant to open our eyes and activate our consciences. Accordingly, this volume is not an autobiography in the traditional sense of the term, i.e. one that is backward looking. It is, instead, an invitation to courage. In the pages you will find experiences that have proven valuable by inciting within Hessel a certain political engagement and a certain outlook on life.

The editor would like to thank all of those who, through their stimulating presence, came to occupy a place in this book. Thanks also to Sacha Goldman of the International Ethical, Scientific and Political Collegium, an indefatigable leader of an organization where intelligence and experience meet in the aim of conceiving of wiser forms of governance for both humanity and the planet as a whole.

M.S

This is the tale of an entire life, a tale marked by chance encounters, by blossoming and withering relationships, by memories revisited and experienced now as though through a glass thickening in the dimming light of evening: “Again you show yourselves, you wavering Forms, / Revealed, as you once were, to clouded vision...”

Contained within these pages is an entire set of principles, of values, and of ethics too, erected from unshakable bases: Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, Merleau-Ponty, and all of the great artists and writers of the past. Special mention to Edgar Morin, Régis Debray, Michel Rocard, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Jean-Claude Carrière, Peter Sloterdijk, Laure Adler, Jean-Paul Dollé, and so many others from the present. To yet another *Danse avec le Stécle*¹ that now begins.

¹In 1997, Stéphane Hessel published an autobiography titled *Danse avec le Siècle* (‘Dance with the Century ’).

*Again you show yourselves, you wavering Forms,
Revealed, as you once were, to clouded vision.
Shall I attempt to hold you fast once more?
Heart's willing still to suffer that illusion?
You crowd so near! Well then, you shall endure,
And rouse me, from your mist and cloud's confusion:
My spirit feels so young again: it's shaken
By magic breezes that your breathings awaken.*

*You bring with you the sight of joyful days,
And many a loved shade rises to the eye:
And like some other half-forgotten phrase,
First Love returns, and Friendship too is nigh:
Pain is renewed, and sorrow: all the ways,
Life wanders in its labyrinthine flight,
Naming the good, those that Fate has robbed
Of lovely hours, those slipped from me and lost.*

²Kline, A.S. "Goethe, Faust - Part I Prologue - A New English Translation." *Poetry In Translation*. Web. 09 Mar. 2011.
<<http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/German/Fausthome.htm>>.

The Gift of Years

“Gleich der Flamme:” like a flame...

I had already begun what I believed was the final chapter in the large book I like to call “My Life”—eight lovely and equally beloved decades marked by myriad adventures of love and of the mind when an unexpected, inconceivable, and yet irrepressible set of circumstances transformed the life of this old, retired diplomat into a circus. A short text with a provocative title³ that had flowed from my pen took off like a rocket, crossing at once all borders, and has now incited innumerable readers to outrage. I hadn’t considered the kind of risk I was taking or the sometimes fervent response with which this cry from the heart would be met. What I had unleashed was a hurricane. I needed to understand the reasons behind this response and, above all, evaluate the consequences. Yes, the pamphlet came at the right time. Our global society, held under the yoke of various financial pressures for the past twenty years (a trend in the face of which individual governments found themselves unable to protect their own citizens), seemed gloomy and incoherent. A summons of sorts, which called upon the values of freedom and justice that my own generation had looked to in its efforts to build a better world after the horrendous tumult of the ‘40s (first by opposing the way in which those values had been trampled both by North African tyrants and by some imperfect democracies among our own developed nations), this call to outrage certainly came at the right time. But I couldn’t leave it at that. The door, now opened, had to lead somewhere. I had to give substance to this message that those born during World War I felt, in their hearts, must be shared with the new generation facing new threats on the cusp of the twenty-first century.

Besides my surprise at having struck the right chord merely by scribbling onto paper a few simple ideas that were, in my mind, obvious facts, the whole affair provided me great joy. A true *joie de vivre* rekindled within me, and lasts even to this day, each time an audience full of young spectators comes to me with anxious questions—questions that I unavoidably end up answering with poems. This quiet old ambassador has such high expectations placed upon him (expectations which he alone is responsible for creating). It’s always a moment amidst the stars.

So there I was, having traveled to all corners of Europe— Warsaw, Düsseldorf, Madrid, Turin, Milan, Lisbon— promoting a rather violent message, a message of outrage that, in sum, declared: Refuse the unacceptable. I suppose this could have inspired some fear within me that I had gone too far perhaps, or that I could no longer live up to expectations. Yet, quite the opposite, this moment has become, in the old age that is now mine (ninety-four in 2011!), emblematic of a last-minute resurgence, and has offered me a new window on the world and on my contemporaries.

But does the life I have lived entitle me to all of this? That is the question underlying this book. What is it about this long life of mine that allows me to carry forth such a message? What do I know of men, of women, and of love? What do I know of science, of philosophy, of politics? What could I possibly have to say about the magical encounters that mark our lives and gave me a taste for wonder? And what did I learn from them? What do I owe my family, my childhood, and my sentimental education? Does having been instilled, as a child, with a love for poetry have some impact today on my relationships, on my interlocutors, and on my audiences who are as young as they are attentive to the words of this old man?

And while we're at it, has the fact that I have learned three different languages over the course of my life, languages, which each delight me in equal measure and in their own way, made expression of feeling and communication somewhat easier for me? I believe so—yet, what a disappointment to not be able to speak Spanish, or Russian, or other languages that are similarly seductive!

“Let us turn to the past: that will be progress”

This quote by Giuseppe Verdi, whispered into my ninety-year-old ear by Régis Debray, resonates with me. I appreciate the fact that my words carry weight merely because they result from a long life in which I have known, encountered, and discovered many things—a life filled with myriad adventures. But the collected memories of a human being do constitute a treasure of insights. What lends legitimacy to my words is precisely the fact that I have crossed a century full of inventions, hopes, and horrors, and that I have fully participated in that adventure. I think I perhaps owe my life a debt of insight and maybe that debt can be repaid today by sharing this account. Caught somewhere in between *l'éclipse de la durée*, the disintegration of generational bonds, and *The Society of the Spectacle*,⁴ the implications of old age in our modern era are peculiar. Past experiences sometimes seem less important in the eyes of my contemporaries than those future experiences, those experiences yet to be had. In his little *Essai d'intoxication volontaire*,⁵ Peter Sloterdijk speaks of an “integral disinheritance,” which he defines as, “This strange way in which younger generations separate from their parents in a single jolt” (even if it means having to relearn everything on their own). The questions arise: What could an old chap like me have to offer the world, and why should attention be paid to me instead of another? After all, I don't really have the philosophical training required to be a thinker in matters of politics. Once again, it is *experience* rather than an ability to engage in theoretical thinking that gives these words value.

The time has perhaps come for me today to consider all that I have said and done. Many times over the course of the past few years I have thought of doing so and considered it, in fact, for the very first time in 1996. I was seventy-nine at the time and the publisher Editions du Seuil had asked me to recount my life. But I've never really considered myself a writer, though I did come to know of this peculiar way of being and living during my childhood, through my father. Indeed, he devoted his entire life to writing and almost held himself apart from anything that was not literary; an admirable fate, but not an enviable one. No, in my own life, I wanted to be immersed in the current of the world. Consequently, I hesitated quite a bit before taking pen to page. It was only upon Françoise Peyrot's insistence (then Director of Collections⁶ at Editions du Seuil) that I accepted. That experience

taking stock of it all was, for me, looking back at the first eighty years of my life as though they had been a dance through the century—a century that is ending now, at the same time as my own existence on this earth, and a dance, that cannot yet clearly be called macabre or merry, that might either mark the end or the beginning in the long history human society, a dusk or a dawn.

Eight years later I took stock of it all for a second time in a way that was particularly close to my heart. I was going to be eighty-eight years old, a number that fascinates me. If you lay them down horizontally, those two eights become two symbols of infinity—infinite like the field of energy that was created by the eighty-eight poems I know by heart and enjoy reciting.

My relationship with Laure Adler, who, at the time, suddenly became head of the Editions du Seuil and decided to publish *O Ma Mémoire*,⁷ is a very *poetry-based* relationship. Accordingly, I chose to examine the connection between man and poetry in that volume, which ended up being a trilingual anthology of more than thirty French poems, approximately twenty German poems, and another twenty in English. By then the end of my life had drawn yet closer and had taken for me the welcome form that Rainer Maria Rilke evokes when describing us as bees that “madly gather the honey of the invisible in order to accumulate it in the grand golden hive of the Invisible.”⁸ But the end did not come. Still alert, I crossed the threshold of ninety and became a survivor, one of those increasingly rare survivors of a memory that has suddenly become essential and whose full significance needs to be explored once again. Before long, I found myself at the Glières Plateau with a message for the generations that follow me: “Resisting is creating. Creating is resisting.”

Isn't “all said and done” the truest motto to ever suit me? It's a motto I actually used to close off my interviews with Jean-Michel Helvig in *Citoyen sans frontières*⁹ —a book of mine that ends with “The Pretty Redhead,” the poem by Guillaume Apollinaire whose own final line closes humbly: “Have pity on me.”

But had all been said and done yet? No. A woman, who was amongst the three thousand people who came to this exceptional place, to this superb Savoyard landscape where the moving memory of our lost comrades lives on, heard me. After hearing me proclaim the important role of those old values which must not be forgotten or desecrated (as they are by too many governments, like our own) at every stage in our history, Sylvie Crossman, co-director, with Jean-Pierre Barou, of Indigene Edition, resolved to make me work some more. A few months later, *Time For Outrage*, that little libel whose unbelievable reach opened a new chapter in my life, was born from our meetings. There was, after all, still something left for me to do.

Today, it is once again a woman, Maren Sell, the editor who worked on the French translations of my father Franz Hessel's books some twenty-five years ago, who invited me to put together some sort of treatise for younger generations on the ways in which one might go about leading the life of an activist. Her request came in the spring of 2010, a few months before I became a media darling. The present attempt at taking stock of my life and of what meaning to give to it, I shan't dare wish that it might actually be the last.

Yes! I know from where I came!

Ever hungry like a flame

I consume myself and glow.

Light grows all that I conceive,

ashes everything I leave:

Flame I am assuredly.

³Hessel is referring to *Time for Outrage*.

⁴Guy Debord's critical work which posits that modern society's authentic social life has been replaced with its representation: "A life that was once directly lived has become mere representation."

⁵Sloterdijk, Peter. *Essai D'intoxication Volontaire: Conversation Avec Carlos Oliveira*. Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1999. Print.

⁶The English equivalent of an editorial director.

⁷Hessel, Stéphane. *O Ma Memoire: La Poesie, Ma Necessite*. Paris: Seuil, 2006. Print.

⁸Rilke, Rainer Maria. *The Duino Elegies*. Trans. Leslie Norris and Alan Frank Keele. Rochester: Camden House, 2008. Print.

⁹Hessel, Stéphane. *Citoyen Sans Frontieres: Conversations Avec Jean-Michel Helvig*. Paris: Fayard, 2008. Print.

¹⁰Nietzsche, Friedrich, and Walter Kaufmann. *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs : Translated with Commentary by Walter Kaufmann*. New York: Random, 1974. Print.

Refusing the Unacceptable

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights...

So what is it exactly that I have learned and must convey? First, that it is necessary and possible to refuse the unacceptable. Throughout the decades, men who have resigned themselves, who gave up, who considered their fight lost and estimated that nothing could be done—whether they were dissenters unable to unify fully before taking power or whether they became non-resistant after the victory of murderous powers—well, something has eluded those men forever, something which was supposed to distinguish man in his dignity.

In 1948, when those who drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights attempted to characterize a human person, the term they deemed fitting to all religions, to all philosophies, and to all cultures which they finally selected was, indeed, *dignity*. It is also the concept which inspires the first article of the said Declaration and which sums up, in my eyes, the entire predicament in which our contemporary world finds itself: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” The unacceptable is infringement upon another’s dignity. This infringement can sometimes cleverly pose as the rejection of another because this other is *justifiably* deemed to be missing something, because he is ‘too other,’ too incapable or lacking. I say no one can ever be *justifiably* treated as inferior. Such a treatment is unacceptable. What is justified, however, is to be outraged at such a treatment. This is also the situation in which outrage must find its true path and result in actual engagement. For, were outrage to merely remain in this formless state of antagonism and were it to wither and turn to anger, nothing would come of it but some gnashing of teeth. Nevertheless, determining what deserves our outrage is the first skill I owe myself to teach those who are going to be protesting this new world and the grave dangers we face. It all boils down to having a conscience.

*“The starry sky above me and the moral law within me,”
or impulse and the law*

This need for us to have a conscience is a complex idea, for a conscience needs to be developed, cultivated, and maintained. Unless you expect to be visited by the Holy Spirit and instructed on the various forms of eternal grace on your way to Damascus, Jerusalem, Benares or Lhasa (a scenario that

lacks both likelihood and courage), I believe we must commit to giving ourselves the means to make our consciences emerge. What we need is an education in the ways of developing a conscience. What we need is an at-once-gentle-and-yet-strict apprenticeship that takes into consideration the dialectic presented by impulse vs. the law, of dream vs. reality, of “human rights” and of “another’s rights,” a dialectic that considers all of these things and their respective limits and constraints; limits and constraints we must both learn to recognize and to resist.

One day, Jean-Claude Carrière pointed out to me to what extent it was illusory to him, and all too all dangerous, to have faith in the essential goodness of human nature. He claims that Rousseau’s ‘myth’ would have us believe that, were men and women to act as they wish, everything would go well in the world and all sources of moral corruption (meaning the power structures in place) would be eliminated. He is, of course, right to emphasize that such a scenario is implausible. In all present cultures token gestures of liberty (the carrot) and the stick must be combined in order to help preserve actual liberty. We know full well that we are not made only of good intentions. We know full well that if we were left to act on our own, we wouldn’t necessarily take the path of fairness, balance, generosity, and of all those noble notions we always like to hold forth. It is such an admission that requires us to seek to impose a law upon ourselves; for indeed, we must consent to law. But the law only draws its power from the sources out of which it is born, from the values it looks to defend and from the injustices against which it must protect us. We must always be able to find justification at its root, for when that is absent, the law should no longer earn the support of those she claims to cast her reach over. The refusal to obey, which was exhibited recently by some of our teachers, for instance, is in that respect, completely justifiable. Additionally, the fact that a government is elected through a democratic process is not sufficient to ensure that all of its decisions will be informed by a clear knowledge of what is right and what cannot be.

This reminds me of Walter Benjamin’s eloquence in presenting his hypotheses on the philosophy of history: in our quest for progress, it is important to focus our efforts primarily on those who are most marginalized, least respected, and the most destitute members of the population. This word *progress*, is not suited to define the current process of endless accumulation of resources that is enjoyed by dominant oligarchies, whose vigorous breath causes Paul Klee’s angel with spread wings to withdraw, terrorized, in his *Angelus Novus*—an image Benjamin was never able to let go of.

We instinctively address our reproaches to tyrants, and we sing the praises of those who make them fall. It is not as easy, though it is just as necessary, to address with enough energy and make heard our criticism of modern democracies, which have shown themselves insensitive to the most basic needs of the true victims of the law, which, we have come to find, seeks to protect the property of the privileged first and foremost.

At once, the importance of having representatives selected directly from amongst the people, who were the carriers of the *cahiers de doléances*¹¹ during the assembly of constituents of 1789, asserted itself. The role of those representatives is especially significant during moments of historic progress in our societies. Today, the carriers of the *cahiers d’espérance*,¹² called upon by Claude Alphanodé to extend the reach of the Social and United Economy¹³, represent real solutions to the unbearable tyranny of the market. During the foreign occupation of a broken France, the members of the National Council of the Resistance (NCR), brought together by Jean Moulin to draft the program¹⁴ that I once

again defended at the Plateau de Glières because its values are so threatened today, were similarly significant. Those Resistant and Résistantes had no other mandate than a task to accomplish; a task addressed to all, regardless of their hierarchical position; a task issued from their convictions alone. And finally, in the years that followed, under the Third Reich—a time in which the most abominable of modern killings were taking place—the members of the Commission who were chosen, based on competence alone and not designated by their respective governments, to draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: were, they too, of incredible worth?

That's it for men, but what about the planet? At the time of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we were not conscious that our responsibilities would involve anything beyond the way in which human societies act toward each other. Perhaps we were still too focused on those disappointing, characteristic concepts of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which conceives of man as being created by God, the master of Creation, and not as part of a larger whole. Evidently, the risk of excess was considerable.

Jean-Claude Carrière sometimes attributes man's exploitation of nature to the words found in Genesis. It is possible that, in our Western traditions, there still lingers in us a sense of supremacy over nature that is very different from what we find in the religions of Asia. The church did try, at some point, to make up for the consequences of this Promethean hubris. But, on the one hand, its influence has considerably waned, and on the other, it is difficult to move past. You might remember the words preached in the nineteenth century in Pope Pius IX's encyclical *Syllabus of Errors*: "Everything that comes from new ideas must be rejected; we must hold fast to the ancient texts. It is truly alarming. And 1864 was not that long ago."

But those are established views *par excellence*.¹⁵ Were we to strictly stick to biblical texts, we would be lost, for we cannot usurp the earth without destroying ourselves too in the process. We need to accept this idea: one need not be a Buddhist to recognize that the Earth is Man and vice-versa. Milan Kučan, president of Slovenia, likes to share this quote attributed to Karl Marx: "In the conflict between Nature and Man, we know who is at fault."

The Scientist, the Businessman, and the Politician

Refusing the unacceptable is only the first step. What must follow is the indispensable evolution of mindsets toward a true collective conscience fostered by creative thought. I must say that it is impressive how—by entertaining a close intellectual relationship with thinkers from back in the day, such as Benjamin, Adorno, Sartre, or Merleau-Ponty, or thinkers of today, such as Sloterdijk, Carrière, Debray, or Morin (and I am not even mentioning them all)—many diverse scientific, political, and poetic minds can all converge into a single plea for an increased awareness of our problems and refocusing on what really matters.

I will concede that in certain circles it may appear that voting preferences are preset. Yet, the idea that humanity, at the very least as far as its Western subdivision is concerned, is on the brink of making significant moral and scientific strides just cannot be shaken from me and is quite my own. The moral and political crises in which we are currently engaged, are not unrelated. Only fear of the unknown, apprehension toward change, reticence to embrace "an occurrence happening in man" (to use Heidegger's words), still keeps us in too conservative and nervous a state of denial.

Let us reflect for a moment on the state of science. What has most progressed over the course of the past twenty or thirty years is science. It has made *fantastic* progress. We now have much more detailed information on human beings, the world, and matter. And yet, the scientist is not a type known to only inspire great esteem. He is known, in fact, for prioritizing first and foremost the pleasure derived from the success of his invention or of his discovery, without necessarily pondering its consequent dangers. He is akin to a child playing with marbles, which turn out to be bombs. As Sloterdijk reminds us, whether we want it or not, we are today the guardians of nuclear fire and of the genetic code. When we think of our relationship to science and technology, we must take in consideration the fact that we hold a type of knowledge that has turned us into improbable demiurge. The chief example is the atom bomb, which is not a scientific problem, but rather a matter of politics yesterday, Hiroshima; then, Chernobyl; and finally, Fukushima. These are serious problems facing humanity, as are stem cell research, biogenetics, cloning, GMOs, and so on.

If it all goes too far, we must refuse the unacceptable, and it is that form of conscience that the politician has been charged to embody and defend. As regards nuclear energy, the question is not whether it is possible to know, both scientifically and technologically speaking, if it can be achieved with a zero risk. No, the question is whether a community is prepared to collectively assume the consequences posed by nuclear power. And those types of questions should fall, by virtue of his responsibilities, to the politician. The scientist need not step into the shoes of the politician and the politician need not resign when in the scientist's presence; especially when the businessman has invited himself into this relationship and is trying hard to plot them against each other in hopes of making a substantial profit.

What is the role of science today? And what is the role it is encouraged to play in the interest of profit? Here is an indispensable question, a question to which I obviously don't have a definitive answer. I am tempted to refer back to that famous quote, "Science without conscience..."¹⁶ It is not so much science itself that is alienating, but the *scientification* of everything that surrounds us. Science is dangerous because it tends to ignore the needs of others in its attempt at self-realization. For a few years already, I have been wary of this term *science*, especially when science is conjectured to be the wise guide that it actually isn't. Too often we are quick to abandon our common sense and blindly follow scientifically-proven solutions, sidestepping necessary reflection on the world and all of its complexities in the process. Then too, things must be scientifically proven or we do not believe them to exist. But what about the *homo ludens*,¹⁷ the *homo demens*¹⁸ that Edgar Morin speaks of in his *Method*?¹⁹ What about all of those things that do not fall strictly within the scope of science? Above all, what about our imagination and our ability to conjure up a world that would make use of all those discoveries? What I hear being said about nanotechnology, for instance, worries me. It's as if the type of reductive thinking that has been at play in finance for the past thirty years unfortunately continues to live on in this new form of scientism that claims, "We have all the answers. Governments have best leave us be. Everything will work like clockwork." Granted, of course, that they get to keep the clock!

I lament the absence of public debate on the motivations behind certain funding decisions and the ways in which our scientific discoveries are put to use. I recognize in this Marx's notions of historical materialism and scientific socialism, Augustus Comte's technocratic doctrines,²⁰ and of course the

oppressive nature of the market, always eager to broaden its scope, to which only the living represent a barrier.

Never has the tension between facts and morals been as heavy with consequences as in our contemporary world. Each in their own way, Edgar Morin and Peter Sloterdijk both remind us that science has become a formidable force today, but a force that has evaded any sort of ethical regulations, and also that politically motivated regulation ranges from stupidly prohibitive to blindly permissive.

There is another limit to science, a more poetic one this time, as highlighted in Morin's book. Thanks to science, we have discovered astonishing things about the universe, reality, and life; but all of this marvelous knowledge actually leads to yet a deeper mystery. We know the universe came about as the result of some sort of explosion, but from whence, out of which abyss? We do not know. What truth do we find behind this truth by examining reality through the lens of microphysics? To where does dissolved matter vanish? What is the origin of the universe, its limits? Why did life emerge? Why does man *exist*? There are so many mysteries. But unexplainable does not necessarily mean impossible.

In his books, and in particular in his *Method*, Morin presents a rich and original view of the brain's future. In a multi-pronged approach that considers brain studies, cybernetics, and information theory, Morin underlines a fascinating convergence in different approaches to our understanding of the functioning of the machines inside our skulls. It is a mistake, according to him, to believe that the scope of research can be limited to a single subject or field. We must understand this paradox: our mind expresses itself through words; but our neurons express themselves through electrochemical exchanges. There is, as a result, quite an intricate relationship between the language of the brain and the language of the mind. It is wrong, however, to reduce the scope of the mind merely to that of the brain.

What we should remark, however, is that, within a given cultural environment, the human brain makes it possible for a mind to arise, a mind which can speak and express feelings. Take as proof the many cases of children-wolves or abandoned children who are found living like primates due to their isolation from society and lack of interaction with their peers. Their inability to speak proves that it is out of contact with a certain culture, a certain language, and certain set of knowledge, and also because of the way in which those interactions influence our brains, that a mind can emerge. Culture is a cocoon, a womb, a fertile space where this 'program' can grow.

Like Morin, we should bemoan the fact that the different branches of contemporary neuroscience have not yet succeeded in coordinating their efforts and remain relatively separate, in the same way other sciences do; which, of course, does not make their research any easier. But we do know some fascinating things already. For instance, the brain scans of Buddhist monks in a fully meditative state have revealed much about the brain's function during this rather ascetic practice; the brain structures supposed to distinguish between the self and the non-self cease to function. It's fascinating. A comparable effect occurs during sexual climax, in which individuals are found to reach fulfillment and lose control all at once. Such is the first lesson in human complexity. This lesson from the scientist is addressed to the politician. Let's hope he will learn it before the businessman does!

When the businessman rules, cold, hard mathematics rule. We will have to prove our ability to separate ourselves from that. For it is impossible to consider a human being in all of his or her parts if we limit ourselves to mere numbers. There are thousands of ways in which to objectively talk about the measure of a human being, such as through electroencephalograms, body measurements, and psychoanalysis, to name a few. But in truth, reality eschews numbers. Life, death, morals, love, and hate all eschew the “reign of quantity.”²¹

Herein lies the superiority of art, whether we are speaking of poetry and its transgressive nature, theater and its cathartic representation of reality, film and its oneiric dramatizations of our imagination, or novels, which blend all of the categories cited above. The novel goes deeper yet than the social sciences, deeper than psychology, or sociology. It portrays concrete beings in all of their subjectivity and in all of their diverse environments. It was Ernesto Sabato who said, in sum that nowadays, the only laboratory in which we can examine the complete spectrum of human conditions is in fiction.

It also seems to me that poetry (more so than science) is able to reveal what is deepest and most essential in all of us, this heartbeat that contains the world and that is shared by all human beings. Let us therefore listen to the advice of a wise man like Morin. Let us recognize the limitations of scientific truths and their shortcomings. Even scientists, who are able to consider everything they look at objectively, are incapable of recognizing their own subjectivity, of truly knowing themselves. This is what Husserl suggested at a wonderful conference in 1930, by claiming that there was a black hole in the brains of scientists: “They do not know who they are. They know things, but they do not know what they are doing.”

Let us not forget that science is a wonderfully human adventure whose destination still remains unknown. Choosing its final destination is not the sole purview of the scientist. It must include the poet, the politician, the citizen, the moralist, and the philosopher.

In a very moving anti-Cartesian impulse, Merleau-Ponty admitted at the ENS²² that a human being is an indissociable compound of body and soul. It is a poignant idea that has remained dear to me and allows me to live out my relationships with others more fully, whether they are loved ones or mere acquaintances. I am sensitive both to exchanges based on intellect and to emotion, to what warms the heart and to what makes us think.

Merleau-Ponty was a great philosopher whose main quality was that he emphasized what I referred to as the “flesh.” Too many thinkers believe that the conceptual nature of their ideas somehow lends gravity to their thoughts. But they forget reality—the body. Kierkegaard, deriding Hegelian philosophy, quipped, “The Herr Professor knows everything that exists in the world, but he no longer knows what he himself is.” And yet, warnings against this tendency toward taking a theoretical view of beings and of their being-in-the-world is already addressed to us as early as Socrates.

Manifestly, philosophy could cause its own degeneration, were it to retreat completely into the barren territories of theorization and become impervious to the soul’s pulsations. I think that nowadays, in our *art de vivre*,²³ we cannot merely aspire, as we once did, to being wise—since it h

indeed been proven that we have great potential for folly in us. Let's admit it. A completely reasonable life is neither possible, nor desirable. The essence of existence lies in a necessary combination of reason and passion. In other words, passion cannot exist without reason and reason cannot exist without passion.

As for the degeneration of philosophy, it is well summed up by a perfidious and impertinent phrase by Sloterdijk: "We find contemporary philosophy at its best nowadays when we witness it in its attempts at justifying how it would posit a given problem if it actually had something to contribute." Harsh, but true. And yet, its contributions are doubly needed. On the one hand, philosophy provides us with the means to call into question things that have, up until then, seemed like immovable truths. On the other hand, it seeks to establish a certain correspondence between our actual lives and the life of the mind. Achieving such a unity would amount to living our human lives to the fullest and would act as a safeguard against cynics, for this type of unity would prove the good sense of this honest humanist.

What seeks the light of day

Refusing the unacceptable is, obviously, refusing the world as it is. Albert Camus once said, "If there was something to conserve in this world, I would be a conservative." Evidently, certain of our accomplishments are precious and it is unacceptable to question them.

So we must call upon our creative potential as humans. What good is it to claim that we are rebuilding the world when we are in fact throwing out ready-made theories, which we hope others will read, others whom we hope will suddenly become enlightened upon learning about our great plan? The true challenge, today, is to help deliver a concrete version of this new world of tomorrow, to help bring about what seeks the light of day. Everywhere this rise in awareness is taking place, human resourcefulness is in action. There are co-ops, mutually supportive, more-or-less-self-directed interest groups, which thrive through unity with nature, organic farming, etc. Those groups are alive; but they are isolated and ignored by administrations, by political parties, and by the dominant structures. All of these citizen-led movements remain in the margins, or are not strong enough yet to resist attempts at assimilation, normalization, or regularization; which all result from a capitalist mindset. The real challenge is to make those examples known, recognized, and shared, so that they may synergize and feed a wider movement of reforms. Like Edgar Morin, I believe that, in the end, everything must be reformed. Not only the ossified, bureau-cratic administrations and institutions, and not only the economy, the markets, and distribution; but *everything*, including nutrition and consumerism. It's our entire lives we must change. All of these reforms, including educational reform and the reform of mindsets, are interconnected, interdependent—each must enter a juggling act to avoid both losing momentum and becoming isolated from the others. The ex-USSR proved it. Completely changing the economy, in the end, does not change habits, human beings, anything at all. On the contrary, the result is simply the founding of new dictatorships.

The idea is therefore to contribute to the transformation of our existence, to create multiple pathways which would merge into a single way that would lead us toward metamorphosis.

Such are the premises of the politics of hope. Believing that nothing can be accomplished without hope, I had, during the European elections of 2009, signed a vibrant plea, alongside Peter Sloterdijk,

and Paul Virilio, that called upon the infinite resources issued from creativity and hope: “*Écologie : pour une politique de l’espérance.*”²⁴

Sadly, it would seem that most seniors have lost hope, perhaps from having been wrong so many times throughout history. As for young people, they don’t seem to really know where to look anymore from being so directionless. That is the entire purpose of Edgar Morin’s approach: to prove that it is possible to set a goal, aim at an objective, and follow a set of beliefs that makes sense. We must lead the way for all of these young people who mean well and find themselves involved in a myriad of initiatives, so that, in becoming united, they may truly come to appreciate their originality of thought and power. Outrage was a first step. It is necessary; but however, insufficient. We need to follow a thought, a set of beliefs, a will to be different.

Be warned—I am not alleging that *La Voie*²⁵ is poised to replace *The Bible*. As the author himself puts it, *La Voie* is a contribution, a proposition, and a mere suggestion. It is an invitation to invent the unknown, to uncover human potential. True creation does not know what it will give rise to. Could we have imagined what the *Requiem* would sound like before Mozart wrote and performed it? Could we have imagined that those small societies of hunter-gatherers would come to found cities and civilizations merely some ten thousand years later? The future is not contained within any political agenda, within any to-do list of any hardworking administrator.

Post-historical?

It is a mistake to believe that human history can be summed up in eight thousand years from the beginning of the Neolithic period. We lived through one hundred and fifty thousand prehistoric years. We need this historical dimension to adequately contextualize our faith in the improbable and the importance of the change to come. Let’s put an end to Fukuyama and his clumsy Hegelian fantasy of the end of history,²⁶ which is poised to emerge through the power of some magical formulas and would come under the delightful guise of what one calls “liberal democracy.” We must now conceive of history not so much as a string of time that stretches from one end of time to the other—between an uncertain origin and an eschatological end—but rather as a winding ribbon, coiled into a spiral, which calls to mind the double helix at the root of all life.

We are currently creating a sort of *hereafter* of history. Morin speaks of “meta-history” inscribed within the pulse of human creativity. The world is in movement; it is deep, tectonic, and unpredictable. The improbable occurs. The *new* is emerging and we are going to come out of the global Age of Iron,²⁷ suggested in the past by Voltaire, and in which we still find ourselves today. The reform of knowledge, the reform of thought, the reform of minds—and therefore the reform of education, without which the other reforms cannot occur and vice-versa—are, as a result, quite urgent. Morin insists on it and I like his line of thought: there is, on the one hand, our desire to revise established truths, and, on the other, our faith in the improbable.

I personally experienced this faith in the improbable. It was in Marseilles during the summer of 1940—that murderous, terrible, humiliating summer, which was poised to mark the end of all democracies. France: defeated. England: nearly invaded. Russia: turned Nazi (and thereby demonstrating all of the perversity of its true democratic system)... We had failed in our attempt

making democracy triumph, but held fast to the feeling that democracy was, after all, the only victor of that ignoble slaughter that was the Great War. Despair was rather in fashion around that time and that is when I came to Walter Benjamin again.

We had the opportunity to spend a few hours together in Marseille, and I remember very well feeling that I was dealing with someone who was depressed, who no longer had faith, who did not entertain a desire to find a solution anymore. I, on the other hand, a perky twenty-three-year-old, was telling him that everything would be all right, that things would work themselves out and eventually fall into place. General de Gaulle's call for Resistance, in which I planned on taking part, was ringing in my mind. I professed to Benjamin my certainty in the improbable before any of it came to be—that is, that we did not know then but that came to be. I wasn't very precise or very clear, but I maintained that sense that we could not lose hope definitively.

This feeling has accompanied me through all of my setbacks: during the war, in which I should have lost my skin, and then, much later, during times that seemed terrible to me like the 1980s (Thatcher and Reagan); times in which free market economic policies were infecting and inundating everything, rotting away everything I had fought for.

If hope is our enemy, where does that leave the revolution?

Jean-Claude Carrière is more skeptical than I am. He believes that we must beware of optimism and invites us to follow Bhagavad-Gita who says, "Hope is our enemy." For if we hope for something outside of ourselves to occur, we may very well wait for a long time. If there is a hope, he insists, it can only be hope in ourselves, in our daily toil. "Be the change you want to see in the world", Mahatma Gandhi said.

Let's also remember Thucydides who, peremptory, impels us to choose, "Do nothing or be free"—by which he means that being free is a constant fight. If we do nothing, we shall be engulfed by greed and ambition, all the pettiness and mediocrity that surrounds us. We will be swallowed whole, engulfed, and it will result in a world crisis. Therefore we should, on the modest level of our little individual paths, work and fight tirelessly. That's the first condition. And we should start in our own backyard. The worst thing is for the change we seek today to be imposed upon us tomorrow, all-encompassing, without the necessary upheaval.

To use, as an example, the Arab revolutions, it is evident that the fall of tyrants and the people's aspiration to liberty—people we had considered culturally and politically doomed to still suffer under the yoke of their predatory *râiis* ²⁸ for many years—are to be celebrated. But the true challenge is now. How can we take advantage of this moment and this change in history without falling back into the same problems? What will happen? Where are the men of law, the legislators so desperately needed there immediately?

In my tiny bestseller, I attempt to consider despair and hope in the light of one another. But to me it seems that despair is simply a way in which to make a problem insolvable. And yet, it is with despair that there is the possibility for hope or, let's say, for an engagement; something Sloterdijk calls *exercise* or *asceticism*. As it so happens, asceticism can be a way of renouncing many useless things in favor of a focus on other, more important ones. I am firmly convinced that this type of

exercise is a notion that would resonate well with a Buddhist mindset, for we find in these ideas the notion, an increased awareness that the problems dealt us aren't simply to be viewed as needing to be resolved; but that they must be accepted, digested, and slowly integrated in order to become solutions.

But in the same impulse, such problems can torment us, shock, and cause upheaval. And it is impossible not to react. We find evidence of this in one of the fundamental teachings attributed to Buddha, and which is actually the basis of Buddhism itself (you will find it in all Buddhist schools throughout all of history and across the world): *expect everything from yourself*. *Gnothi seauton* or *Know Thyself*, is a similar precept found inscribed at the Temple of Apollo at Delphi.

According to Jean-Claude Carrière, there can be no other form of hope since no divine being is going to come and resolve our problems. And from the moment we believe in an outside source of help, whether from a transcendent or supernatural power, we are lost.

The most common reaction to unacceptable situations, in our Western mind, is a revolution. A certain kind of youth has, at different moments throughout history, had a tendency to believe that a revolution is the alpha and omega of all political action. Since we're on the topic, I'd like to suggest to those people to become interested in Dany Cohn-Bendit's tale of "his" May '68 revolution. [29](#) I believe there are different ways in which to take action, ways which do not necessarily take place on the streets, but which are achieved through the support of well-intentioned, educated men and women who help put in place more than mere legislation.

First, let's ask ourselves, what is a revolution? What is a reform? What is non-violence and progress through non-violence? Forgive me for looking for answers we already have, and I apologize if this sounds cliché, but I must insist on the fact that the outcome of the revolutions of the twentieth century wasn't good. It is obvious now that those movements, whatever their legitimacy and justifications, resulted more often in excesses, despotism, tyrannies, and dictatorships in the name of ideologies which fancied themselves, undoubtedly, grandiose for all of the world's men. The Russian revolution was a phase, an ideal, and as such, brought a lot to the conscience of men. But its actualization into totalitarian oppression is by no means enviable and gulags must be condemned with the same vehemence as all camps in which torture is practiced. This idea of a revolution has somewhat lost its appeal.

Despair overcome

I cried, "Time for outrage!" and it was heard. But, in the end, the most useful message I have for generations to come is a message of courage and resilience. [Georges] Bernanos said, "What we need is hope. And the highest form of hope is despair overcome." And it is true. Faced with the unacceptable, outrage is not sufficient. Not only because Spinoza is right when he claims that it is an unhealthy emotion since it contains hatred. He advises to not become outraged, to not mock, or cry, but to understand instead. Imagine a xenophobe and his becoming outraged at the number of foreigners in his country. There are a thousand stupid, ridiculous, and unhealthy types of outrage.

It's only when the outcome of outrage is a movement toward action that outrage is justified. Even Spinoza admitted that understanding must be accompanied by emotion, as long as it is under the control of rationality. This goes for outrage too. Outrage in and of itself is not a sign of lucidity. It must be accompanied by the correct knowledge of what merits outrage. Outrage cannot emancipate

itself from the intelligence of the world—otherwise, it runs on empty. I remain puzzled by the speed at which my little praise of outrage met its success. And even if we recognize how right it struck French society—and far beyond too—it must not constitute a culmination. Rather, a beginning.

In a society like our own, the (good) reasons for outrage are many, but it would be dishonest to let you believe that outrage is enough to improve a situation.

Outrage remains, however, a positive first step. It is good to rise up, to become aware, to come out of a certain kind of more-or-less resigned indifference, or despondency, and to say to ourselves that it is possible to resist and to fight against what moves us. But it is only just a step in the larger plan of pulling the alarm, “the beginning of the way.” This moment in which we are jolted must not prevent our faith in progress. We should never underestimate our ability to accomplish great, just, and important tasks. Who cares if our initial efforts do not result in much? If engagement in this or that cause has not been crowned with success, if we must go back to the drawing board...?

What we must say to ourselves, then, is that our efforts were only a first step and that future circumstances can evolve and become more favorable. I don't deny it's hard to accept such failing. And therein lies my main regret: that I am somewhat able to express myself, but not able to transform my words into actions. I have been involved, many times, in international mediations, and most of the time, those mediations have failed at first. But then they were undertaken a second, and a third time. I sometimes think that they were inefficient and had no decisive impact. The transition from dialogue to reality is, of course, very difficult—especially for someone who is not a political rat, or even a statesman. I can only hope, therefore, that someone might read this book and realize that it is not enough to put forth messages full of hope and faith. Instead, they might realize that those messages need to be taken up by men and women of courage who will not let the difficulties they will doubtless encounter undo them in their attempt at making those values discussed here prevail and be actualized.

The courage of resilience in the face of chaos

To illustrate our refusal at resigning ourselves, let us look back on recent history, namely on the last decade of the twentieth century from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the election of George W. Bush. Many causes have progressed. There was the conference of Rio in 1992, the one in Vienna, in 1993, then Copenhagen in 1994, and Beijing in 1995. All of the world's states were represented during those summits at which it was observed and proven that progress, at least as it pertained to the environment, to human rights, and to the place and role of women in the world, could be made.

That decade really marked an increase in momentum toward the realization of what global challenges we faced. It's during that period, namely, that we realized to what an extent the problem of the environment was paramount. Some think that the 1990s marked the start of a deterioration of the consciences, which would range from a frenzied individualism to a loss of ideals; but that is not what was experienced.

It is certain that, while a newfound freedom was triumphing in Central and Eastern Europe, the reigning freemarket economy (in the tradition of the Chicago School of Economics) was unfortunately taking the world economy by storm, moving quickly toward deregulation.

In 1993, the last conference of the United Nations on human rights was held in Vienna; a conference during which I had the privilege of presiding over the French delegation. It is there that the

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