The Test of the Political: A Conversation with Claude Lefort

Pierre Rosanvallon

Claude Lefort was one of the great figures of the renewal of political and social theory in the second half of the 20th century. His thinking—very different from that of Rawls, Dworkin, or even Habermas—was tied to events, to the attempt to elucidate them, and with them the conditions of our emancipation. In a conversation with Pierre Ronsavallon, he retraces his intellectual trajectory and the great themes of his work.

Pierre Ronsavallon: The work of Claude Lefort is that of a committed philosopher who has never believed that philosophy could be reduced to a desk job. The work of the philosopher is for him a conceptual task that must always be bond to interpretation and to the test of the event. The political philosopher must also be careful to read all those whose work is inseparable from the analysis of the present. Claude Lefort has turned to Machiavelli, to thinkers from the American and the French Revolutions, to an author from the period of the French wars of religion like La Boétie, and more recently to the great thinkers of liberalism in the 19th century, because these authors nourished their philosophy with an interpretation of the political, social and religious problems with which they were confronted.

The thought of Claude Lefort is indissolubly tied to, and involved in, the event. It also thoroughly engages with the question of emancipation. The critique of capitalism was the only horizon organizing the conception of the world of many philosophers of his generation. Yet, even if he identified himself with the Marxist critique, Claude Lefort has always thought that the concept of emancipation should not be limited to the critique of capitalism, to the critique of exploitation, and that it was necessary to reflect on the institution of individuals, on the constitution of their dignity, on the modes of establishment of the collective, which needed to be considered in an autonomous manner. The question of emancipation was inscribed for him within an anthropological perspective of autonomy as much as within the political perspective of the democratic invention.

The Political Philosopher Does Not Furnish Arguments

Another feature of the thought of Claude Lefort is that it forged itself by facing the test of the abyss, and of cowardice. A substantial part of his work was devoted to thinking the question of democracy from its absolute negation: totalitarianism. But his thought was equally nourished by a ruthless critique of the weaknesses of our thinking. While he always considered himself as belonging to the left in our country, he never ceased to be the uncompromising critic of the simplifications, the perversions and the renunciations that came along with its history.

The work of Claude Lefort is characterized by the type of position—I would use the word “attitude,” if it was not ambiguous—represented by his work: that of a radically lucid thought that never becomes disenchanted, nor gives itself to any form of blind commitment. He has always emphasized the need to tie together these two imperatives: to resist excessive simplification, but to make room at the same time for the imagination of the possible.
One of the books that Claude Lefort published in the 1990s is a collection of essays named *Writing: the Political Test*. In the preface that opens that book, Lefort insisted on the proximity between the work of the writer and the work of the philosopher. For both, writing should neither be swallowed up by the ocean of opinions nor blinded by the shock of events. His attention to writing is inseparable from the understanding of a certain relation to reality that could be degraded into the simplifications and a form of ideology. Such attention translates the concern to stay always open to an interrogation, an indetermination, a form of incompleteness.

The political philosopher, writes Claude Lefort, “does not 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 and him the hero of a cause. For him, quite particularly,” continues Lefort, “writing is therefore facing up to a risk; and the 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 zigzag movements that disappoint by turns the various sections of his public.”

I believe that in this difference, in this prudence in relation to one’s readers, critics and enthusiasts, there is a true exercise of thought.

An important part of Claude Lefort’s work has been devoted to thinking the nature of democracy, but for him such a reflection was indissociable from a study of the history of this democracy and of its founding experiences. Three kinds of experiences, positive and negative, have particularly retained his attention. He has explored the first kind somewhat recently in an article published by the journal *Esprit* in 2002: it is the invention or the advent of the modern city. It is no coincidence that an important part of his work focuses on Machiavelli, because the writings of Machiavelli are indissociable from the problems related to the organization of the city of Florence, exactly like the work of Rousseau is indissociable from a reflection on Geneva or that of Spinoza from a consideration of Amsterdam. Another experience that was fundamental for Claude Lefort is the French and American Revolutions. Finally—and this may be the best-known part of his work—he undertook the consideration of the destructive experiences known as totalitarianism.

Following a chronological order, we will begin by examining with you that first point, the manner in which you understand the experience of the first European and Italian cities as constitutive experiences of a way of being together, and as preparatory forms for the formation of the very notion of a democratic political community.

**The Break from Hierarchy and Civic Humanism**

**Claude Lefort:** I want to thank you first of all for this very generous, too generous introduction, by which I am intimidated, and hope that our dialogue will be fecund. I have indeed recently been interested in the question of the origins of democracy. We all know that, for Tocqueville, the origin of democracy is the equality of conditions. We all know that universal suffrage, popular sovereignty, the separation of powers, are all constitutive principles of democracy. But there was a question that had been intriguing me for a while: where does this equality of conditions come from? How was it born? After all, Tocqueville shows a sociological sensibility by not limiting the definition of democracy to that of a regime, since he immediately refers to a social notion of the equality of conditions. How did the equality of conditions find its origin in a certain kind of society?
I should have thought about this much earlier. After all, I was born in Paris, I lived my whole life there, and am therefore a son of the city. I think that in the European city new relations appeared that implied an absolute severance from, of course, the Roman or the Athenian republics, but also from that system of hierarchy—that distinction between the nobles and the people that was proper of feudal society. In the great book on feudal society written by Marc Bloch, one of the greatest historians of our time, a sociologist and a philosopher, I could find this idea: the European city as a radical rupture with the hierarchical system of the time. Bloch goes as far as calling the city “the place that makes one free.” He identifies what radically distinguishes the city as a way of being together. And in fact, we can see it by thinking of a few great examples like those you mentioned before: the city is Antwerp, it is Amsterdam in different periods, it is Florence, it is Geneva, it is all those places that will become in different periods world metropolises, which will be places of goodly immigration and capitals of commerce. They are precisely places in which equality does not reign at all, but where everybody is in contact with everybody. Jacques Le Goff has a funny expression in one of his books: the city is the place “where the priest crosses the prostitute.” It is this mixing, this “entanglement” of the conditions as Tocqueville puts it, that is characteristic of the modern city and that burgeons at different periods. These cities truly have something like an international vocation, like the Amsterdam of Spinoza, and it is no coincidence that Spinoza was one of the first thinkers of democracy.

And then there is Florence, which I had the occasion to study for a long time following the discovery, many years ago, of a work that at the beginning disconcerted me, that seemed strange and contradictory to me—the work of Machiavelli. Machiavelli, it must be said in passing, is someone who was an eminent actor in Florence without ever holding any other title than that of Secretary of the Chancery. He was a true ambassador to the city, he went to France on several occasions, he even took important decisions, he advised the Gonfaloniere on essential issues at a time when there were dramatic tensions in Florence. But Machiavelli is the thinker of social division. He is the first thinker who conceived with clarity the idea of the people in terms of national identity, but also the idea of the distinction between the people and the elite, and the idea that the politics of the latter, and hence also the politics of the Prince, was fundamentally dependent on the activity of the people. The city is that place where the people are free, it is that place where the people are alive and apply pressure on power. When power does not depend on the people, we are in tyranny. Machiavelli’s two books, one on the decade of Titus Livius and the other on the Prince, follow the same logic. If the Prince wants to strengthen his power and protect the State, it is necessary that he looks to the people for support, not to the elite; while the Republic is essentially the regime that accepts the fact of social division.

Florence, whose history I came to study from the consideration of Machiavelli, is an extraordinary city which, at the beginning and unlike Venice, did not enclose itself into some kind of oligarchy. In Venice, the elite belong to a number of powerful families that had established the sharing of the council among themselves once and for all. Florence was the place where a conflict developed and where, moreover, there was a significant immigration of those men who were called the novi cives, the “new citizens.” Because of their condition and their openness, these new citizens created a new style of relations within Florentine society. This was one of the key factors of the importance of Florentine capitalism, of the extraordinary blossoming of commerce, of a city which had an influence over the whole of
Europe. Here we can see something that I would not call democracy—Machiavelli cannot be qualified as a democrat, nor can we say that Florence is a first democratic city—but it is a city where hierarchy does not exist. It is a society where there is a mixing of the conditions and that becomes thereby fertile on every level, intellectual, social…

Pierre Ronsavallon: Is it a multicultural society, to speak in the language of our time?

Claude Lefort: Yes, it is a multicultural society.

Pierre Ronsavallon: And a capitalist one?

Claude Lefort: Yes. And once again, it is a place of attraction for a very intense immigration. It is a place where all these new citizens live together with very wealthy patricians. And despite this difference, a social experience of a new kind takes place. That is the reason why the city interests me. But we could say something similar, even if I will not go into the details, of the city of Amsterdam, where Descartes lived for twenty years. Amsterdam was for him the city of Spinoza, the first democratic thinker. Amsterdam, perhaps even more than Florence at a certain point, was the greatest center of world commerce. Hence the universe of the city allows us to detach ourselves from an interrogation that is classically linked to the birth of popular sovereignty.

Pierre Ronsavallon: What you are saying is that the origin of democracy is not simply to be found in the formulation of a new kind of regime, as opposed to the monarchies or the ancient autocracies, and that the birth of democracy is above all the emergence of a certain kind of society; that is your thesis.

Claude Lefort: Exactly.

The Counter-democratic Power of the People

Pierre Ronsavallon: That thesis applies perfectly well to the examples that you use, those examples of commercial, multicultural cities, from 15th century Italy to 17th northern Europe. However, modern democracy was not born in those cities, even if they were the ferment of civic humanism. The founding Revolutions of modern democracy were rather the French or the American Revolutions. Those cities were very powerful experiences of freedom and important moments in the composition of new societies, but at the same time those experiences did not give birth to the modern democratic regimes. Here is my question: both in the American Revolution and in the French Revolution, the civic ideal is very different from the multicultural idea, very distinct also from the merchant conception of the world. On the contrary, the republican morality in 18th century France constantly criticizes luxury, criticizes the political economy. And the anti-federalist Americans found a modern democracy upon a world of small artisans and peasants, not at all upon the modern world. Does that mean that there are two ways towards democratic modernity? Would there be on the one hand the way of civic humanism, which is indisputable and that you illustrate so well, and on the other hand, the way of the Revolutions, which are of a more direct political character?

Claude Lefort: It is actually very difficult to answer this question. I would simply draw your attention towards the fact that a long time has passed until the proclamation of American democracy, which is a model that requires in itself a lot of reflection. It is not exact to speak of a juxtaposition of small landowners. In The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution, the historian Bernard Baylin collected a considerable number of pamphlets—that is, both
what we understand today as a pamphlet, and letters and all sorts of publications which circulated at the time—that testify to the existence of an urban life. Before the affirmation of democracy, there is a new circulation of ideas and individuals. Landowners come together for town meetings and they confront one another. There is an element that Tocqueville makes us forget. Democracy and the equality of conditions do not come out of nothing. We can talk here as well of milieux. There is not one milieu called the city, there are here and there milieux that communicate with one another, and assemblies that result from there. It is more complicated.

Pierre Ronsavallon: Let’s come back to this fundamental idea that you develop about the social conditions of democracy pre-existing the proper political birth of democracy, that is, the forms of popular sovereignty. In Florence, the people exist as a force that needs to be conciliated; the prince learns that, if he wants to be powerful, he needs to be accommodating, even obedient in relation to the people, and hence the two powers need to tame one another. There is an interpretation of this fact that we could call cynical, and there is a democratic interpretation. The cynical way consists in affirming that to tame the people means to know how to manipulate them, and the democratic interpretation consists in saying that this is a way to make sure that the pressure of the people becomes obligating for power. All the history of the interpretation of Machiavelli oscillates between these two interpretations. In the relation between the people and power, is it power who manipulates the people or is it the people who restrict the exercise of power? Today, we can say of those who govern us that they need, during electoral campaigns, to conciliate the people and at the same time, or later, to find the means if not to manipulate, at least to seduce the people and to capture their favor through appropriate means.

Claude Lefort: When Machiavelli writes The Prince, he is supposed to be addressing a prince. The regime has changed, it has become a monarchy. But he is addressing as well a public of young republicans. Machiavelli writes that if the prince turns to those who brought him to power, the people of higher rank, he will fail. He will never have the freedom of action that he wishes for his military initiatives; only if he leans on the people will he be able to keep the powerful under control. You spoke of a certain cunning—that is what he offers to the prince, who lacks it. A popular prince is a prince who does not fall into the absurd trap of making himself the mere representative of an aristocracy; he is a prince clever enough to keep a wide margin of initiative by turning to the people and, as a consequence, controlling the powerful. On the other hand, there is the Republic, which is something different: for Machiavelli, the people are a positive factor, a fecund factor of the regime, and not only by means of their resistance, as was the case in The Prince. It is not that the people have the power. But by demanding, by affirming themselves, by accommodating others and augmenting their numbers thanks to the immigration, the people become the decisive element in the determination of politics, and of the foreign policy of the Republic as well.

Pierre Ronsavallon: The people are something like an indirect power, a force of resistance.

Claude Lefort: Absolutely. Machiavelli says it in all his works, the desire of a people is not to be oppressed, while the desire of the powerful is to oppress. It is as radical and as simple as that: the people do not want to be oppressed and it is necessary for them to have that resilience to fight against oppression.

Pierre Ronsavallon: This is a conception of emancipation.
Claude Lefort: One that is completely devoid of the image of a sovereign people. For Machiavelli democracy cannot be defined by the sovereignty of the people; conflict is the beginning, and the people are the force of progress.

Pierre Ronsavallon: The people must not become a negative power, that is, a power which rebels. At the time, political philosophy says that to conciliate the people is nothing but to make sure that the people consent. The will of the people is their consent, the fact that they do not rebel. This is a pre-democratic conception.

Claude Lefort: No, I cannot agree with such a claim. Machiavelli has this idea that the people need to apply pressure, that the people must be active. It is not that they are oppressed, it is that they need to fight against oppression.

Pierre Ronsavallon: In today’s terms, we would say that the people are a counter-democrat.

Claude Lefort: Exactly.

Finding the People, Representing the People

Pierre Ronsavallon: The second experience of democracy is the founding revolutions, the French and the American. We are no longer facing the counter-democratic power of the people, we are dealing directly with the idea of popular, positive sovereignty, an idea which is going to find its central institution: universal suffrage. How do you analyze this transition from the counter-democratic people to the sovereign, positive people?

Claude Lefort: The question that you ask interests me at the highest degree. We could believe that popular sovereignty, that is, the institution of the principle of the sovereignty of the people, implies the idea or the image of the people as one, the people. They are not the lower part of society, the part beneath or under the powerful; the people encompass each and every condition. But in fact, this people must be periodically interrogated by universal suffrage, for its will to be expressed. This means that the people is one, but that it is necessary to come back to the people once and again in order to know what that one is. Universal suffrage has as its function—I do not say as its principle—to mobilize society. It is a great moment in which everybody is required to concretize their opinions. This factor gives birth to forms of association and the organization of society in parties, which are going to become new sources of decision. At the beginning we don’t quite know what that people is, what that sovereign people refers to. Moreover, because of the periodicity of suffrage, today’s power is not the power of tomorrow, exactly like the people of today are not necessarily the people of tomorrow.

Pierre Ronsavallon: In the iconography of the French Revolution the question of the representation of the people was strikingly problematic. The painters and the engravers were not quite able to represent the people. Finally, there was one form of agreement: near the bridge located at the tip of the île de la Cité in Paris they built a great giant in plaster cast which they labelled “the people:” to show that the people were something massive, that it was the people which dominated society, to give an image of their greatness. Representing the people was one of the fundamental questions in the history of democracies.

Claude Lefort: Because the people are unrepresentable. It is at this point that I merge two themes: the first one, that I have been developing for a very long time, is that democracy is a
society in which power is not incorporated into the social realm. This is easy to understand: the power of the monarch or of the aristocracy is naturalized.

**Pierre Ronsavallon:** There is something that is felt as divine.

**Claude Lefort:** Exactly. And the people are beneath, they are a social class. Then, suddenly, the people must be explored in order to appear as a sovereign, which means they need to be mobilized. Political parties exist because there is universal suffrage. Every institution and the very exercise of power—this government, this authority—must be periodically challenged and reconsidered. That means that power belongs to nobody.

**Pierre Ronsavallon:** This is your famous theme of power as an “empty place.”

**Claude Lefort:** Yes. In every society where power exists, there is a place for power—if it is not in the hands of men, it is in the hands of God. But power cannot be embodied in society. On the other hand, there is the exercise of power, power lives...

**Pierre Ronsavallon:** There are many candidates to fill the void. That is the problem...

**Claude Lefort:** I think that it is really important to understand these two things in order to understand what democracy is: on the one hand, the people are heterogeneous, multiple, in conflict, and on the other hand there is power, which is the power of nobody.

**Pierre Ronsavallon:** Your reflection deals with human beings and democracy; but quite often the politicians who have been the representatives of the people do not follow your definition of democracy, and this is also a historical problem.

**Claude Lefort:** It is not in their interest.

**Pierre Ronsavallon:** A whole tradition advanced towards that idea. During the French Revolution, Condorcet, for instance, is not far from expressing the idea that there is no one who could actually embody social power, and that an image of that power could only be given by multiplying its partial and immediate manifestations. For Condorcet, the people cannot be represented, but as with those animated images, it is possible to form a living expression of the people by superposing a certain number of instantaneous images. Some liberal thinkers from the 19th century also came close to this idea. However, it was seen as a means to disqualify the idea of sovereignty rather than as a means to construct democracy.

**Claude Lefort:** Here, it is necessary to introduce a distinction between what belongs to the order of the symbolic and what belongs to the order of the real. Real power moves from one to the other. But symbolic power, no matter what the opinion of the majority is and whether it decides to put this or that particular government or individual in power, is a factual power—there is an essential dimension of power that I call its symbolic dimension. And there is no way to realize that power; it is for this reason that I speak, in a more simple way, of a “power of nobody.” That link between universal suffrage and the idea of an exploration of society is very interesting to me.

**Pierre Ronsavallon:** There is indeed a double dimension to universal suffrage. The first is a consecration of equality: every voice, every argument counts, both the wise and the trivial, the person who has long reflected and the one who votes on an impulse; they all count, because nobody can become the judge who establishes what are the good arguments for the choice. It is a dimension of universal suffrage which establishes a very radical equality. At the same time, universal suffrage exists as a result, that is, as a counting of votes. The dimension
of equality constructs a social form—stressing radical equivalency establishes democratic equality—but in the counting of the votes, every single time that a result is formulated, the cacophony of the people appears, and with it the division, the problematic character of the people.

Claude Lefort: It is true that suffrage results in numbers, but this does not mean, as we could say from Tocqueville’s perspective, that we count individuals. It is more complicated than that: there are the numbers, but at the same time this sudden revelation of the plurality of the social. People vote because their affects direct take them to a particular opinion, because they believe that there is a left wing and a right wing, because they think that this little fellow, even if he is ugly, must be a really nice person. But there is something else; behind those opinions there are households, unions, parties, associations, neighbor relations. What emerges unexpectedly, at a certain moment, is nothing but this multiplicity.

Pierre Rosanvallon: It took quite a long time to formulate this idea: that suffrage is a way of revealing diversity or division. For a very long time, many people thought that the virtue of democracy consisted in expressing the unity of the people. In France, many villages voted almost unanimously until the end of the Second Empire, as if the expression of a dissenting voice or the existence of competing, even divided groups, were some kind of aggression towards the social body itself.

Claude Lefort: Yes, that is true in agricultural backgrounds. But at the same time political parties are formed, and a social division is formed—the workers’ movement, the proletariat, the bourgeoisie . . .

**Totalitarianism in the Soviet Union**

Pierre Rosanvallon: Let’s come back to the fundamental idea of the empty place. Is it not possible for us to think the totalitarian fact, and I believe this was the sense of your approach, from its relation to the empty place? From this perspective, totalitarianism appears as a forced attempt, a crazed attempt to fill up, even to saturate the empty place. Could you synthesize the trajectory of this idea throughout your work?

Claude Lefort: It is easy for me to answer your question because, in my early youth, I was a Marxist. I discovered Marx when I was 18. Class struggle, the proletariat—I was dazzled, and that lasted for a while. But I got involved in a party from the extreme left, that is, in a Trotskyist party. Being radically anti-communist, I interrogated with passion the nature of the new totalitarian regime. In 1981 I wrote a book called *The Democratic Invention* which was a collection of essays. As it happens there was only one text about democracy; the others dealt with totalitarianism. Because for me, a young Marxist turning away from the Communist party, totalitarianism was an enigma. I understood that such a regime was not, as the trotskyists believed, a degenerated workers’ state. I wasn’t completely stultified; for me, the activities of the trotskyists were already Marxist enough. The problem was their unconditional defense of the Soviet Union—unconditional because, for the trotskyists, it was necessary to distinguish between the good structures (the abolition of capitalism, the abolition of property) and a bad superstructure (Stalin and the Communist party). I was lucid enough to understand pretty soon that this was an absurdity. Afterwards I met Castoriadis, who, like me, was absolutely critical towards the Soviet Union. He had admitted the idea that the Soviet Union was nothing but state capitalism. We were still inscribed within the Marxist analysis—capitalism was the enemy, but the means of production had been monopolized by
the state. It took me some time, but not too much, to realize that this was absurd too, that the system of power in the Soviet Union could not be reduced to state capitalism. In fact, the big novelty was the capacity of power, through the single-party rule, to be omnipresent. I say single party, but it was much more than a single party, it was a party that had tentacles all over the social body. We know how important Stalin was as an individual. But that power, at the same time, permeated every channel of society.

In 1948 Kravtchenko publishes a book, *I Chose Freedom*, which arouses an immediate indignation from the vast majority of the left, including the intellectual left, and people who are very dear to me. In 1948, Merleau-Ponty allows me to write an article in *Les Temps Modernes* in which I say that Kravtchenko’s book is extraordinarily revealing; but he includes a note stating that this is the personal opinion of Claude Lefort. For Sartre, in that period, that book does not exist, he does not even know what it is. I still recommend reading it nowadays, because it is not at all a theoretical critique of the Soviet regime, it is about its history—the story of the gifted son of a worker who, ascending the social hierarchy, becomes an engineer and lives in a world of informers and denunciations. The party is everywhere, espionage is everywhere, not to mention what people knew or what we still come to know about the 1930 great purges, when the peasantry was exterminated by the hundreds of thousands. This party is not simply a party which gives the execution orders—millions of people were executed—from above. There is also a rotten society where, because someone detests you, envies you, you are at risk of being considered an anti-communist, an enemy of the people. You know that concentration camps, in the Soviet Union, were filled up with millions of people who, in many cases, had done nothing but to say words that could not be said. One has to think about the fact that the immense majority of them were purely and simply innocent.

**Pierre Ronsavallon:** This analysis of totalitarianism stresses the fact that such an oppressive and destructive power was certainly imposed upon society, but that it also nourished itself, partially, from some kind of social consent. It is at the same time an internal and external power, which falls upon people and then keeps their hold on them.

**Claude Lefort:** You are completely right, we should not omit that sort of acquiescence, of complicity, among the population. It is horrible to say such a thing, even if it is true, because it means that a significant part of that population is fundamentally rotten too. It is not only the great number of informants, it is a society that is composed of passive people and where there is a deep respect for power.

**Pierre Ronsavallon:** A society which has not known the conditions of equality, a radically anti-democratic society. To keep advancing in the discussion, let’s come back to the analysis of totalitarianism that you have developed since the late 1940s.

**From Anti-totalitarianism to May 1968**

**Pierre Ronsavallon:** Your work enjoyed a moment of visibility in the 1970s, with the publication of the *Gulag Archipelago* by Solzhenitsyn and one of your memorable books, *Un homme en trop*, which is a philosophical commentary of the *Gulag Archipelago*. Many of us were reading and learning from your work at that time. It became the philosophical reference nourishing what was then called the “anti-totalitarian left.” How did you understand at the time the extraordinary reluctance from the part of the left, not only the communists, to accept the totalitarian fact and to define, if I may put it in these terms, an anti-totalitarian
democratic socialism? We even saw figures who were associated with a moderate socialism (like Jean Daniel) attacking Solzhenitsyn. How did you experience and interpret all this?

**Claude Lefort:** I read Solzhenitsyn passionately, and I did not have any doubt whatsoever about the veracity of his account. This case was very different from Kravtchenko’s, because Kravtchenko was a soviet civil servant. This was not at all the case of Solzhenitsyn, and Solzhenitsyn had been in a concentration camp. His testimony was unquestionable. And yet even at that time, we are in 1973, a significant part of the left considers Solzhenitsyn as a religious man, as a conservative, as an idealist. The resistance to Solzhenitsyn in that period is very strange.

**Pierre Rosanvallon:** How do you analyze and explain that strangeness?

**Claude Lefort:** There was a Socialist Party that made an alliance with a Communist Party; the socialists never understood a thing about the communists.

**Pierre Rosanvallon:** No, they were anti-soviet.

**Claude Lefort:** They were anti-soviet. But they were deceived in 1936- betrayed by the communists, even as there was an immense egalitarian momentum among the population. They learnt nothing. Mitterrand still found a way to make an alliance with the communists. He did not understand what the Soviet Union was.

**Pierre Rosanvallon:** Yes, around the time when you published *Un homme en trop*, Mitterrand visited Hungary and was filled with wonder by the successes of the regime; you wrote a famous article about that episode. For my generation, your contribution was double. There was, to be sure, the analysis of totalitarianism. But this analysis did not have as its only goal the critique of this type of regime, it aimed at rethinking democracy from scratch. The strength of your analysis is to have shown that the understanding of totalitarianism was the condition for a democratic consolidation, and that democracy could only develop from the understanding of the concrete forms taken by its worst negations or its pathologies.

**Claude Lefort:** For me, rediscovering democracy does not mean at all to minimize the inequalities, to idealize democracy. It means to be aware of the fact that we live in a society where there are possibilities of development, of a certain social mobility—which by the way still exists today in spite of the levels of unemployment. Democracy must be seen as this *milieu* for conflicts, as a *milieu* in which we have to know how to engage in contestation. You are today a leading advocate for the associations against inequalities, and this is something absolutely essential. But no matter what the critiques are, how intense they are, we cannot detach ourselves from this regime and consider it as just one regime among others. Either we manage to transform democracy from within by the power of spontaneous mobilization, or democracy will wither away. This is another urgent aspect of the problem. In recent times we have come to fear the absence of great social conflicts, and we know that the polarization of society is very important for its vitality. There has been a transformation of industrial society, capitalism still exists, but there are no longer what we could identify as the evil agents of inequality; things are much more complex than that.

**Pierre Rosanvallon:** They cannot be personalized in the same manner. We have talked quite a lot in recent times about the many mechanisms of development of our financial economy. It is not simply a social group, it is a mechanism of what we could call abstractization, which has severed the economy from society and has produced the dramatic inequalities that we all know. The mode of production of inequalities has changed in its nature, and the feeling
of oppression or the feeling of exploitation have followed suit: today they are increasingly expressed, as we have been able to observe in France in different occasions, in communities which experience concrete trials at a particular moment. They occur, as well, much more as a simple sharing of trajectories than as a general and constant belonging to what we used to call the working class. They are embodied in moments and experiences, in the form of trajectories, in the similarity between stories, in solidarities. They assume very different faces and forms.

Claude Lefort: In a sense, this is very positive; but in another, we can fear a certain social demobilization that might be due, in part, to the erosion of oppositions. We can fear a power that puts society to sleep, a power that does not consult and that reforms different realms, education for example, or justice... without there being any mobilization on the part of those who are affected. We can fear a society allowing itself to be modeled by a kind of authority that was unthinkable in the past.

Pierre Ronsavallon: Do we not, we the producers of ideas, the intellectuals, have a responsibility in this? We should give more visibility to these problems and these mechanisms. Passivity is explained in part by the feeling of having lost one’s hold on reality, a feeling of opacity, of no longer being able to understand, of an increased distance from the world. From a certain point of view, to understand the world is already to begin to transform it. This relation between interpretation and action, as you know perfectly well, is a theme that was not invented by us, it is a great *topos* of marxism. So do you plead for our return to Marxism, Claude?

Claude Lefort: That is simply bad faith!

Pierre Ronsavallon: I was giving an extremely sympathetic definition of Marxism—in other words, a radical effort towards the comprehension of social critique. Is it better like this?

Claude Lefort: Then my answer would be yes, without any reservation.

Pierre Ronsavallon: Very good. I would like to end, Claude, with one last question. For my generation, you have been the philosopher of anti-totalitarianism, but you have also been a very active philosopher, very engaged in the May 68 movement. In that period a certain utopian idea, in the best sense of the term, was developed, the idea that we could think differently, the idea that other things could be made possible—a utopia of the opening of the possible. I often had the impression that you regretted the fact that a certain critique of Marxism, and of communism, led some people to be satisfied with a prudential liberalism and to forget that utopian dimension.

Claude Lefort: 1968 was an extraordinary year. Mobilization originated, as you know, among the students; a collective mobilization for which there was no example. I am surprised when people make fun of 68, when they present it as a moment of weakness. I was then a professor at the University of Caen, where everything started, with a great involvement from my students, the day before Nanterre exploded. To suddenly see such a liberation of words, powerful words, that was in itself an extraordinary event. It was a new mode of socialization, a wild socialization, which could not last. I never had the hope of a revolution in 68; only some idiots ascribed that idea to me. On the other hand, I would not say that I quarreled with, but I certainly opposed Raymond Aron who considered that there was some kind of attack on the integrity of the university, on adults, on Fathers—everything was called into question. In the midst of that savage democracy there was a sort of freedom which, I confess, was extremely precious to me. Today we mock 68 by saying either that the communists had...
the initiative of the whole thing, or that the communists did not play any role and that they tried to catch up with the movement of the Communist Youth, or that it was an anarchist movement; the reality is that there was no doctrine and that it was a curious movement which, all of a sudden, cracked the traditional relations of authority and hierarchy. 68 was not the caricature that we want to draw today, it was not a simple disorder.

Pierre Rosanvallon: Let’s continue then to learn about freedom with you!

– Translated by David Ames Curtis

NOTES

This conversation was recorded at the forum “Reinventing democracy”, organized in May 2009 by La République des Idées (http://www.repid.com/) in Grenoble, a year and a half before Claude Lefort passed away on 4 October 2010. It has been edited for publication. It was first published in laviedesidees.fr. Translated from French by David Ames Curtis. Published in booksandideas.net 18 February 2011.


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Claude Lefort, Director of Studies Emeritus at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales, passed away in October 2010. Among his seminal works are The Political Forms of Modern Society: Democracy, Bureaucracy, Totalitarianism (1986) and Democracy and Political Theory (1989).