

Duma. Moscow
November 8, 2018

Political and social responsibility. How to build a trusted society?

Professor Jean-Baptiste Noé. Doctor of history from the Sorbonne.
Director of Orbis. School of Geopolitics.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for your kind invitation to reflect with you on these very important themes of political and social responsibility. These themes are important because they are about the cohesion of a society and the trust that people can place in their politicians. It is always difficult to express oneself in another country, because the cultural references are not the same, even if there are many common points and affinities between Russia and France. I will speak here about my profession as a historian, which makes me frequent the great authors, and also about my modest political experience, since I have been a member of the municipal council of a city in the Paris suburbs for ten years. This makes it possible to combine theoretical reflection with practical use, which is always useful when talking about politics.

When I was a teenager, I spent several summers of school holidays reading Russian novels, including Dostoevsky and Gogol. A story from the *Petersburg News* has always marked me: *The Nose*. This story is absurd and grotesque. Kovaliov wakes up one morning without his nose and travels all over the city to find him. His existence was turned upside down by this disappearance. Without his nose, he can no longer live normally, and we can understand him well. There are several ways to analyze this news. I will propose one, related to the theme of interest to us today. Just as without its nose, Kovaliov's life is destroyed, without the responsibility that unites citizens and politicians, the city cannot function. Kovaliov's efforts through St. Petersburg to find his nose show us the efforts that a society must make to be based on trust and responsibility. In Gogol's story, the disappearance of the nose was just a bad dream. When Kovaliov wakes up, everything is back to normal. This is not the case in political life, where trust is an everyday job.

I/ The society of mistrust

Democracy is entirely based on trust. It is a political regime that is not based on terror or coercion, like dictatorships, but on the trust that the people have in their representatives. When this trust is broken, citizens have the opportunity to dismiss their leaders in elections. This makes it a very fragile regime, but also very strong and very resistant. If I take the case of France, it has now become a society not of trust, but of mistrust. Citizens no longer have confidence in their politicians, which weakens their responsibility. This mistrust is reflected in

the very strong abstention during the presidential elections: nearly 22% of citizens did not vote. Analyses show that voting is more important in the higher social categories. On the other hand, workers, the unemployed, the small pensioners vote little. In France, a civic divide is emerging not in the territories, but in social categories.

Why this mistrust? The French historian and politician Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1849) had anticipated this. Tocqueville experienced the emergence of democracy in France, he was a Member of Parliament and Minister of Foreign Affairs. He understood that democracy was inevitable, that it could bring a lot to the countries of Europe, but that it also concealed potential dangers. Among them, two major dangers: the fragmentation of the individual and the tyranny of the majority.

For Tocqueville, democracy is not a political system, but a social state marked by the equalization of living conditions. France, like most European countries, abandoned the aristocratic system for a democratic system where the humble person is equal in dignity and right to the prince and lord. But this egalitarianism leads to a destruction of social ties, to a dissolution of the person who becomes a simple individual. Between her and the State, there is nothing left. This is what Tocqueville calls benevolent despotism:

I want to imagine what new features despotism could take place in the world: I see an innumerable crowd of similar and equal men who turn restlessly upon themselves to procure small and vulgar pleasures, with which they fill their souls. (*Democracy in America*, Volume 2, Chapter 4.)

The democratic man no longer dreams of greatness and conquest, he only dreams of satisfying his immediate pleasures. He's a small man. As a result, he no longer expects anything from himself, but everything from the State. The State is then supposed to provide him, in addition to security and food, with education, health and leisure. This man who lives in benevolent despotism believes that everything is his due. Politics must satisfy all its needs, all its desires. This horizon seemed very far away to Alexis de Tocqueville when he wrote these lines in the 1830s. It was reached almost a century later, first in England and then in France. During the Second World War, English MP Lord Beveridge, with the help of economist John Keynes, established what they called the *welfare state*. The State was no longer responsible only for its sovereign functions: internal security, the army, justice, but it also had to deal with people's entire lives, including their leisure and personal lives. The State then takes charge of education, health, work and leisure. The entire citizen was in the hands of the State, from cradle to grave, according to Lord Beveridge's formula. This welfare state was set up in England and France, notably under the inspiration of the communists, who were then very powerful in these countries. Especially in France, where the French Communist Party (PCF) was then the largest party in France.

But to function, the welfare state needs substantial tax-based funding. It is about taking money from some and giving it to others, which is called redistribution. As needs continue to increase, so do taxes. Today, France is one of the European countries where taxes are the highest. More than 50% of the French people's salaries are deducted by taxes. The other means of financing the welfare state is public debt. This has the advantage, for politicians, of making other generations pay for their services. Fathers consume, children pay. The indebtedness of

Western European countries has increased steadily over the past 40 years, now reaching levels that are too high. Debt weakens the sovereignty of States by placing their freedom in not always benevolent hands. Social services provided by a state are always less well managed and more expensive than social services provided by private companies. Hence the anger of the people: on the one hand they have to pay more and more (taxes), on the other hand, the quality of the services received is deteriorating (public services).

But the other anger, which creates a society of mistrust, is due to the majority's control over the conduct of the state, which can then force the minority to follow its will. That too Tocqueville had seen it well. This was what he called the tyranny of the majority. In matters of government, the majority of a people has the right to do everything. This majority imposes its will on the minority, without the latter being able to protest. Thus, it is sufficient for a majority group to take over the State's control so that it can increase the collection of taxes on the minority and the money collected can be used to finance the majority's activities. The latter will continue to vote for this government, since it receives a lot from it without having to pay. As for the minority, it will have no choice but to submit (pay its taxes), or to resign (exile itself in a country with a low tax burden). The State is distorted from its function. It is no longer the guarantor of the interests of all, but the protector of the particular interests of the majority against the minority. This is what the Austrian lawyer Friedrich Hayek (1899-1992) called the easement route, in homage to Alexis de Tocqueville.

II/ The person at the heart of society

Friedrich Hayek took refuge in England during the Second World War. He stayed in London to escape Nazi terror in Austria. What he says in his book *La route de la servitude* (1944) is an anticipation of what Europe experienced later. Hayek is very close friends with Lord Beveridge and Keynes, who are his colleagues at the London school of economics. But he does not share at all their vision of man and society. In his book, Hayek explains that the welfare state is potentially as dangerous as the totalitarian systems England is fighting. He is also dangerous because he shares the same vision of society: a man subject to the State. His words obviously shocked in 1944, and he continues to shock today "the socialists of all parties" to whom his book is ironically dedicated. Yet the socialist conceptions of National Socialists and the authors of the welfare state are not so far apart. Both do not value the human person and are willing to submit it to their ideology. This is the cause of the distrust of the European populations towards their politicians. Admittedly, Europe has experienced an unprecedented material and economic growth, which has provided a comfort that many envy us. This has been achieved through the hard work of Europeans, their initiative, creativity and inventiveness. But today, however, the indebtedness of the States, confiscatory tax rates and the bankruptcy of public services threaten this balance. Since the 1980s, many States have undertaken a privatization of their activities. The state managed the economy in France so much that a French economist once had a joke about how France is a successful USSR...

On the other hand, where there is no success, it is on the French population's mistrust of politics. To remedy this, we must place the person at the heart of society, restore his or her freedom of action and decision, put an end to benevolent despotism on the one hand and the tyranny of the majority on the other. That is, to move from a welfare state to a subsidiary state, where people receive state assistance but are responsible for their actions.

III/ Subsidiarity

Subsidiarity is a fundamental notion of political science. It is about allowing local actors to do things, to regroup in associations, to create activities and companies without depending on the State's supervision. Subsidiarity is based on trust and responsibility. The State's trust in its people and, hence, the population's trust in the State since the latter is there to help them, not to coerce or despoil them. Subsidiarity allows the construction of a harmonious society based on trust and justice.

This type of company existed in France until the 1940s. Many companies had established mutual relief societies and health and unemployment insurance systems. Employees and workers could thus benefit from social protection in the event of illness and accident. These mutuels and insurances have mainly been set up by industrial companies, in coal mines, the automobile, electricity, etc. The same is true for schools. Until 1875, when Jules Ferry joined the government, French schools were run by associations, mainly religious congregations. All the villages in France have one or more schools and all children can go there. School is even free for the poorest. Secondly, the State established its own school system, limiting the possibilities of independent schools.

At the economic level, subsidiarity is characterized by the participation of employees in the results of their company. This is called participation and profit-sharing. It was General de Gaulle who passed several laws allowing this. Thus, employees benefit from the good results of their company, either by a salary increase or by dividends from the company's profits.

Another form of subsidiarity concerns associations. This is one of France's great assets. The French have a passion for associations: for sport, music, dance, drawing, etc. These associations are managed by volunteers. They receive assistance from town halls or regions, which finance them through taxes. Many people are involved in associations, which are a legal structure recognized by a law dating back to 1905. Their activities often take place on Wednesdays and Saturdays, which are public holidays for children. It is thanks to them, in particular, that France was able to win the football world cup last July. Footballers, like other sportsmen, start playing sport at a very young age and play it in amateur clubs run by volunteers. Then, when they are good, they can join professional clubs.

Mutuals, insurance companies, sports or arts clubs, schools are some of the many possible examples that subsidiarity allows. Above all, it ensures trust between citizens, because they become the actors of their society and no longer just the recipients. They no longer expect everything from the State, but are able to do things for themselves. Empowered by politics, they have more confidence in it.

When Kovaliov finds his nose again, after a turbulent nightmare, he also finds his tranquility and serenity. Gogol is having fun with his reader by offering him this improbable ending that ends an extraordinary story. But the writer also shows us that it is the found unity of his body that allows Kovaliov to regain his calm. This unity is the trust allowed by subsidiarity that allows the social body to regain its harmony and fraternity.