

“The Political Test” An Interview with Claude Lefort

Pierre ROSANVALLON

This interview was recorded in May 2009 at the République des Idées forum on “Reinventing Democracy” in Grenoble.

Pierre Rosanvallon: This conversation will be an opportunity for Claude Lefort and me, by considering the questions we have chosen together, to revisit some of the major themes of his work, in addition to exploring a number of questions he has been thinking about more recently. To present Lefort is, I think, to present a set of unique traits. His thought and its relationship to society are characterized, I believe, by a number of singularities and particularities. First, Lefort’s work must be considered as that of an involved philosopher. He has never thought that philosophy, to put it crassly, means to work by yourself in your room. He has always thought, to the contrary, that being a philosopher means working together. It is work that always entails interpretation and an engagement with events. He believes that the political philosopher must read everyone whose work is required to understand the present. For if Lefort turned to Machiavelli, if he turned to the thinkers of the American and French Revolutions, if he turned to the great writers of the Wars of Religion, like La Boétie, if he has turned more recently to the great nineteenth-century liberals, it is because the philosophy of these authors was nurtured on the interpretation of the political, social, and religious problems they faced. Lefort’s thought seems invariably preoccupied with and tied to events.

Lefort’s thought is also a sustained reflection on emancipation. For many philosophers of his generation, the critique of capitalism was the only horizon against which they could see the world. While acknowledging the connections between his thought and Marxism, Lefort always believed that emancipation should not be limited to the critique of capitalism and exploitation, and that the institution of individuals, the constitution of their dignity, and the forms through which the collective is established must be considered in all their autonomy.

A third trait of Lefort’s thought is that it was forged through confrontations with abyss and cowardice. It confronted the abyss in that most of his oeuvre is dedicated to thinking about the question of democracy from the standpoint of its opposite, its absolute negation: totalitarianism. But his thought also drew strength from a ruthless critique of cowardice, of feeble-minded thinking. While he never ceased to identify with our country’s left, he has always been a merciless critic of the left’s simplistic frameworks and tacit disavowals.

I also think that Lefort’s work is characterized by the kind of position—I would say “posture,” if the word were not ambiguous—that his work represents. His thought is lucid without ever being disenchanted; it is radically lucid without ever making blind commitments. In this demanding thought, two imperatives have always been connected: to resist easy solutions while always emphasizing the importance of imagination. His work, as I see it, is simultaneously a form of writing, a style, and a method. One of the books Lefort published in the 1990s is an essay collection, *Writing: The Political Test*. In the book’s preface, he

emphasizes how close the writer's task is to the philosopher's. What connects them, in his view, is the fact that writing must not be engulfed by an ocean of opinion nor blinded by the impact of events. Writing is thus inseparable from a particular relationship to reality, which risks degenerating into a simplistic idea, a form of ideology. It is always open to that which presents itself as a questioning, a problem, as something that remains open-ended.

We will end this brief introduction with a few sentences from the preface to *Writing: The Political Test*. The political philosopher, Lefort writes, "doesn't wish to furnish arguments to persons whom he holds to be adversaries, imbeciles, or devotees of a doctrine, nor does he wish to seduce others who are in a rush to grasp one or another of his formulas, and, without understanding him, hasten to make themselves his supporters while making him the hero of a cause. For him, quite particularly," Lefort continues, "writing is therefore facing up to a risk [*l'épreuve d'un risque*]; and the risky test he faces offers him the resources for a singular form of speech that is set in motion by the exigency that he spring the traps of belief and escape from the grips of ideology, bringing himself always beyond the place where one expects him via a series of zig-zag movements that disappoint by turns the various sections of his public."¹ I believe that in this difference, this prudence in relation to his critical as much as his enthusiastic readers, thought is truly exercised.

Without further ado, I would like to thank Claude Lefort for accepting the invitation of the République des Idées forum on "Reinventing Democracy." We will begin our conversation by thinking about the origins of democracy. An entire branch of Lefort's work is devoted to reflecting on the nature of democracy, but this reflection is inseparable from his work on the history, origins, and what one might call the foundational experiences of democracy. There are three positive and negative experiences that seem to me to have particularly captured his attention. He explored the first kind quite recently, notably in an article published in the journal *Esprit* in 2002, I believe, which considers the invention or the advent of the modern city. It is no accident that much of his work deals with Machiavelli, for Machiavelli's work is inseparable from Florence's life and organizational difficulties, just as Rousseau's cannot be separated from Geneva or Spinoza's from Amsterdam. Secondly, we will consider another experience that was fundamental for Lefort, his work on the revolutionary experience in France and the United States. Finally and thirdly—this is perhaps the aspect of his work that is best known—we have the negative and destructive experience that goes by the name "totalitarianism." Going in chronological order, I think that we can begin by examining together the first point, the way in which you understand the experience of the first European and Italian cities as experiences that are constitutive of "being-together" and which thus, one might say, set the stage for the very concept of a democratic political community.

Claude Lefort: First, I would like to thank you for this generous—too generous—introduction, which I find intimidating. I hope our conversation will be fruitful. It is true that I have recently examined the origins of democracy and we know that, for Tocqueville, the origin of democracy is the equality of conditions. We all know that universal suffrage, popular sovereignty, and the separation of powers are democracy's constitutive principles, but for some time I have been obsessed with one question: where does the equality of conditions come from? How did it begin? In short, Tocqueville betrays his sociological instincts by

¹ Claude Lefort, "Author's Preface," in *Writing: The Political Test*, trans. David Ames Curtis (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), xli.

not limiting himself to defining democracy as a regime, since he immediately advances the social concept of the equality of conditions. Yet such equality, I believe, could only have occurred in a specific kind of milieu, which must be defined. Both you and I have said that democracy is not only a political regime; it is also a form of society. How does the equality of conditions originate in a certain kind of society?

I could have addressed this much earlier since, after all, I was born in Paris and have spent my entire life in Paris. I am a child of the city. I believe that in European cities, new relationships were formed that completely broke as much with the Roman or Athenian republics as with the hierarchical system, founded on the distinction between the great and the common, that was feudal society. In the work of Marc Bloch, one of the great historians of our age—a historian, but also a sociologist and a philosopher—particularly his great book on feudal society,² I discovered the idea that the city marks a radical break with the period's hierarchical system. Cities, he goes so far as to say, are places that makes you free. He analyzes the development of the medieval commune, the creation of communal government, and shows their distinguishing traits: the communal oath, for instance, is an oath of equality. He shows what makes the form of “being-together” found in cities radically distinct. By cities, he means, as can be seen from a few important examples, Anvers, Amsterdam at various periods, Florence, and Geneva—places that at various epochs would become world metropolises and, in particular, major immigration destinations and commercial capitals. They were places where equality certainly did not prevail, but where everyone was in contact with everyone else. In one of his books, Le Goff says something amusing: the city is where “the priest crosses paths with the prostitute and where the merchant crosses path with ...” This mixture, this “entanglement” [*intrication*], as Tocqueville calls it, of conditions is characteristic of the modern city and which flourished at various periods. These cities had a kind of genuine international aspiration, as one sees in Spinoza's Amsterdam—and it is no coincidence that Spinoza was one of democracy's first philosophers. And then there is Florence, which has long interested me, since my discovery long ago, of an oeuvre that at first troubled me, which struck me as strange and contradictory—Machiavelli's. Machiavelli, incidentally, was an eminent figure in Florence without ever having held any title other than that of Secretary of the Chancery, despite the fact that he was actually an ambassador, sent several times to France, that he took decisions, and advised the gonfalonier on major issues during times of tension with Florence. Yet Machiavelli is the thinker of social division. He was the first to propose, with great clarity, the idea that the people share a national identity, as well as the idea of a distinction between the people and the powerful, and the idea that great politics, as well as the Prince's politics, were fundamentally dependent on the people's actions. The city was a place where the people are free, where the people was alive and could exert pressure on power. When power does not depend on the people, we are living in a tyranny. Machiavelli's two books, one on Livy's *Discourses* and the other on the prince, obey the same mechanism. If the prince wants to assert himself and to preserve (for example) the state, he must turn to the people rather than to the powerful. The republic is fundamentally the regime that accepts social division.

Let me return to cities. Beginning with Machiavelli, I studied Florence's history. It is an extraordinary city which did not, at its origins, lock itself into a kind of oligarchy, as did Venice. There, the great were the powerful families that had divided the council among themselves once and for all. Florence was a milieu in which conflict developed and where,

² *La Société féodale*, 2 vol., 1939-1940 (dernière réédition chez Albin Michel, en un seul volume, en 1998)

moreover, there was extensive immigration of so-called *novi cives*—“new citizens” who, through their social condition and openness created new kinds of relationships in Florentine society. This is one of the main reasons—it is important to remind ourselves of it—for Florentine capitalism, for the extraordinary commercial expansion of a city known throughout Europe. In Florence, we clearly see not democracy—Machiavelli cannot be called a democrat, nor can Florence be described as the first democratic city—but a city where hierarchy did not exist. It was a city where there was a mixture of conditions, which, on this basis, flourished in all respects, intellectually, socially...

Pierre Rosanvallon: Was it a multicultural society, to use contemporary terminology?

Claude Lefort: Yes, it was a multicultural society.

Pierre Rosanvallon: And was it capitalistic?

Claude Lefort: Yes, Florence was a multicultural society, to use contemporary terminology, and it was indeed capitalistic. And again, it was a beacon, which attracted many immigrants. It was a place where new citizens lived alongside very wealthy patricians. And yet, despite such difference, a new kind of social experiment played out. This is why it interests me. But the same could be said about Amsterdam—I won't go into it—where Descartes lived for twenty years. For him, Amsterdam was the city of Spinoza, the first philosopher of democracy. Perhaps more than Florence at a certain period, Amsterdam became the center of global commerce. In this way, the world of the city allows us to reconsider a question that is traditionally tied to the birth of popular sovereignty.

Pierre Rosanvallon: You are saying that the origin of democracy lies not only in the creation of a completely new regime, opposed to the old monarchies or autocracies, but in the emergence of a particular type of society. That is your claim.

Claude Lefort: Exactly.

Pierre Rosanvallon: I understand this claim very well, as it applies perfectly to your examples: the commercial and—let's use the contemporary term—multicultural cities of fifteenth-century Italy and of northern Europe through to the seventeenth century. Yet modern democracy was not, ultimately, born in these cities, which gave birth, I would say, to civic humanism. Modern democracy's foundational revolutions were, rather, the French and American Revolutions. In other words, these cities were an important moment in the process of learning how to be free and in creating a new society, but, at the same time, these experiences did not result in modern democratic regimes. The question I wonder about is this: in both the American and the French Revolutions, the civic ideal was very cut off from multiculturalism, as well as the commercial outlook. To the contrary, in eighteenth-century France, republican virtue was always critical of luxury—in other words, of political economy. Ultimately, the American anti-Federalists also believed that modern democracy should be based on small artisans and farmers, not at all on the modern world. Does this mean that there were, if I can put it this way, two paths to democratic modernity? There was the path of civic humanism, which is undeniable and which you have taught us about, and, on the other—we'll return to it shortly, as it's one of your topics—there was the path of more explicitly political revolutions.

Claude Lefort: This is indeed a very difficult question. I can't decide. I would simply draw your attention to the fact that a lot of time passed before American democracy was proclaimed. In itself, this model demands much reflection. It's not true to say that it consisted of nothing more than small landowners living side by side. In *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*,³ the historian Bernard Bailyn examined a large number of pamphlets—by pamphlets, I mean what we call a pamphlet, but also letters and all kinds of circulating publications—that attest to urban life. Bailyn shows that before democracy asserted itself, ideas and individuals were circulating in new ways. Landowners assembled at town meetings and argued with one another. This is an element that Tocqueville leads us to overlook. Democracy and equality of conditions don't come out of nowhere. Here, too, we can speak of milieus. There is not one milieu called the city. There are milieus here and milieus there which enter into contact with one another. Assemblies are the result. It's more complicated.

Pierre Rosanvallon: Let's return to one of the key idea that you have explored, that democracy's social conditions existed prior to democracy's actual political birth—in other words, prior to popular sovereignty. In Florence, the people existed as a force that had to be reconciled. The prince learned that, to be powerful, he had to show himself to be conciliatory or even obedient to the people. These two powers needed to learn to tame one another. There is what some would call a cynical interpretation of this taming, and a democratic interpretation. The cynical view is that taming the people meant knowing how to manipulate them, and the democratic interpretation holds that it meant ensuring that popular pressure constrained those in power. The entire history of Machiavelli interpretation oscillates between these two interpretations. In the people's relationship with power, was it power that was manipulating the people or the people that placed limits on power? At present, one can say that those who govern us need, in the midst of an election campaign need to reconcile themselves with the people and, at the same time, if not later, to find the means to manipulate or at least to cajole it—to seduce it and, by controlled means, to seduce it through directed goals, to curry its favor.

Claude Lefort: When Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*, he was supposedly addressing a prince. The regime had changed, having become a monarchy. But he was also addressing an audience of young republicans. Machiavelli writes that if the prince relied on the powerful people to whom he owed his throne, he would fail. He would only have freedom of action in his military initiatives if he relied on the people and respected the powerful. You spoke of a ruse and, in a way, he sees the prince's action as a ruse. A popular prince is one who has not absurdly rested his power on an aristocracy, but one who is clever enough to preserve his freedom of action by relying on the people. In this case, the powerful, to put it simply, abase themselves. Furthermore, there is also the republic, which is something altogether different: for Machiavelli, the people, through their ability to resist, are not only a positive and productive factor, as in *The Prince*. The people do not hold power, but by making demands, by asserting themselves, and by growing through immigration nevertheless become the decisive factor in shaping the republic's politics and foreign policy.

Pierre Rosanvallon: Perhaps even an indirect factor.

³ Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press

Claude Lefort: Absolutely. Machiavelli says so in one book after another: the people want not to be oppressed, while the powerful want to oppress. It's that radical and simple: the people do not want to be oppressed, so they must be able to fight oppression.

Pierre Rosanvallon: So what we have here is an emancipatory vision.

Claude Lefort: It's an emancipatory vision that is completely free of any conception of popular sovereignty. In other words, for Machiavelli, democracy cannot be defined as popular sovereignty: in the beginning, there is conflict, and the progressive force is the people, who are born from their ability to exert pressure.

Pierre Rosanvallon: The people must not become a negative power; in other words, the people must not become a rebellious power. Ultimately, the political philosophy of that time says that to win over the people is simply to ensure their consent. Their will is their consent, the fact that they don't rebel. So one might say that it's a vision...

Claude Lefort: No, I don't agree with your way of putting it. Machiavelli believes that the people must exert pressure, the people must be active. What matters is not that the people are oppressed, but the fact that they fight oppression.

Pierre Rosanvallon: Today, we would say that the people are counter-democrats.

Claude Lefort: Precisely.

Pierre Rosanvallon: The second democratic experience consists of the foundational revolutions, the American and French Revolutions. In these cases, we not only find the people acting as a counter-democratic power, but the positive idea of popular sovereignty. And this idea of the people's positive sovereignty will identify its central institution: universal suffrage. How do you analyze the shift from the people as a counter-democratic force to popular sovereignty, to the people as a positive force?

Claude Lefort: Your question is one that interests me greatly. We might think that popular sovereignty, the establishment of the principle of popular sovereignty, implies a conception or image of the "people united." The "people" no longer means society's lowest ranks, below the powerful; it now encompasses all conditions. Yet through universal suffrage, the "people united" are periodically interrogated. Their very mobility is asked to express itself. This means that the people are united, but that one must always return to them to determine what their unity is. But what is universal suffrage's function? Its function—if not its principle—is to mobilize society. It's an important moment in which each individual is summoned to find an outlet for his opinion. As a result, it's a society into the midst of which associations and party organizations are thrown, which become so many decision-making centers. In this way, the "people united," the sovereign people become a people whose identity is unclear. Furthermore, because of regular voting, those who are in power today are not in power tomorrow, just as what we call the people today is not necessarily what we'll call it tomorrow.

Pierre Rosanvallon: In support of what you're saying, I would point out that it is striking that the question of how to represent the people was posed in the iconography of the French and American Revolutions. Painters and engravers were unable to represent the people. Ultimately, they reached an agreement of sorts: near the bridge at the tip of the Ile de la Cité, they built an enormous plaster colossus with a banner that read "the people," in order to show

that the people was something massive, something that dominated society. They want to create an image of its grandeur. Representing the people was a crucial question in the history of democracies.

Claude Lefort: Of course, since the people cannot be represented [*infigurable*]. This point, if you will, allows me to connect two ideas. The first, which I have explored for many years, is that democracy is a society in which power is not incorporated into the social. This is easy to understand: in monarchies and aristocracies, power appeared to be rooted in nature (that is, “nature” in quotation marks).

Pierre Rosanvallon: It was felt to be divine.

Claude Lefort: Exactly. However, the people are also a social level, those who are “below.” Suddenly, the “people united” must be explored so that it can reveal itself in all its sovereignty; and to be explored, it must be mobilized. Once again, political parties exist because of universal suffrage. Every institution, as well as exercised power—government, authority—must be periodically put back into play. Power, in other words, belongs to no one—an idea I have explored for some time.

Pierre Rosanvallon: This is your famous idea of power as an “empty space,” which is the core of your thought.

Claude Lefort: Yes. There is an empty space. Because in every society in which power exists, power has a space—if not the hands of men, in the hands of god. So power cannot be incarnated, it cannot be incorporated into society. Power can, however, be exercised; it lives...

Pierre Rosanvallon: There are lots of candidates to occupy the emptiness. That is the problem...

Claude Lefort: Yes, we agree. But the two things I want to connect are, on the one hand, the people, who are composite, multiple, and conflictual, and, on the other, power, which belongs to no one. These are the two things that we must understand, I believe, to grasp democracy’s nature.

Pierre Rosanvallon: Your thought deals with people and democracy, but politicians who have represented the people have rarely embraced your definition of democracy and this is a historical problem, too.

Claude Lefort: It’s not in their interest to do so.

Pierre Rosanvallon: You could say that there is entire tradition that led to this idea. For instance, during the French Revolution, Condorcet was not far off from the idea that no one can occupy power and that only an array of partial occupations can offer an approximate image of it. For Condorcet, the people cannot be represented, but, like an animated image, one can offer an approximate image of the people by superimposing several different images. A number of nineteenth-century liberals also come close to this idea. But it is seen rather as a way of discrediting the idea of sovereignty rather than as a means for building democracy. Herein lies the problem.

Claude Lefort: I would say—but these terms obviously require definition—that we need to distinguish between the symbolic and the real. Power has shifted from one to the other. Whatever the majority opinion might be, whether it brings such-and-such a government or individual to power, whether it is a *de facto* power—this doesn't mean that there isn't another, essential dimension to power, which I call the symbolic dimension. This power can thus not be realized, which is why I speak, more simply, of a power belonging to no one. Moreover, the connection between universal suffrage and the idea of an excavation of society strikes me as very interesting.

Pierre Rosanvallon: Universal suffrage really has two dimensions. The first consists in the consecration of equality: in other words, all voices and arguments are equally valid; the wise and futile, those who have thought deeply and those who vote impulsively or emotionally are of equal value, as no one can be the judge of what constitutes a good argument. One dimension of universal suffrage is thus this way in which it constructs equality, and, in this sense, a very radical equality. At the same time, universal suffrage is also a result, i.e., a vote count. While the egalitarian dimension produces a form of society—for to say that the principle of equality is constitutive is to posit a radical equivalence—with vote counts, each time the results are announced, we see what I would call popular cacophony, revealing the people's divisions and problematic character.

Claude Lefort: Voting is indeed about numbers, but this doesn't necessarily mean, as one might say, from a Tocquevillian perspective, that one counts individuals. No, it's more complicated than that: there are the numbers, but, at the same time, there is also the sudden revelation of social plurality. People vote because their hearts makes them lean a certain way, because they're on the left or the right, or because they think some little fellow is really nice, no matter how ugly he might be. And there is something else: opinions are conduits for unions, parties, associations, and neighborhoods. At a given moment, all of this emerges.

Pierre Rosanvallon: That's very clear, but at the same time, it took a while to arrive at the idea that voting revealed diversity or division. For a long time, it was believed that a good democracy was one that expressed the people's unity. Until the end of the Second Empire, there were villages that voted almost unanimously, as if the expression of a dissident voice or the existence of concurrent groups were an act of aggression against the social body itself.

Claude Lefort: Yes, that was true of agricultural regions. But at the same, there were political parties and social division emerged: the workers' movement, the proletariat, the bourgeoisie...

Pierre Rosanvallon: You're right about that. You could say that the ideal of unanimity had a strong presence in traditional territorial communities, but was weak in cities. Cities were always places where division was in fact accepted.

To move forward, let's start over again with the fundamental concept of the empty space. Can't one understand—I think this is the point of your approach—totalitarianism in its relationship to the empty space? Totalitarianism is a forced and even fanatical effort to fill the empty space. Can you summarize how this idea developed in your thought?

Claude Lefort: How it came to *me*? That's simple! I thought you were talking about its development through history. History is more difficult.

Pierre Rosanvallon: Tonight, history is Lefort!

Claude Lefort: I can answer that easily, since, at an early age, I was a Marxist. I discovered Marx when I was eighteen. The class struggle, the proletariat—I was dazzled, and this lasted some time. But I joined a party on the extreme left, i.e., a Trotskyist party. On that basis, as a radical anti-communist, I began to think about this new regime, totalitarianism. In 1981, I wrote a book entitled *L'invention démocratique* [Democratic Invention]. It's a collection of essays and—surprise, surprise—only one was about democracy. The rest dealt with totalitarianism, because for me, as a young Marxist who was detached from the CP, totalitarianism was the enigma. I realized that this regime was not, contrary to what the Trotskyists believed, a degenerated workers' state. I wasn't a total idiot and I found Trotskyist activism pretty Marxist. There was also their unconditional defense of the Soviet Union—unconditional because the Trotskyists believed you had to distinguish the good base (the abolition of capitalism and property) from the bad superstructure (Stalin and the Communist Party). Fortunately I was sharp enough to realize quite quickly that this was absurd. Next, I met Castoriadis who, like me, was absolutely critical of the Soviet Union and who accepted the idea that the Soviet system was state capitalism. In short, we remained within a Marxist framework—capitalism was the enemy, but the means of production had been taken over by the state. It took me some time, but not too long, to realize that this was absurd, that the USSR's power system could not be reduced to state capitalism. In fact, the great novelty was power's capacity, via the single party, to be omnipresent. I say single party, but it was much more than a single party, as its tentacles extended throughout the social body. Stalin's importance as an individual is well known. But at the same time, this power circulated through society's every channel.

A little while ago I alluded to Kravchenko's 1948 book, *I Chose Freedom*, which immediately provoked the indignation of the left, or a large majority of the left, including the intellectual left, notably many people I was very close to. In 1948, Merleau-Ponty let me write an article for *Les temps modernes*, in which I said the Kravchenko's book was incredibly revealing, but he added a note saying that this was Lefort's personal opinion. For Sartre, political books didn't exist, he didn't know what they were... Kravchenko upset the entire left. I still recommend reading it today because it's not at all a theoretical critique of the Soviet regime, it's his own story—the story of a clever worker's son who, rising in the social hierarchy, became an engineer and lived in a world of informers. The party was everywhere, so spies were everywhere, without even going into what was known then and now about the great purges of the thirties, in which the peasantry was killed by the hundreds of thousands. The Red Terror had a mythical quality. There's still an abundant literature about it. What I wanted to explain was that the party didn't only give execution orders from above—thousands of people were executed. It was also a rotten society where, because someone hated you or was jealous of you, you risked suddenly being called an anti-communist or an enemy of the people. You know that there were millions in Soviet concentration camps; many had done nothing more than say something they shouldn't have said. It must be that the vast majority of these people were purely and simply innocent.

Pierre Rosanvallon: At the same time, this analysis of totalitarianism emphasizes the fact that this oppressive power, this destructive power, is a society-power, which imposes itself on society, but which enjoys some degree of consent. It is a power that is both internal and external. It grabs and holds onto the pincers.

Claude Lefort: You're absolutely right. You can't omit this kind of acquiescence or complicity on the part of the population. It is terrible to say, even if it's true, because it means that the population was mostly corrupt. Not only because it consisted of informers, because it consisted of people who were passive and respected power.

Pierre Rosanvallon: It was a society that never experienced equal conditions, a radically anti-democratic society. To move the discussion forward, let's consider your analysis of totalitarianism, which you developed beginning in the late forties. It became visible in the seventies, with the publication of Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* and one of your most influential books, *Un homme en trop* [A Man Too Many], which is a commentary on *The Gulag Archipelago*. At the time there were a few of us who were reading your work, who were inspired by it. Your work became, in a sense, the philosophical reference point for what became known as the "anti-totalitarian left." During these years, how did you understand the extraordinary reticence of the left—and not only the communists—to accept totalitarianism and define what I would call an anti-totalitarian democratic socialism? The struggle was very difficult and there was very powerful resistance to these analyses of totalitarianism. There were even moments when people we assumed to be moderate socialisms lost their temper over Solzhenitsyn. How did you experience all this? How did you interpret it?

Claude Lefort: Solzhenitsyn fascinated me and I had not the slightest doubt about the truth of his account. It was very different from Kravchenko, since Kravchenko was a Soviet bureaucrat, which was not at all the case with Solzhenitsyn, who had been in a concentration camp. His testimony was indisputable. Yet even by then—this was 1973—much of the left saw Solzhenitsyn as a religious and conservative figure, who on top of everything was an idealist. Resistance to Solzhenitsyn in those years was very strange.

Pierre Rosanvallon: What's your analysis of this strangeness? How do you explain it?

Claude Lefort: The Socialist Party had an alliance with the Communist Party. The socialists never understood anything about the communists.

Pierre Rosanvallon: No, they were anti-Soviet.

Claude Lefort: They were anti-Soviet. But in 1936 they were duped, they were betrayed by the communists in 1936, despite the fact that population was experiencing a great egalitarian *élan*. They learned nothing. Mitterrand still found a way to ally himself with the communists. He did not understand the USSR.

Pierre Rosanvallon: Yes, at the very moment you published *Un homme en trop*, Mitterrand was visiting Hungary and marveled at the regime's success. You write a famous article about this incident. For my generation, your significance was twofold. First, of course, there was your analysis of totalitarianism. But your point was not simply to criticize a regime, but to make a fresh start in thinking about democracy. The strength of your analysis consists in showing that understanding totalitarianism was a necessary condition for democratic enrichment and that democracy could only flourish if one grasped the inner workings of its pathologies and its most terrible negation.

Claude Lefort: Yes, certainly. For me, rediscovering democracy did not for one moment mean downplaying inequalities or idealizing it. It meant being aware that we live in a society in which there are opportunities for development, in which there is social mobility, which

continues to exist despite unemployment. We must see democracy as a space of conflict, a space in which one must know how to make objections. At present, you are at the cutting edge of ideas about associating against inequality. This is absolutely essential. But whatever these criticisms, however sharp they might be, we cannot detach ourselves from this regime and treat it as a regime like any other. Either we will manage to change democracy from inside through the power of spontaneous mobilization, or it will die. This is another issue that it is too late to speak about. The fact of the matter is that there is reason to fear the recent disappearance of great social conflicts. The polarization of society was important for preserving its vitality. Now, industrial society has been transformed, capitalism still exists, but there is no longer what could be circumscribed as the inequality's malevolent agents. Things have grown much more complicated.

Pierre Rosanvallon: They can't be personalized in the same way. There was a lot of discussion, in the workshop on capitalism, of all the mechanisms that the financial economy has developed, such as securitization: it's not simply a social group, it's a mechanism of abstraction, one might say, which severs society and produces the dramatic inequalities with which we are all familiar. The mode of production of inequalities has changed character, because these days it is increasingly expressed, from what can see these days in many places in France, including Grenoble, in test communities at certain critical moments. It is also experienced much more in the form of shared trajectories than in a generalized, routine, and daily membership in something known as the working class. It is embodied in moments, experiences, in trajectories, in similar histories, in solidarity. It thus takes on very different faces and forms.

Claude Lefort: In a sense, that's very positive. But in another sense, one might fear that society could demobilize itself, perhaps due to an erosion of opposition. We should fear a power that puts society to sleep, a power that does not consult people and makes reforms in certain areas—education, the judicial system—without any mobilization on the part of concerned parties. We should fear a society that allows itself to be modeled by an authority that, previously, would have been inconceivable.

Pierre Rosanvallon: Indeed, this path is completely apparent. But don't we, as the producers of ideas, as intellectuals, have a responsibility? We must make these problems and mechanisms more visible, more palpable, for the phenomena of apathy can in part be explained by the sense that we have no handle on reality, a sense of opacity, a sense of not understanding, a sense that the world is falling away from us. To understand the world is already, from a certain perspective, to change it. The relationship between interpretation and action, as you well know, is an idea that neither one of us invented; it's one of the great issues in Marxism. So, Claude, are you making a plea that we return to Marxism?

Claude Lefort: How insincere of you!

Pierre Rosanvallon: I know of a definition that is maximally sympathetic to Marxism: social critique's radical effort to understand. Can you handle that?

Claude Lefort: In that case, yes, without reservation.

Pierre Rosanvallon: Very good. I would like to conclude, Claude, with a final question. For my generation, you were the anti-totalitarian philosopher, but you were also a very active philosopher, one who was closely tied to May '68. During this time, there developed a

utopian idea, in the positive sense of the term, the idea that one could think differently, the idea that new possibilities could be unlocked—a utopia of unlocked possibilities. It has often seemed to me that you regret that the critique of Marxism and communism has led some to content themselves with a cautious liberalism and to overlook this utopian dimension.

Claude Lefort: '68 was extraordinary year because, as you know, it began with students, an unprecedented collective mobilization. I am surprised every time '68 is presented as ridiculous episode, a moment of weakness. I was a professor at the University of Caen. I've told this story before, the events at Caen began—my students included—the evening before the events at Nanterre began. To witness this sudden liberation of speech, of sovereign speech, was in itself an extraordinary event. It was a new form of socialization, a kind of wild socialization, which could not last. I never hoped for a revolution in '68; some imbeciles have said I did. However, at the time, I did, not quite break, but disagree with Raymond Aron, who saw '68 as an attack on the integrity of the university, adults, Fathers, and so on—everything was thrown into question. In this savage democracy, there was a kind of liberty that, for me, I admit, was extremely precious. Today we caricature '68, either by saying that it was initiated by communists, despite the fact that the communists played no role in it and tried to catch up with the communist youth movement, or that it was an anarchist movement, even though it had no doctrine and was a curious movement which, in a single blow, destabilized a traditional relationships based on authority and hierarchy. '68 was not the caricaturized version of it that is often presented. It was not simply chaos.

Pierre Rosanvallon: Let us then continue, with you, the task of teaching liberty!

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