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Of essentiality

*A plea for the deracialisation
of the world*



*Translation by Nicole Boulogne
Defining and redefining
oneself and the world
while faced with its loss of meaning*

“Mankind’s richness lies in its creative diversity, but the source of its creativity lies in its generating unity.”

G. Durand

“What this is about is Man in his human dimension.”

St John Perse Vents III.1

To Jérémie-Jonathan, my son

EXTRAIT

*“Each man has within himself
the entire human condition.”*

Michel de Montaigne

“Every man is Man”

Creole proverb

As a Foreword

Our era is profoundly characterised by a scope of paradoxical cultures that set our time apart from all other space-times that have been so far.

Seldom before has a generation seen at such close range how the speakable and the unspeakable could work side by side, how horror and beauty could flirt so perfectly, how the moral and the amoral could work hand in hand like insolent accomplices, or violence turn into habituation while spirituality flourishes all around.

Our time was to be that of the mind, and yet it seems it is spawning perennial *incongruity*, because no prospects likely to sound the awakening of intelligence are in sight.

Humankind has always resorted to an array of defence mechanisms in order to avoid collapsing under

the weight of time and events. It looks as though this variety originated in the need for constantly renewed definitions and redefinitions, that might allow the being to access a space of convergence towards himself and towards the world – a space that would be full of the same fragrant and enticing meaning as the one that the Master of Time dons himself with.

The ultimate strategy resides in an individual's capacity to define what is essential to them, and to organize their lives thenceforward.

However, life is usually far from being the expectation of some kind of existential bliss upon which to ground man's hope. Indeed life is nothing if not human, that is to say laden with both consistence and vacuity.

Yet, it is when life does not make sense to the being any more, when the meaning is lost and essence has no consistence any more either, that certain rifts occur in rationality, thus affecting our societies and the balance of the most vulnerable of us.

Besides those penalizing facts, our early-21st century societies carry in their core the residues of colonial distinctions. These have so thoroughly shaped the individuals' way of thinking and being, that, ever since the days of colonization, some components of humankind have been living with the *illusion that they were*¹ by the mere virtue of the

¹ Freud S. *L'avenir d'une illusion*, PUF, Paris Edition 2004.

colour of their skin and have considered themselves above the rest of all those that are different from them. At the same time, others have been living with a *lack of being*² because, for the same reasons, they have taken in a depreciated and guilty self-image, which prevents them from reaching their full human dimension.

We know today that racial distinctions always induce racial discriminations.

Thus, each time we indulge in categorizing individuals, we run the risk of founding our social organization upon a subjective representation, which appears to be one of the greatest aberrations the world has ever brought forth.

Césaire, Damas and Senghor provided an intelligent answer to this problem by stressing the need for the former colonised to value their being by highlighting their negritude which, according to Sartre³, represented a necessary dialectic. Unfortunately, we often overlook how insistent the author of *Black Orpheus* and *Being and Nothingness* was that this concept be transcended as soon as possible. In other words, he meant that individuals should define themselves through their negritude for a limited length of time only and never for the whole of their lives.

² De Beauvoir S. *La morale de l'ambiguïté*, Gallimard, Paris, 2003.

³

However, we clearly see that millions of people still live as the shadows of themselves, because they perceive negritude as an identity rather than an identity strategy. This perception prevents them from achieving what should be their essential goal, namely *to be themselves by appropriating their human identity quite freely without any prerequisite. In other words, they cannot have a deracialised relationship with themselves and with the world.*

We shall say that self-awareness here is seen as the whole of the perceptions and representations that a person has of themselves. This notion embraces self-image and self-esteem.

When that feeling is valued during the very first years of life, then the adult's perception of himself is marked by a certain narcissism that fuels his self-esteem. Thus, as Lipiansky⁴ explained, narcissistic self-commitment partly originates in the gratification of the infant's needs.

On the other hand, when parents, adults and even the society in which they live, show a depreciated self-image to the child because of its gender, social status, or phenotype – especially if the prejudice is fully active in the child's environment – then one cannot expect self-awareness to produce the self-assurance and self-confidence necessary for the child, and later the adult, to build an assertive personal identity.

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Owing to that narcissistic flaw which is borne by their community, many “black” people are tempted to wear a white mask⁵ or to assert their ethnic origin in a conspicuous way.

The same flaw could account for the learning difficulties encountered by young social outcasts coming from underprivileged backgrounds as well as by a certain number of school dropouts from problem areas, whose childhood has been both chaotic and badly affected by social and ethnic stigma.

Therefore we are not dealing with learning difficulties borne from some kind of determinism, but rather from a lack of self-appraisal and self-commitment in those children.

The greatest challenge that the world has to rise to is to value all of its human resources in order to face the *Big Multi-dimensional Chaos* awaiting us. Therefore, our work is first and foremost committed to restore the humanity of all peoples, adults and children alike, whether they were historically deprived of that identity for a certain length of time, or on the contrary had an overrated, therefore skewed, image of themselves.

We think this can only be achieved through the deracialisation of the world. To that effect, we shall consider human identity to be the one ***paradigmatic essential*** for any individual to define themselves and the world.

⁵ Sartre J.-P. *l'Être et le néant*, Gallimard, Paris 1976.

Additionally, the mapping of the human genome has highlighted once and for all that men were equal in an inalienable and inalterable way; that is why we find it necessary to show how the representations induced by past mistakes, such as the theory of evolution, racial classifications or colonial distinctions, should no longer lead to persistent feelings of superiority or inferiority that prevent generations of individuals from feeling free to be and from knowing that colour is not a curse⁶.

“A representation is a mental process that corresponds to a fairly conscious, organised and consistent set of cognitive and emotional elements pertaining to the values attached to a specific object.

It is made up of conceptual elements, attitudes, values, mental images, connotations, associations etc. It is a symbolic universe which is culturally determined, where spontaneous theories, opinions, prejudices, decisions to act etc. are forged.”⁷

As the findings of cognitive psychology have proved, the above definition of a representation highlights the link existing between the reality and the

⁶ Bonniol J. L. *La couleur comme maléfice*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1992.

⁷ Garnier C., Sauvé L. *Apport de la théorie des représentations sociales à l'éducation relative à l'environnement – Conditions pour un design de recherche, Éducation relative à l'environnement – regards, recherches, réflexions*, Arlon, FUL. 1999

values connected to the social and historical background of a place or an individual.

This definition also underlines how subjective the perception of oneself and others can be, and how much it depends on what individuals had to endure in the past, whether it was in their own childhood or in the history of their people.

It is appalling to observe that in 2011, millions of people still live and die with a wrong image of what they are or were. It is truly a shame that those people never had a chance to feel free to be themselves, without being forced to subject their minds to the representations and fantasies that were imposed on them by history and were brought about by erroneous feelings of superiority or inferiority, by a silent condoning of *Mani's*⁸ vision of the world and by many other factors too.

Even more revolting is the fact that so many people lived and died without ever being liberated from the alienation induced by prejudices, as those prejudices deprived them of the liberty to be and ignore the bitter violation of their human identity. There is no such thing in fact as a “white” or “black” man.

⁸ Mani or Manes, the founder of Manichaeism, whose teachings were based on dualism. Two eternal and opposite principles founded the universe: good and evil, light and darkness – and shall we add, black and white.

*“It is about teaching
humanity to humankind.”*

Rodrigo de Zayas

Chapter I

The founding principles of essentiality

The basis of Plato’s and Aristotle’s theory of essentialism is that essence precedes existence, as opposed to Socrates’, Heidegger’s and then Sartre’s existentialism which postulates that man’s existence precedes his essence.

What we should retain from those two major theories is that they question the meaning of existence, which itself involves the question of essence.

Existentialists claim to supersede the origin of natural coherence.

However a coherence has to pre-exist within humankind, or else we could not organise our ideas so they might make sense.

The alembic metaphor, drawn from the world of distillers, seems quite appropriate here. Whatever the alembic they say, no genuine essence can be extracted if it is not already present in the plant. Extracting however, is not creating.

It means that no notion of existence or essence can be perceived without the other.

As we see it, the present world's meaninglessness makes it more imperative than ever to refer to the dialectic of *essentia* when defining oneself and the world. This will be done by understanding what the structuring substance and founding values are, in so far as meaning is the result of essence that pertains to transcendence therefore to the divine.

Logistically speaking, essentiality is the distinctive feature that makes an object or a concept essential, that is to say "necessary, indispensable, most important, crucial".

For many of us today, the real world is synonymous with the struggle for existence. To describe that reality, we cannot confine ourselves to the question of essence; we have to consider the additional properties that make the passage from essence to essential possible. These refer to what is indispensable, fundamental, crucial and vital.

Along those lines, it is easy to understand how, quite logically, by giving priority to possessions and appearance, most men have been unwillingly led to forget about the importance of being, either for the sake of modernity or out of an exaggerated consideration for tradition.

How then could the concept of essentiality give more meaning to man's life in his attempt to define

himself and others in the face of a meaningless world. By highlighting everything that, in everyone, has to do with human identity and being, with a view to deracialisation.

Thus, we shall endeavour to show first how the concept of *essentiality* must become the new identity paradigm from which culture, individual and collective identity, personality, microcosm and macrocosm, economy, environment, existential philosophy will be structured. Then we will show how it can be appropriated.

We shall presuppose the duality between essential and transcendence. This permits the individual and his group to appropriate other identity markers than those that were previously available to the collective conscience and unconscious. Those markers weighed upon individuals through their history or their cultural heritage and, as Freud underlined, were in fact cultural interdictions.

Even today, many Indian, Brazilian and even West Indian (*“La Baie des Flamboyants”*) TV series broadcast in the Antilles and America, are directed at viewers who are mainly black or mixed-race, and yet most of their actors are “white” or mixed-race. This highlights how deeply ingrained these issues are, that perpetuate the burden of phenotypic appearance among all the communities in search of an identity. Although quite a few decades have gone by since the

concept of negritude was conceived, it looks as if nothing has changed and the length of time has not been enough to produce the cultural revolution that would deracialise social relationships or, more simply, human relationships.

Identity polytheism, cultural polytheism, trans-ethnicity and trans-culturalism therefore are and should be the substrates used by individuals when defining themselves, so that they may access the essential core of their being: a deracialised human identity.

*“He who does not wonder is an animal,
because the constituent concern of any
human life is the one of its meaning”*

A. Schopenhauer

Chapter II

Man’s transcendental dimension

Life is supposed to be meaningful to the human being whatever his situation, origin, or belonging. Thus, unknown to him, the individual gets involved in a continuous process that is meant to lead him to personal well-being producing a satisfactory definition of himself in the face of life and death.

Depending on their culture, individuals will seek the meaning of life in spirituality, materialism, ideology, riches or absurdity.

Many theorists have tackled this question through their works. Such is the case for Maslow with his Theory of Needs⁹, for Hertzberg¹⁰ in his work on

⁹ Maslow A. *Motivation and personality*. Harper and Row New York, New York, 1954 p 91.

satisfaction levels, and for Erickson¹¹ in his approach to Validation.

All three authors deal with the individual's development whose outcome is self-assertion and fulfilment.

However, none of the aforementioned highlights the fact that a major part of humankind never reaches the final stage in achieving their individuality, as they should do, because of a feeling of incompleteness linked to the colour of their skin that is still seen as a curse¹².

A great number of those people find it difficult to be as persons without first taking into account their phenotype and some unjustified feelings of culpability.

It is true that in most colonised countries, various forms of apartheid have existed, limiting the dominated population's rights *to be* as well as their vision of themselves that was sullied and bruised – as A. Memmi¹³ described.

Are those archaic residues re-emerging from time and time in our individual and collective memory?

¹⁰ Hertzberg. *La motivation dans l'entreprise: modèles et stratégies* (Ed. d'Org, 1998).

¹¹ Erickson /Fail. *Validation – Mode d'emploi* – Editions Pradel 1997.

¹² *Op. cit.*

¹³ Memmi A. *Portrait du Colonisé* Paris, Editions Corréa, 1957.