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## The Crisis, or Abandoning The ‘Politique’

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The financial and economic crisis that has come upon us, however important, or even dramatic it may be on the social plane, is nothing but the tell-tale sign and the symptom of a much more profound “crisis,” revealing, in reality, a change of period, as sometimes occurs in history, as during the 15th and 16th centuries with the Renaissance, and with the advent of modern times.

In such a difficult situation, we must particularly avoid confusing the forest for the trees, realizing that this crisis is masking, in part, the ongoing upheaval in the world today. If we are dealing with the end of one period of history and the beginning of a new one, then we must be careful not to be mistaken in our diagnosis, and not make too many errors in the remedies.

Obviously, the financial crisis has direct causes—political and technical—that we must be able to assess, measure, and understand. There are many lessons to be learned about the errors to be avoided in the coming months. Certainly the financial crisis has economic and social consequences that we must attempt to overcome and contain at all costs.

But most important, in order to understand the mechanism and the gravity of the current crisis, is to place it back in the historical context of the last 50 years, after the end of “European time” in 1945, and before the entrance into the “world time,” in 1990. It is that pivotal period, between 1945 and 1975, which was our “Glorious Thirty Years,” our “*Trente Glorieuses*,” when everything was at stake, and the sundry factors that brought about the present crisis were set into motion.



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*Gen. Eric de la Maisonneuve called for a return to the concept of the politique, which he described as the “‘mast’ of our ship—its superstructure,” which, for centuries, gave meaning and strength to the nation.*

### The Inheritance

In essence, those elements all converged to debase, and then weaken, what had been for centuries in Europe the “mast” of our ship—its superstructure—that which was giving it its meaning and its strength: that is to say, the “*politique*.”<sup>1</sup>

The first of these elements to have weighed down on the *politique*, is the failure, and then, the end, of the ideologies bearing hope, the future, and also utopia. The totalitarian experiments of the 20th Century have brought ruin to most of the great ideas born of European philosophy. They have perverted the political projects these ideas had inspired.

The second element—directly linked to the first—is the seizure of power by “economists,” both those who would theorize and those who would run the economy. They have imposed on populations a solution in place

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1. *Politique* is a specific French term from the time of Henri IV (r. 1559-1610), indicating a ruler who puts the nation ahead of his personal interests. This is reflected in the fact that Henri IV had sacrificed his Protestant belief to become a Catholic for the benefit of the unity of France.

of the disavowed *politique*, which was also a peaceful solution: peace by growth and prosperity. It consisted of attaining happiness—the utopia of ideologies—through well-being, to be inscribed within a concrete, consensual, and effective model of development. In fact, the economists offered bright prospects for achieving the ends of societies by means of permanent growth, and, as an example, for refounding a ruined Europe by means of coal and steel.

This was a pragmatic and solid approach, but starting from the “bottom,” and required therefore, in order to get to the “top,” constant aspiration and stimulation. The political idea of human happiness—the one found in the *Brave New World* of Aldous Huxley—was replaced by the practice of material well-being. In a certain way, the “world of soldiers” was going to be succeeded by the “world of merchants”; better still, the technicians were overtaking the politicians. The technicians of economy imposed this new belief all the more easily once they had relieved the *politique* of one of its royal prerogatives: the control over the currency. They did not rest in pressing their advantage until they succeeded in regulating the economy from the inside of political power. It is that surrender of the *politique* that we are suffering from today.

At all times, the *politique* has had the responsibility for a “project of society.” It had the duty of elaborating it, by embodying it, and making it work, whether because it made its own decisions under authoritarian systems, or because it was the legitimate executor in democratic systems. It is certainly within the implementation of this “project”—which was for a long time, dedicated to the survival of society and to the constitution of its geographical and cultural framework—that the *politique* abused its power and has dragged humanity from one war to another, into a sort of collapse. It is because of this failure (after 1945 especially) that the *politique* was stripped of its sovereign power—to wage war, the *jus ad bellum* (just war)—for the benefit of international authorities—a “thing,” as General de Gaulle would say, speaking of the UNO. That is why “projects of society”—utopian and dangerous—have been replaced by realistic and convincing “growth projects.”

The problem of growth plans is two-fold. First of all, they occasionally set people to dreaming and can, when they are exclusive, uncork revolts, as during May 1968. Furthermore, they contain within themselves their own failure, because growth is not unlimited, and every quantitative system runs up against contradic-



*The French term politique dates from the time of Henry IV (r. 1559-1610), and indicates a leader who puts the common good of the nation ahead of personal interest.*

tions, and in every case, one day, its limitations. Today, we have reached that stage where we are deprived of everything: We no longer have a project of society, and our growth plan is in a breakdown.

### **Some Guidelines for the Future**

What are we to do in such a complex and apparently blocked situation?

Outside of those remedies that are drawn up to serve as a shock absorber or a stopgap in the present crisis, and which would appear debatable as long as the “financial barrel” seems bottomless, we must rethink the essentials of how societies function, and, acting within a framework imposed by globalization, of the global society which is our humanity. Which means that it is indispensable not only to coordinate corrective measures, but also to seek a global consensus to reconstruct what is called, somewhat abusively, “the international community.”

Absorbing the shock of the crisis means, first of all, that we do not mortgage the future with a colossal debt or with demagogic measures; in both cases the tab

would be heavy. The threat of social explosions is, in fact, very real, as the recent incidents in the Antilles indicate.

We must consider how to reconstruct effective and democratic socio-political structures that permit: first of all, to reestablish a “project of society,” and, in doing so, to return the *politique* to its legitimate place; second, we must restore the technical services—important, even essential, but secondary—the various technical services, beginning with finance, and do it that much better, and faster, because those services hold the key on which our future depends, notably for the development of human potential and for the survival of the planet.

In our classical systems, these structures of society have always been vertical structures, where the “top,” that is to say, the *politique*, would impose its point of view on the “bottom.” This system has been discredited, not only because of the debasement of the *politique*, but mostly because of the emergence of the bottom, whether it is represented by the citizens in each country, or is symbolized, at the world level, by developing nations in Africa and Asia, notably China and India. It is surprising that, in 2009, these two demographic giants—and economic, in the case of China—are not admitted with full rights into the G7, the leading club of the planet.

In reality, in each of our nations, as well as on the international level, we speak of democracy with abandon, but we never put it into practice, in concrete terms. What I venture to propose is that we finally put into place the structures that would allow for the normal exercise of democracy.

This process of considering the “bottom” seems to be the only feasible way of allowing the elaboration of a new project of society. Without doubt, a project whose foundation must be that which is common to all humanity—bearing especially on the very survival and dignity of man—and based on the aspirations acknowledged as universal. And also without doubt, a project whose other aspects acknowledge the right of peoples to diversity. In all, to find a ratio of equilibrium between the numerator of diversity and the denominator of commonality.

In French society, for example, when the social bomb must be defused before it explodes, the convening of the “Estates General,” according to the formula of 1789, would permit citizens the ability to express themselves by other means than in the street, and other-

wise than the shortcut of the ballot box; they could thus pass along to the leaders a certain number of messages, thereby helping to renew the long-lost relationship between society and its superstructure.

Maybe we should imagine procedures along the same lines for the renewal of the “European project,” which has totally run aground today.

Since we are dealing with “world governance” in which the present heavy techno-structure is ineffective and is manipulated by vested interests, of course the idea of convening the Estates General might be impracticable, but we could consider Permanent General Assemblies which would permit the different peoples to come together for the purpose of defining their destiny.

Finally, this project of society, if it is to be inspired by the citizens, could not be either elaborated or activated without the reconstitution of new elites, concerned for the common good and respectful of the diversity of cultures. Populism and demagoguery, which could lead to uncontrolled exercise of direct democracy, are the worst dangers. But oligarchism and plutocracy, which we face in all of our societies, are as well.

One of the essential tasks today is the formation of a new elite, capable of simultaneously helping reconstruct the system and representing the aspirations of the citizens. Where are today’s elites “educated,” if not in the “business schools,” where, aside from management and marketing, they are taught to profit from their education at the highest price? We must base the cadres of future generations on different foundations than those of consumerism: They are worth more than this strictly material approach.

## Conclusion

These were a few guidelines, not for resolving the crisis whose accounts will have to be settled, but to reinterpret it. Contrary to the French meaning, which only underscores that the evil character, the word “crisis”—*wei-ji* in Chinese—has a broader and more “strategic” meaning; as suggested by the Greek etymology, where *crisis* is a moment of uncertainty and therefore choice, crisis is also an *opportunity*. It is a moment where everything is possible, the worst as well as the best, but the one and the other depending on choice: that is to say, on human free will. Doubtless, we will not escape unscathed, but it is up to us to prepare, without delay, the best for tomorrow. A different world just as entrancing as the current one but, we all hope, more human and more just.