

A Reasoned Feeling, beyond the Contrast between Reason and Emotion

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Abstract

The aims of this paper are 1) to quickly describe and analyze the criticisms of rationalism in *The Affective Sciences* and above all, to formulate the hypothesis of an indirect but undeniable link with populist and neoconservative movements. 2) To clarify the status of republican rationalism. 3) To make a philosophical offer that goes beyond the emotion/reason dualism in the political field. Thus, attention will be paid to define a "reasoned feeling". Passion towards certain political ideals can, in our opinion, be coupled with the coldness of rationalism, the informed consideration of legal needs or institutional complexities.

"Emotions", "Populism", "Illiberal democracy", "Public reason", "Republican debate", "French Republicanism", "Affective Sciences", "Philosophy and political capacity", "Freedom of Opinion"

Our time is marked by two important innovations. The first one concerns the spreading of illiberal democracies which, in many formerly democratic or republican countries (in a continental sense), set up populist leaderships as the United States, Poland, Brazil and Hungary. United Kingdom and France aren't definitively spared. In fact, in those countries, democracy is drained of its inner self, without military takeover or electoral manipulation. Political feelings such as virulent hatred for foreigners, enthusiasm for egocrats, rejection of elected representatives, academics and journalists, which characterized extremist or inconspicuous groups, are openly and violently expressed: these feelings are well established. As a result, Public Reason (Habermas), republican debate seems impossible in front of emotional rhetoric.

The second innovation is the enthusiasm for affective science supposed to be initiated in biology and neurology of emotions. A proliferation of philosophical or human sciences books or texts, describing the richness of beliefs and the impossibility to distinguish them from exact knowledge, goes together with direct or indirect questioning of rationalism and modernity. Cognitivism makes a clean sweep of the most classical philosophical references

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(Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Comte) and this, in part, within the universities themselves.

The affective and emotional Turn

The Director of the “Institute for the Neurological Study of Emotion and Creativity” (California) proclaims the “Descartes’Error”[1]. According to this brain specialist called Damasio, reasoning or thinking are not necessary for an effective action. On the contrary, “it is as if there were a passion founding reason, an impulse that originates from the depths of the brain, creeps into the other levels of the nervous system which finally translates itself into the perception of an emotion or an unconscious influence that is guiding decision making. [2]”

Long neglected by Sciences and Philosophy, the new field of Affective Science includes Psychology of Emotions, Social Cognition, Computer Science (which would mould the emotional phenomena). These specialties can be found in many universities, for example in Geneva. “To do quickly, in the current studies, everything seems to begin with the improvement of a thematic field based on wide-ranging institutional and financial investments, as Damien Boquet points out when he contextualizes his EMMA project on its dedicated blog. These investments are based on the notion of “emotion” and not on those of “sensibility”, “affect” or “feelings”. And it is certainly not only a matter of a dominant English language, but also an epistemological matter that deserves attention. Because these enormous investments don’t testify to a new, disinterested taste, but also to a new political will that revives the aim to be able to deal with human subjects. Emotions constitute a strategic applied research field which benefits from war sector resources. Once again, psychological war looks for tools that would allow it’s unravelling the mysteries of “human nature”, in the sense of a human functioning that would not be restricted by cultural and historical determinations, but by anthropological and psychological invariants, a physiology. Thus understanding how human matter is constituted and how it works, in order to understand how to act on it. Actually, the major international institutes work with psychology that is rather close to cognitivism, neuroscience and history of science. There are certainly some means left for some other knowledges, but they are the margins of this renewed curiosity. Heavy investments are on the sides of the sciences that are the least suspected of literary lightness. [3]”

It is not about giving a scientific basis to the modern transformation described by Hirschmann in *The passions and the Interests*[4]. From the 18th century onwards, for Hirschmann, the violence of passions was restricted by soft trade and the utilitarian search

of interest. It is not a matter for the political scientist to affirm the existence of natural emotions base, which would be the basis of any action or decision, even in politics. Damasio[5] distinguishes passions, emotions and feelings. *Emotions* are close to the biological basis of behaviors, they escape from consciousness. *Feelings* would be subject to socio-historical variations. If it exists, the reasoned choice is always built on an emotional base, there can be choices and opinions that are opaque to any objective approach of legitimization.

Reason and emotions in French republicanism

Republicanism is a rare case in history; a concrete political practice that give way to philosophy[6]. This is not philosophy that would grant itself a political role. There is a role for philosophical ideas, individual reason of each citizen is claimed to be an instrument of decision. Because normative theory can't establish a republican policy, it is not a question of finding an ultimate political foundation, a truth, nor is it a question of justifying practices (by an ideology), nor of breaking up the contradictions of reality. The role of ideas is specific.

The debate through the expression of opposition from two antagonistic points of view or political model is characteristic of modern political life. If the republic is a *parti-pris* (Alain), it is a constructed but revisable norm. Revisable because constructed and therefore questionable. Republic is the call for voluntarism through the discussion of an ideal. If then, the "protest of the intellectual" [7] amplifies the "reign of criticism" inherited from the Enlightenment no longer exists, then consensualism and "emotionalism" testify that we are in the process of forgetting this form of politics that requires sharp divisions, public opposition of points of view, a dynamic emerging from the differences of opinion between citizens and the reasoned political debate that follows. Fear of conflict or the search for unanimity bring populism and violence internally[8], it is undoubtedly appropriate today to repoliticize the public debate and expose divergences and oppositions.

The aim of this debate will be precisely to « [...] critically determine the definition and implementation of *an idea*[9]". Because republicanism is not a doctrine, it can only find in itself, without transcendence, assumption of a natural right or its founding principles. It is based upon an incessant reasoning concerning the various aporias that it is made of (revolution/institutions, majority/minority, individualism/unitalism). This need for reasoned reflection is precisely due to the fact that the Idea of Republic is never completely and definitively constituted, and as a result is the subject of constant questioning.

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Philosophy therefore does not provide a theory for republican practice. It is just one of his instruments. "This circumstance, so new in history, of all the political education of a great people entirely made by literary people was perhaps the most important contribution to the French Revolution, its own genius and to making it what we see [...]. When we study the history of our Revolution, we see that it was conducted precisely in the same spirit that led to so many abstract books on government being written. Same attraction for general theories, complete systems of legislation and exact symmetry of laws; same disregard for existing facts, same confidence in theory [...][10]".

It is therefore necessary to define a form of rationalism that allows a plurality of axiological and social choices, as well as the common space of their confrontation. The reason we are talking about is essentially the one that has the will to *judge*. "Using reason is always doing the same simple and individual act that we call judging[11]". Doubt, confrontation, reflexion, dialogue, trial and error are the processes of political, individual and collective (but individual before being collective) reasonableness.

Reason is at the centre of a public space where the various conceptions of Good are not juxtaposed, but where the search for criterion of reasoned decision is staged. Without this rationalism, the idea of an indivisible and secular republic engraved in the 1958 Constitution makes no sense. Republican public opinion will therefore be the one in which public reasoning is engaged. It is mixed with ordinary reason (the one of any educated and autonomous subject in his choices - the one of any citizen) and more specific or learned knowledge. Republicanism is therefore optimistic about the ability of all citizens to make public use of their reason. It is conditioned on the work of instruction that will realize this capacity in everyone. This republican optimism is measured and is not confused with the belief in the spontaneous ability of the people for reasoning or of society to be democratic, nor to express their natural freedom through universal suffrage[12]. There is a tension between political rationalism and the idea of the sovereign will of the people. This tension is irreducible.

Historians of thought see French 19th century republicanism as a mixture of neo-kantism and positivism[13], but what really matter here is less the doctrinal content than the very role of philosophy. A rationalist philosophy, breaking with religion and its philosophical avatars, played an essential role in 1880s France. In the continuity of the philosophies of Condorcet, the "*Ideologues*", Auguste Comte, Renouvier's reading of Kant detached from the metaphysics kantism still contains, the reading of positive philosophy by the republican disciples of Comte, the claim for "reason as foundation of the Republic" (Alain), will serve as philosophical guarantee[14].

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It should be noted that there are theories of knowledge and not political philosophies that most often serve as a basis for the indirect political role of philosophy. At that time in France, it was a question of “being a society” other than through Catholic rites and rhythms. If religions are accepted as individual beliefs, public space (the symbolic places of social and political identity) and knowledge in general can no longer proceed from them. Philosophies are therefore called upon as theories of knowledge or philosophy of science, less in their own content than as a vehicle for a possible social rupture, that of mentalities.

“French Republic ensures freedom of conscience. It guarantees the free exercise of worship under the sole restrictions set out below in the interest of public order^[15]”. Pluralism of beliefs, religious or not, is thus legally guaranteed. Neither society nor institutions can refer to a single value system without debate. Reasoning and dissent require a specific use of convictions, (religious ones included) a use that relativizes them because they require confrontation on a background of neutrality. *Neuter*: “ Neither one nor the other “.

Public space is not the place where points of view are juxtaposed, nor is it the place of the absolute convictions clashing, but the place where individual points of view are confronted in order to reach a temporary agreement. Strictly speaking, this is a question of laicity (french version for secularism). *Laos* in Greek means “undivided population”. “Is secular, in this sense, what concerns all the people, regardless of the various beliefs that divide them” reminds us opportunely Henri Pena-Ruiz^[16]. “Human diversity and the unity of the political and legal community, which makes it possible to ensure their coexistence, must be reconciled^[17]”. Laicity concerns the very definition of public life, this balance between unitism and the expression of divergences. It should therefore not be considered only as just freedom of conscience or the separation between public and private.

It is important to consider that it is not a question of tolerance, in the sense of allowing private convictions to be expressed, but rather ensuring public confrontation of points of view, whether religious or not (there are idolatries other than religious). The despotism that republicanism fights is due to the absence of public relativization of convictions (whether they are theocracies or neo-liberalism, for instance). Therefore, strictly speaking, a secular education doesn't promise any conviction, it exercises the necessary reasoning practices to confront points of view. Secular neutrality will therefore be the political guarantee for this space of confrontation of absolute convictions, which are thus obliged to change, to tend to relativize their positions. It can deal with the expression of convictions of any kind, because it is the acceptance of this public confrontation, the exercise of relativization of values and beliefs that constitutes laicity. This space must be politically and legally guaranteed even if it also has a social meaning.

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This space of reasoned confrontation of opinions and convictions is an ideal, it is impossible because we are not a people of gods. It is possible as the ideal of reason, the political and spiritual ideal of peaceful intersubjectivity. It is an everyday plebiscite, a controlled conviction, a spiritual principle that leans on knowledge. “On what principles, especially since the Revolution, modern political societies have been founded, on what principles France rely on in particular rests, whose peril, as has often been said, but whose greatness it is to have, by its logical and intrepid spirit, pushed the very idea of Revolution to the extreme consequences? The idea, the principle of life which can be seen at work in modern societies, and in all institutions, is the act of faith in the moral and social efficiency of reason, in the value of the reasonable and teachable human person. [18]”

Secularism therefore has to do with science, but in a particular way: “I do not want to speak of science as an institution, not only because it has public laboratories, but because it has such a profound impact on the children to whom it provides common data, and on the very course of social life, that it has indeed the value of an institution, an autonomous institution, an independent institution[19]”.

Neutrality (neither one nor the other), the recognition of diversity of convictions and dissensus do not lead to relativism (tolerance in the weak sense of the term). At the same time, secular Republic affirms the unity of the people *despite* the diversity of beliefs and convictions: the public space of their conciliation/confrontation. The existence of a regulator who is not attached to any conviction is also asserted: Sciences. While there are many convictions and beliefs, personal points of view and critical arguments, there is also a different kind of knowledge: scientific knowledge. By their questionable and collective nature, these don't offer dogmas but verifiable certainties, although they are limited and temporary.

Republicanism is also linked to Human Sciences because it requires a renouncement of the absolute, not building castles in the air, avoiding partisan rhetoric, taking reality into account (and not from natural or divine norms or laws), an external referent, a social order already there which is somehow the material of politics: a system of opinion, an organization of production, techniques and a state of morals. This does not mean changing politics into a physics-style science, but simply involves giving up utopia and metaphysical idealism in order to confront ideas and social realities. It is not about giving power to scientists, but about basing political actions on precise knowledges. Scientists and philosophers exercise spiritual power in the manner in which, in the name of knowledge, they guarantee that plurality and complexity of social and political reality are taken into account. It is clearly about considering basic and applied research policy as an instrument for political decision-making.

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The idea of founding a new city, according to a rational plan, is therefore not republican. Only utopians, revolutionaries, dreamers, philosophers, metaphysicians who despise or neglect the complexity of reality, especially in politics, could have this illusion. Everyone cannot in some way “rebuild the political world”, offer the fancy of his dreams to his fellow citizens. Republicanism, which is based on history and Human Sciences, provides the opportunity to draw on knowledge of the reality of the elements of political decision-making. But it is philosophy, not science, that is essential for republicanism: it is about will and judgment rather than knowledge, as said before. It is the bet of the possibility of individual autonomy, it is the bet of public freedom.

Republicanism therefore does not give on philosophy the leading role: it does not inform the political field. Its role is therefore more indirect and more essential: it creates the ability for autonomous judgment, it moulds the public mind. It does not transmit knowledge, therefore, it does not provide references, it does not enlightens by the content of its proposals or its warnings. It makes the space for confrontations: between individual beliefs, between political ideals, between human sciences and hard sciences. Autonomy, the will to judge, the discipline of questioning, the consideration of divergent points of view, the courage to use one’s understanding essentially results from this.

An individual exercise towards the universal: is it therefore the discernment of individuals in facing error of the masses and crowds that is at stake? The role of intellectuals[20]? Republicanism stands on the following ground, which can be said to be both nuanced and precise: Democracy, which implies the search for collective judgment emerging from the addition of individual wills, is blinded by optimism. The tension mentioned above between the expectation of the gradual establishment of enlightened public opinion and the recognition of the population’s weak autonomy is specific to republicanism, which is both pessimistic about the people’s ability for discernment and optimistic on this point on principle. This tension leads to caution. Hope measured in the possibility of establishing peaceful relationships between men, ordered by greater equity, based on hope, which is also measured in fear and political capacity.

Freedom of opinion is the major political good, but the instrument for the existence of reasonable public opinion lays in the formation of individual judgments, a task that is never definitively accomplished. “In tendency, the republic allows the free game of reason. As a foundation, it feeds on it: it therefore produces its own basis in a virtuous circularity. Because it is the rule of reason, it allows reasons to be expressed, because it allows reasons to be expressed, it can be the rule of reason. From this point of view, the republic is justified less as a political “in itself”, than as a meeting place for a reasonable “in itself[21] ”

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Social order can be changed by the will of the people and not by the one of the State. Secular neutrality is the common space of autonomous wills on which they depend in order to have the use of this autonomy of judgment. It is based on the desire to effectively consolidate political modernity which has seen the end of “the terrible absolute domination that man was able to exercise upon man during the childhood of humanity, in the name of unlimited power, applied to interests whose preponderance tended to prohibit any deliberation, is fortunately forever extinguished [...] [22] ”.

The power of public opinion itself will not be unlimited. Freed from traditions, modern opinion has a relative authority over individuals. “Public opinion generates itself. Individuals agree by noting the agreement of their inclinations [23]”. A civil religion of free examination and the critical use of knowledge does not leave individuals in the loneliness of a free will or judgment.

Is it a form of rationality developed in a « communicative” way? Nothing could be less certain. Rational deliberation is certainly particularly required in the republican system. “Wondering why I’m myself a Republican, isn’t it already being one yourself? Isn’t it in fact admitting that the form of power can be the object of a deliberate choice on the part of the citizen, that the community is therefore not imposed on man [...] [24] .”. However, information empowerment technologies, in their current dematerialized and global version, are transforming what can be called communication in its relationship to civic deliberation to such an extent that it requires consideration. The emotional aspect passions and instant representation seem more present than the courage to know and the individual exercise of reason towards the universal.

Political reason will therefore be the one which is slowly being formed through instruction and teaching (and more specifically through philosophy - which should be renewed and extended to all upper secondary school cycles - but also history, Human Sciences as a whole and the courses in popular universities). Civic behaviour can’t be prescribed, we can hope for its strengthening by the diffusion of knowledge, of a culture, in the classical acceptance of the definition of culture [25].

Republic is an Idea, an ability to propose and bring about, a secular faith. Marc Bloch, once again, puts it brilliantly: reality, not intellectual nuances (which inevitably lead to a questioning of one’s abilities) leads us to this *bet*, this bias for reason. “Deliberately - read *Mein Kampf* and the conversations with Rauschung - Hitlerism denies its crowds any access to the truth. It replaces persuasion by emotional suggestion. For us, a choice has to be made: on one hand, turn our people into a blindly vibrating keyboard with the magnetism of a few leaders (but which ones? Those of the present time lack waves), on the other hand,

train them to be the conscious collaborator of the representatives they have chosen themselves. In the current disorder of our civilizations this dilemma no longer bears medium term plans. The masses no longer obey. They follow, because they have been put in a trance, or because they know[26].”

However, two forms of renouncement of knowledge and rationality can be identified. The one Marc Bloch refers to (single mass party, ethnic state, leader’s plebiscite, theocracy) seems to be replaced or synthesized with another more insidious form of despotism (the one of renouncement to reason through peaceful indifference to politics, that of conformist attachment to private happiness and consumer comfort). This synthesis takes place in the field of mass communication. It is this synthesis that the republican challenge must be confronted to by an active policy of education and culture.

In the republican context, ideas finally seem more likely to create dissensus than to aim for or foresee consensus. Social and political life remains unsteady, inalienable, oscillating from caution to criticism. This double regime (of questioning and/or approval) expresses the institutionalizing and revolutionary nature of the republican regime. The exercise of philosophy, if we understand it as the implementation of critical intelligence, therefore seems central and necessary. “French democracy has lost its luggage. She needs to rethink her whole set of ideas. [27] “. There Republicanism finds its revolutionary aim again and struggles to come will be difficult.

Sovereignty and political will do not depend on circumstances, organizations or incitements: they are acts. They are guided by an idea, but are not its strict and simple application. Sovereignty and political will overthrow the state of affairs, the state of fact, they are resistance to the facts, to the supposed naturalness, to the ineluctability of the state of affairs, to the constituted authorities, to the most anchored traditions.

What is a political idea? “Reason harbours in itself the principle of Ideas: by this I mean necessary concepts even though the object cannot be given in any experience[28] “. Any idea thus understood is not immanent in any reality but is a pure possibility, it moves in an unconditioned field that does not refer to any fact or experience. Republic is a simple idea, it is not applicable in itself, it is a norm of action, an indication of a direction, a condition of possibility.

We cannot help but notice the convergence of antirationalism (and “affective sciences”), the philosophical focus on “Emotions”, with populisms. In this setting, citizens can vote and act against their interests, contest or ignore the most proven facts or knowledge. Authorities (lawyers, journalists, intellectuals), likely to provide elements of reasoning, obedient to the

law of proof or contradictory debate, are delegitimized. Emotion, moral panic, real or supposed insecurity overwhelm all reasoning.

Illiberal democracy implies that leaders are elected by universal suffrage, but that individuals no longer benefit from fundamental civil rights (mainly freedom of speech, opinion, association, and privacy). The media and independent judges who are supposed to be the vectors of “political correctness” are excluded. Traditional values or national identity are emotionally promoted as the norms of a single fate, that disregards according to higher law, or pluralism of opinion. A substantial conception of the Political Good is promoted in a form that Claude Lefort describes as opposed to democracy: “the phantasm of the People as One, the quest for a substantial identity, a social body united by an embodiment of power, a state delivered from division. [29] »

Jozsef Szajer, Hungarian MEP, explains Fidesz’s strategy as such: “We are developing emotional politics. Politics goes hand in hand with the emotions that keep members of society together. It is in this prospect that we must understand our return to religion. In Europe as in Hungary, today, political parties are becoming too rational. They put emotions aside. They no longer talk about the nationality of their voters. However, it is not a policy of social redistribution that people identify with, but with the history of their country! »

Endnotes

[1] L’Erreur de Descartes, trad. Fr de *Descartes’ error. Emotion, reason and the human brain*, 1994.

[2] Op cit, 2010, p. 331.

[3] Sophie Wahnich, “Émotions et ambition démocratique : la contribution de l’approche historique”, in *La politique à l’épreuve des émotions*, s/d Alain Faure et Emmanuel Négrier, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2017, p. 251-252. Our translation.

[4] A. O. Hirschman, Princeton University Press, 1st ed., 1977.

[5] *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the feeling brain*. 2003.

[6] The teaching of philosophy in French high schools is a survival of republicanism and the current crisis in this teaching expresses the lack of republican voluntarism in political institutions. The opponents of republicanism perceived this well. The character of the professor of philosophy, a Kantian rationalist in Maurice Barrès’ novel *Roman de l’énergie*

nationale, (published in 1900), a professor who diverts young Lorrains from their family traditions and regional roots, is an anti-republican charge.

[7] The term is the one of Maurice Barrès and refers to the list of the first signatories who, on 14 January 1898, requested a review of the trial of Captain Dreyfus in the newspaper *L'Aurore*.

[8] Alain-Gérard Slama, "La peur du conflit" in *Le Siècle de Monsieur Pétain*, Perrin, 2005 about unrealistic procedures (concealment of reality).

[9] Umberto Eco, *Cinq leçons de morale*. Grasset, 2002.

[10] Tocqueville, *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*, , livre III, chap. 1.

[11] Alain, « Le culte de la Raison comme fondement de la République », *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 1901, pp. 111-118.

[12] This point is insufficiently established in Pierre Rosanvalon's work, as for example in the conclusion "Un universalisme singulier" of the *Sacre du citoyen*, Gallimard, 1992, pp. 447 et seq., a text in which he is surprised: "There is in France a problem of epistemology of democracy. Since good government can only proceed on the basis of reason, it is indeed difficult to make the sovereignty of numbers a condition for political progress." (p. 449).

[13] Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Intellectual Founders of the Republic*. Oxford Un. Press, 2002.

[14] Marie-Claude Blais, *Au Principe de la République*. Gallimard, 2001 pp. 395ff.

[15] Loi de 1905.

[16] H. Pena-Ruiz, *Histoire de la laïcité, genèse d'un idéal*. Gallimard, 2005, pp.16-17. "The secular school will therefore be for all the people, through its audience but also through the content of the teaching."

[17] Ibid.

[18] J. Jaurès, "Pour la laïque", in *L'esprit du socialisme*. Denoël, 1964, pp. 127-128.

[19] J. Jaurès, *Pour la laïque*, op. cit., pp. 130-131.

[20] The neologism of "intellectual" that emerged in the context of the Dreyfus Affair has

since been misused: it is less a question of calling for universal principles in the face of the established order and accepting the consequences of this commitment, than of showing off one's personal capacity to have an opinion on everything. The right denunciation of the media swelling of supposed intellectuals is unfortunately mixed with the desire to put an end to the public space and the reign of criticism, an obstacle to neo-liberal omnipotence.

[21] Thierry Leterne, *La Raison politique, Alain et la démocratie*. PUF, 2000, p. 156.

[22] Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive*, VI, p. 505.

[23] Stoetzel, *Théorie des opinions*. PUF, 1943, p.155.

[24] Marc Bloch, "Pourquoi je suis républicain", *Les cahiers politiques*, Comité général d'études de la Résistance, n°2, juillet 1943. En exergue de *L'Étrange défaite*, ed. folio. Gallimard, 1990.

[25] "Culture, taken as a whole, can be seen as the process of man's progressive liberation of himself. Language, art, religion, science are the various moments of trial. In each of them, man discovers and possesses a new power - the power to build his own world, an 'ideal' world". Cassirer, *Essai sur l'homme*. Trad. Fr. Minuit, 1975, p. 317.

[26] Marc Bloch, *L'Étrange défaite*, op. cit., p.178. Author's translation.

[27] Edgar Quinet, *La Révolution*, tome 1, p. 11, ed. 1868.

[28] Kant, *Prolégomènes à toute métaphysique future qui pourra se présenter comme science*, Vrin, 1986, p. 102. "It is"[...] the State in general, that is, a State according to the Idea, as it is conceived to be, according to the pure principles of right, and it is this Idea which serves as a directive for any real association aimed at forming a State." Our translation. Kant, *Doctrine du droit*, Vrin, p. 195. Author's translation.

[29] "La question de la démocratie", in *Essai sur le politique*. Seuil 1986, p. 31.

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