



Interview with Patrick Viveret: How can we develop to a well-being society?



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Patrick Viveret is a French philosopher, former counselor at the Court of Audit and member of several citizens' movements. In an exclusive interview for the Youth Press Agency, Viveret criticizes our current system and talks about well-being in practice: how can we develop to well-being societies?

YPA: Personally, what does well-being mean to you ?

PV: Personally, what I call well-being is the art of living at the right time. That is to say, it's the art of being fully present to life. It's the fact of saying I cannot live everything, I cannot do everything, but the things I live, I am going to live it intensely. So at this moment I am not seeking happiness in the sense that it has to be an ephemeral happiness or a stroke of luck, or a capital one would be trying to conquer but also afraid to lose. We are living at the wrong time all the same if we prevent ourselves from sorrow when losing a beloved one, for instance. It is really an art of full presence to life, to my mind, and in this respect living at the right time is in the end very synonymous with well-being.

YPA: Considering that the current model of development needs to be changed, on which philosophical bases could we refound it ?

PV: If I start from the great philosopher who considered those issues, who is Spinoza, he highlighted that the big deal is the alternative between, on the one hand Joy and on the other hand Fear, which is at the heart of what he used to call 'sad passions'. Therefore, cultivating the energy of joy is to me the essential element because in the end we have a system – that is the case today, of market capitalism but it is the case of other regimes as well, despotism, religious fundamentalism – when we look deeply at what drives them, it is whether direct fear, whether entertainment in the sense that Blaise Pascal explained, related to those same fears. For instance entertainment in relation to the fear of death, to sickness, to getting old, etc. The whole capitalist

system is deeply an entertainment system. And so the thing to do is to build, on the contrary, a type of movement in which the fundamental energy is joy. It does not mean that this movement will renounce to anger, to indignation, to resistance, etc. But this resistance itself will be a creative resistance and not a desperate rebellion, because it is driven by the energy of joy.

YPA: Among all that has been discussed here, what differences and what similarities do you see in the many ways to depict an alternative – more desirable – global understanding of the world?

PV: First of all something that seems very interesting to me, is that it is clear there is a meeting point between two great historical movements, now setting up a true dialogue of civilization. There are movements coming from modernity, so from the logics of emancipation, human rights and among those human rights for instance women rights, which is absolutely fundamental.

Then, we also have movements coming more from the tradition side: underlining the importance of native people, the importance inside the “bien vivre” cosmovision of the relationships with Mother Earth, etc. The big deal is not to assume a pendulum movement and to say we should just give up on modernity and turn ourselves to the tradition side, which could indeed be a temptation... It is, on the contrary, to launch an open and demanding dialogue, allowing us to take what’s best in the so-called tradition as well as in modernity, and at the same time to determine dark aspects. For instance, within modernity’s bright sides are the freedom of consciousness, emancipation, individuation – which is a whole different thing than individualism – and it is all along human rights and the essential cursor of women rights. But simultaneously the dark side is the process of ‘thingification’, turning nature into a thing, turning the living into a thing, and in the end turning human beings themselves into things through merchandising.

Therefore, we need to keep the best, emancipation, freedom and so on, and at the same time to be critical of the worst. Same thing for traditional societies’ cultures. We could say the best in it is binding, binding with nature, with others – social bonds – and binding spiritually – the question of meaning of life – those are the three points modernity no longer considers. Nonetheless there is also a blind spot within traditional societies, and it is dependence! Because social bound may evolve towards social control, and meaning as well when becoming identity and excluding, can lead to exclusion or war. Even the connection with nature may lead to a form of misanthropic ecology.

So the big deal is to manage, through this open and demanding dialogue, such an alliance of the best of freedom and emancipation with the best of binding, and to be in a creative resistance to the cocktail of the worst. The idea is well expressed by an Indian friend who is often present in the Dialogues in Humanity : “Coca-cola and excision”, meaning on one hand ok, I open my markets, but in exchange you stop bothering me with the rights of women. So this is to my mind the big deal that is being played now, and it is an opportunity through this International Forum for Well-being because, as a matter of fact, well-being forces us to consider the question of the criteria needed to spot what is bright and on the contrary what is dark within those great historical movements.

YPA: Civil societies all over the world try to rethink the democratic system as well. You say the main issue is to restore the ethical and political function of indicators (so we don’t need very sophisticated indicators, only opportunities to debate). But how can we collectively guarantee the possibility to feel completely free to express all conflicts and questions?

PV: First of all, it’s very important to inscribe at the heart of the democratic process itself the question of those debate spaces and to inscribe, therefore, the call for quality in the democratic process. Today, we have a form of democracy that is unsatisfactory because it is delegative and not participative, it is competitive, and it is quantitative. That is to say, basically, through the elections we consider that the person who won the competition has been given a blank check for x years. This process, first, is simplifying and binary... Moreover, when considering the case of § whistleblower § whose importance today is very obvious to guarantee the democratic process. When thinking in quantitative terms in most cases they only represent a very small minority. So we need to introduce quality concerns: for instance the issue of discernment, the issue of wisdom which is a very ancient one and that says a very important thing to reach discernment is the emergence of a superior quality of consciousness. This is what we call within our international network for Dialogues in Humanity, the qualitative mutation of democracy.

And we need to reintroduce inside democratic structures spaces where the determining criteria is the quality of conscience and the quality of wisdom. Not to bore all other criterias but to have in this respect as well an articulation between what’s best in actual democracy – universal suffrage – and the best democratic quality structured around the call for discernment. Starting from here, obviously, deliberation and assessment become determining.

Just like for one person the great ethical detour (how do one makes choice for his own life that are complex choices, because situations are scarcely simple) and the quality of discernment on the political scale (deliberation, assessment) also calls for participation. Nonetheless it is not a form of participation that drives one into collective passions or moody movements, because this could create regressive forms as well. It is participation but to serve a higher quality of conscience.

YPA: While trying to turn violence into conflict, what about the emotional part of misunderstandings ? What can we do to make sure that participants will feel entirely free to express all conflicts?

PV: One of the tools that we already experiment in citizen networks is called construction of disagreements. That works from the hypothesis that what is toxic is not disagreeing but misunderstandings, in the strong sense of the word... including all collateral damages such as suspicion and trial of intent.

The problem is that at some point part of a group feels it hasn't been heard and so it has the feeling of being despised, or even humiliated. This is what produce, afterwards, dangerous metastasis. In a disagreement-building exercise, as we had spotted that most misunderstandings come from the emotional rather than the intellectual sphere, we start with moving debates techniques. We take keywords from a debate and we ask the group to position in a four-edges play: if one feels good with the word he goes to one edge, if one feels bad he goes to the front, if in doubt he goes to the third edge, if neutral or indifferent to the last... And to begin with, the idea is simply to listen to each other about the reasons of their feelings.

And so here we will see the group starting to move, in both literal and figurative meanings. We will see that an important part of misunderstanding, because we listen to each other, are going to transform into potential disagreements – but that we are going to build – or very often into agreements, that we will record as such and it will allow groups that may be very divided to be ready to lead common actions about what they thought were disagreements but were really just misunderstandings. For instance during a disagreement-building about marriage for all in France, we obtained that people who were opposed to it – and suspected of homophobia by the other group – declared ready to lead a common campaign against homophobia.

So it will not only allow the debat to move ahead on disagreements now truly identified, but it will also allow actors who were at the first sight identified as belonging to different sides, to act all together, to be a much stronger and to multiply the action's weight, compared to an action led only by the convinced ones. Concretely there are three periods of time: first the group gets out of misunderstandings, with an important work on emotional intelligence; then the interactive part: we get to agree about the terms of the debate. In the third part the participative assembly is very important because debaters are too deep in their contradictions to be able to make that exercise: we ask the participative assembly “what is there, within the position you do not share, that seems particularly receivable and important to consider ?”

Not to change one's mind, not to seek for compromise! Just to say: here I reckon this is a strong point. For instance in a debate on civil nuclear power, the pro-nuclear people had been led to say: we recognize the question of accidental risks and the question of nuclear waste are trues issues; unlike pro-nuclears from the 70s, after Chernobyl, after Fukushima, we can no longer consider the question of accidental risks is a purely theoretical statistical risk. We cannot keep saying that concerning waste, we will eventually figure it out. So it does not change one's mind, because for other fundamental reasons they stayed in favour of civil nuclear power, but we recognize that.

And when we turned to the anti-nuclear side, they ended up saying “even if a government was to declare the way out of nuclear power, we are aware that there will be a whole transition period that will probably last several decades, and during such period of time we know we will be in charge as well of those questions of risks and waste”. So both sides did not look for compromise and even less for consensus, both stayed on their positions but they had a huge common work: to do everything possible to reduce accidental risks, to do everything also to find solutions for nuclear waste. This is just an example among others of what a qualitative mutation could enable. And it is true as well when seeking ways to turn violence into conflict, or ways to transform enemies into adversaries.

YPA: Don't you think getting to really listen to each other takes a lot more time that what most people are currently willing to give, due to our conception of time-give?

PV: It is very important to identify the question of addiction to speed as being one of the major diseases of our societies, and to understand that working on time is on the contrary one of the most powerful strategies of creative resistance and anticipatory emancipation. To stop mistaking the few real emergencies with precipitation. On the contrary, we start to consider true emergencies only when we are in a calm, cold-blooded situation, not when we are on the run... Just like if we want to learn to drive on the ice, it is essential not to feel stressed when approaching danger! In the same fashion that workers movement had led a struggle against hellish rates inside factories, nowadays it has to be – as an object of creative resistance – a struggle against hellish cadences of tensed flows societies. This is why all “slow-type” movements appeared: it was first slow food as a reaction to fast food, and then slow cities in Italy... now about e-mails, and there is also a whole part of the movement that considers slow love, because relationships are also subjected to this logic of performance, excitation, etc.

And this is indeed at the heart of well-being. The art of living at the right time is by excellence an art of the quality of presence to time. And this comes as much from personal transformation as from social transformation. That is why it is important to help each other in this respect, for instance within a movement we could call “let’s cooperate to slow down” – because it is often quite difficult to slow down alone, but if we get collectively organized it is all more simple. Among the network l’Archipel des Jours Heureux (Happy Days citizens’ archipelago) we also initiated a process of time’s gift. We give each other dates but we cancel right before, and as we haven’t had time to program something else, it is a gift of time. And the only thing we ask is that, if on that occasion you have discovered something, seen a movie, read a book, etc. and you feel particularly passionate about it and willing to share, you can make us that gift too.

YPA: One last question about the global structuration of global society : I read you are willing to open, for next World Social Forum, a “humanity security council”. Can you tell us more about this idea and the forms it could assume?

PV: It is indeed a project we discussed during the last World Social Forum in Salvador, Bahia, is part of a global project for world citizenship. The idea is to say let’s stop making that gift to capitalism but above all to big mafias, to the crime economy which is nowadays the true reality of world governance, let’s stop leaving them this gift of globalization. And start moving towards what Edouard Glissant called mondialité [worldality]. For instance for the coming Dialogues in Humanity, one of the main focuses is our country Earth, to say that our people is Humanity, and it does not prevent us from belonging to several people, but at the same time we are all members, all the people of Earth, where soil and nature as well need to be preserved. So we offered to launch this great movement for the emergence of world citizenship, with approaches such as a Wisdom Council – to introduce wisdom within all those debates – and a Security Council of Humanity. Saying “is Humanity threatened?” The answer is, unfortunately, yes. “Does the Security Council of the United Nations take care of it?”

Unfortunately, no. So let’s initiate with what Cornelius Castoriadis calls instituting procedures [...]: “What would happen if we were to create conditions for an actual Security Council, for instance, on topics like military nuclear power, by using the fact that there is a treaty for nuclear weapons’ abolition signed by 122 countries members of the United Nations?” So this is an amazing opportunity, while nuclear countries are doing all what is in their power to prevent it. Afterwards we are also willing to organize a great alliance between civil societies and moral and spiritual authorities on those topics. And we want to make the most of the week of consciences that will be hosted at UNESCO during the month of march 2019, to launch the idea that this week should be a time for higher conscience worldwide... During such an event, the question of the creation of Wisdom councils and Humanity Security Council will be brought into public debate. Right now we have also started exchanging with spiritual authorities, we have an audition with Pope François with an extremely positive feedback. Of course we are going to meet other moral authorities, but it is not negligible to see that ideas like this one are starting to move forward.

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