

PART ONE

THE TELESCOPE



*We are living in the
aftermath of something.
Are we on the eve of
something else?*

—CHARLES MORICE, 1905

POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

*No age has ever held such great
power or borne such great responsibility.*

—HANS JONAS

Schopenhauer, who wrote extensively about relations between politics and ethics, proposed an experiment for politicians in which they imagine themselves a few decades into the future looking back through a telescope to judge their present actions. The *retrospective* vision, he thought, should allow them to evaluate the long-term consequences of their acts and to recognize that political activity should be conducted not only for the benefit of the current generation—a demand that is already too great for many—but for coming generations.¹ To do justice to future generations, you have to be able to identify with them, not merely invoke them ritually. Putting yourself in their place with an imaginary telescope pointed at the past is the best way to feel toward them the sympathy you feel for your contemporaries.²

The difficulty of the exercise lies first in the tyranny of current events in politics, where the future is primarily for rhetorical purposes. Despite the speeches on climate change or underdevelopment,³ we observe a declining interest in long-term political questions in favor of immediate economic and social issues. The difficulty also lies in the multiple potential consequences of any given decision in a future environment about which we know almost nothing. In the strict sense, there are neither *causes* nor *effects* in the development of history. Bertrand Russell provides a facetious

illustration of that in his critique of dialectical materialism, offering to demonstrate that the industrial revolution was a consequence of drought in Central Asia, or that the United States owes its independence to the marriage of Henry VIII to Anne Boleyn.⁴ Historians speak of immediate or distant causes as approximations only to impose some order on historical chaos.

What was difficult in the recent past is even more so today. The set of variables governing human action that has been introduced by globalization has considerably complicated any efforts at prediction. Political phenomena now have nearly infinite interconnections. And if it is true that no period can be conceptually identified in its own time but only after the fact, and sometimes long after, the next period is even harder to define. That is not necessarily anything to complain about, since contingency, whose influence we tend always to underestimate, also means the reintroduction of freedom into history. But understanding of contemporary history suffers as a result.⁵ When have we finally found the right angle, the right perspective, the proper distance? Pascal before us raised that essential question about the exercise of historical judgment.

The conditions for carrying out Schopenhauer's experiment seem problematic for another reason as well, a more directly ethical one, because *at its core* it concerns the sympathy we are supposed to feel for our contemporaries. For Schopenhauer, this is the root of ethics: we are moved by the suffering of our fellow humans. But is that really true? After believing it for a while during the Balkan tragedy, particularly in 1999 when the disasters of Kosovo led off every nightly news broadcast, we may once again question ourselves.⁶ At that time, all the talk was of humanitarian intervention, and of limits on the sovereignty of governments—at least when, sweeping aside their most elementary duty, that of protecting their citizens, they began massacring some of them. That more engaged stance marked a reversal on the part of Western countries, driven by public opinion, quite different from the prevalent attitude of indifference and helplessness during the Cold War. The internal conflict in the United Nations Charter between the protection of human rights and the defense of national sovereignty, which protects actions taken by governments with respect to their people, provoked countless commentaries toward the end of the twentieth century. Reactions from Moscow and Beijing defending the status quo were intense: Where were we headed on this slippery slope? But

the Western countries most attached to their sovereignty—France, for example—asked the same question. The debate led United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan to adopt courageous positions supporting a duty to intervene—or a *responsibility to protect*⁷—which gained increasing legitimacy. That was just seven years ago. Since then, governments and people seem to have settled back into indifference,⁸ except when confronted with major national disasters receiving heavy media coverage, such as the terrible tsunami of Christmas 2004 that caused more than 300,000 deaths. Jan Egeland,⁹ who coordinated UN aid to Asia, has had to constantly remind us of “the twenty forgotten crises,” from Uganda to North Korea.¹⁰

With good reason. The tragedies unfolding in the Darfur region of Sudan (where 2.5 million inhabitants have been driven from their villages, 300,000 of them dying of hunger and disease, with 200,000 civilians massacred by militias¹¹); the genocide perpetrated with impunity by the Russian army in Chechnya since 1999;¹² Chinese citizens rotting in psychiatric hospitals for dissident acts; chemical experiments to which entire families have been subjected in special camps in North Korea¹³—all these provoke little compassion, and even less action. It is not information that is lacking, rather that the misfortunes of the world are so numerous that it seems, as Chamfort said, “that the heart must break or harden.”¹⁴ We only wonder whether that choice was really made, or whether indifference decided the matter. If the latter is the case, what good does it do to ask people who only glance distractedly at dramatic events unfolding in front of them to project themselves twenty years forward to discover some standard of prudent conduct to protect those who will come after them?¹⁵

Though one might wish them to be stronger, it is not *feelings* that are most cruelly lacking, and the foregoing is in no way a call for a politics of feeling. Feelings are ephemeral, unworthy guides for judgment, and frequently create nothing but disorder. “Bleeding hearts and bloody mess” was the apt title of a British article on the international chaos. It is political thinking—to recall the image of the telescope, political vision—that is necessary to prevent catastrophe. Political vision can foresee that a policy systematically favoring regimes over the peoples they govern will lead to violent outbreaks for which the price will one day have to be paid. Political vision would encourage firmness toward President Vladimir Putin in the name of the strategic relationship one wishes to establish with Russia. It could advise against the resumption of arms sales to China at a time when

tensions among China, Japan, and Taiwan are on the increase.¹⁶ Judgment and character have always been the most important qualities in politics, and they remain so. But feelings too must play a role in strategic judgments. The most enlightened minds and the most seasoned temperaments should not be allowed to forget the “brother humans that after us shall live,” from whom François Villon hoped to receive forgiveness in the *Balade des pendus*. Their inheritance will be our actions—and our mistakes—at a time when actions can have huge consequences. Unlike almost all the generations that have gone before us, we can now stage what Jung called *the end of the world*.

The history of the last century showed the ease with which historical transformations of unprecedented violence could follow without warning on the heels of the best of times. As in Greek tragedy, crime engendered crime in the house of Europe, which twice set the rest of the world ablaze. From the experience, lessons were drawn for the reconciliation of the European nations. But what is now at stake is Europe’s capacity to assume international responsibilities in a deeply troubled world. And from that point of view, the *internal* lessons just mentioned are insufficient. The unprecedented historical eruption from which the entire twentieth century arose does not speak only for the madness of Europe and of national passions. It is evidence of a wider adventure concerning humanity as a whole: the sudden appearance of storms whose warning signs on the horizon we Europeans have too long pretended to ignore, storms no one can control once they have been unleashed. When such sudden acceleration of history occurs, it signals the defeat of political action, which can do nothing but run after events until it is swallowed up by them. If Europe has any message to transmit to the world, it is truly this one.

In 1905, with the Russo-Japanese War, the first Russian Revolution, and the Tangier crisis, many signals were starting to turn red, but only a few astute observers saw the storm coming. Nine years later, in 1914, tension had reached its peak, but history was not yet written. Major errors in more than one European capital were still necessary before the doomsday machine could be set in motion. Twenty-five years later, Hitler’s military victories were heralded by six years of conquests carried off without firing a shot, while the democratic powers refused to see what was plain to anyone who cared to look. The war really began with the rearmament of 1933 and the fight against the principle of collective security. The withdrawal

from the League of Nations and then from disarmament negotiations by the three Axis powers, Germany, Japan, and Italy, were important stages in a conflict that applied what Hitler himself called a broader strategy (*erweiterte Strategie*). Bombs came later. Before them, several battles were won without encountering any resistance. Those included the annexation of Austria and then of Czechoslovakia, followed by the pact with Stalin that nullified the East-West alliance of the First World War.

After the war, in a letter to Raymond Aron, Carl Schmitt quoted a sentence from Clausewitz with a commentary by Lenin. "The conqueror always loves peace," Clausewitz asserted. "He would happily enter our country quietly." And Lenin comments in the margin: "grandiose, aha!" This sequence is instructive for other parts of the contemporary world, especially East Asia, where the situation often calls to mind the European rivalries of the last century. There, too, the clouds gathering on the horizon are visible. China's legal and diplomatic offensives proliferate, while it claims to be pursuing a "peaceful rise to power." That has not prevented the Europeans from sending the worst possible signals to Beijing, whether it is a matter of multipolarity, arms sales, or craven warnings addressed to Taiwan rather than China.

Anxious minds at the beginning of this century bear little resemblance to those of a hundred years ago, whose carefree nature has often been noted. In a sense, they seem better prepared to confront hard times than their ancestors were. Yet they seem somehow *crushed* by the weight of the past, fearing any kind of change lest it bring on trouble. In 2005, even the campaign in France on the draft European Constitution showed, disturbingly, that the refusal to take risks overwhelmed any other feeling. While the supporters of a yes vote ensured that nothing was going to change, those against denounced all possible change. Seen with a forgiving eye, present-day anxiety proceeds as much from the weight of the past century as from the anticipation of new ordeals.¹⁷ Jung claimed that the iron curtain, bristling with machine guns and barbed wire, ran through the soul of modern man, no matter which side of the frontier one lived on. Europe has finally been reunited, but its enlargement has not been experienced as a victory in most of the western part of the continent. The unity of the European consciousness has not yet been accomplished, as though it is evolving much more slowly than events. Above all, the unconscious ignores time, and bad memories are still lurking there. In circumstances in which control

over the fate of nations and individuals seems increasingly uncertain, it is not surprising that feelings of vulnerability prevail, especially when it is no longer possible to ignore the savagery of which history is capable.

In the twentieth century, one of the principal causes of regression was the dynamics of *the egalitarian passion*, best analyzed by Tocqueville:

Nations today cannot change the equality of conditions within them; but it is up to them whether equality leads to servitude or freedom, to enlightenment or barbarism, to prosperity or poverty.¹⁸

While the twentieth century conducted political and social experiments on a grand scale, it was often by following out “equality of conditions” to the most extreme consequences of modern tyranny. It was in the name of equality that some of the greatest crimes were committed in Russia, China, North Korea, and Cambodia. The speed with which liberty was sacrificed to equality, the magnitude of the human suffering allowed in equality’s name, and the complicity of a portion of the “free world” have taken their place among the great human disasters. Historians produce book after book on modern tyranny but often succeed merely in deepening the mystery.¹⁹ Only novelists have come close to capturing the radical strangeness of those crimes. It is impossible to read George Orwell’s *1984* without a feeling of palpable horror that history books are powerless to communicate.

Except for small, absurd nations like North Korea that continue to cultivate the lunacies of totalitarianism at their people’s expense, the question of equality of condition raised by Tocqueville has gained new momentum with globalization. The globalizing process has spread the egalitarian message around the world, while offering even less hope that its promises will be fulfilled either on a national or a local level. As it is, envy and resentment have no proper outlets in any society.²⁰ In a globalized world, those passions remain fierce and their expression is given more impetus, while the hope that they might be fulfilled appears increasingly utopian. The situation is intensified by the possibility of endless comparisons throughout the world. Successive industrial revolutions have created such large gaps between nations, regions, and peoples that even substantial investments, which are nowhere to be seen, in conjunction with strong literacy campaigns, which are not being undertaken, could hardly reduce them significantly. The egalitarian passion has assumed a worldwide scope, and

information technology has helped sharpen it. Its strength can no longer be contained within any borders, and the contemporary world is therefore an unhappy world. Comparisons are perpetual, whereas progress toward equalizing conditions remains what it has always been: as limited in space as it is finite in time.²¹

That has licensed fertile minds to imagine more transformations than the history books can contain, especially in a hurried world where the youthful population of the most destitute countries has little tolerance for injustice. The clash of civilizations that has been so widely discussed is perhaps nothing more than a desire for universal equality that can never be fulfilled and that will therefore bring forth nothing but frustration and violence.²² That frustration has been the breeding ground for the monster of *Western domination*, a chameleon present in every nook and cranny of modern history, and the myth of the American empire, which is of more recent origin but awakens equally powerful passions. America, however, has neither imperial institutions nor, above all, imperial ambitions, unlike the European powers of the last two centuries. To confirm this, one need merely read the many accounts of American reluctance to engage in conflict or to remain in territories where the United States has won military victories. But those realities do not alter the imperial image.

Power, especially when it appears in so impressive a form as the American version, inevitably has effects like those described in Balzac's *Comédie humaine*, whether we are looking at a particular society or the entire world: it creates envy, competitiveness, and resentment. Peace in the world would require the satisfaction of those collective passions, which is impossible. Hence the seeds of future great disorders are still to be found in the dynamics leading toward equality of conditions. This does not call for a lament about globalization, but rather for recognition that, while democratic passions have become universal, democratic regimes have not. Universalization is the bearer of revolutionary movements of a new kind, of which terrorism is only one manifestation.²³ In light of recent experience, it may be feared that those revolutions will be of the type—"disordered, furious, powerless revolutions that destroy everything and create nothing"—that Balzac presents in his novels.

A second phenomenon, which concerns governments as much as peoples, must be mentioned. Some countries believe that history never gave them what was rightfully theirs. The stability that European societies

worship is not what such countries have in mind. To imagine that they will be satisfied with some sort of reform of the Security Council²⁴ or with speeches on the beauties of multipolarity is pure diplomatic romanticism. What they want is not official positions or speeches but a genuine redistribution of power. If Iran has acquired ballistic and cruise missiles with a range of two to three thousand kilometers and is attempting to develop nuclear weapons in spite of its international agreements and multilateral pressure, it is largely to secure regional hegemony. If New Delhi conducted nuclear tests in 1998, it was to gain greater heft in world affairs as much as to guarantee its defense. India is not lacking in intellectual, economic, or political resources for pursuing that aim, and it will not have to pay the price of extricating itself from communism like China. Of all the nations on earth, China is the most intent on transforming power relations in the twenty-first century for its benefit, and it will also have the fewest scruples about choosing the means to reach that goal. China has never forgotten how the European powers dismembered it, beginning with the Opium War of 1839–42. The revenge to be taken on history guides its foreign policy, as the preservation of power by the Communist Party guides its domestic policy. China's aim often seems to become the rival power to America and to outstrip it if possible. It already thinks of itself as the leading world power.

The questioning of the international status quo by new powers is natural in a time of historical transition like the one we have been passing through since the end of the Cold War. Those rising countries' calls for change have regularly brought the Security Council to consider—though to no effect thus far—enlarging its membership, so as to regain some degree of legitimacy. But, as already underlined, even a successful enlargement would not be enough. Correct handling of the situation would involve the great powers' first accepting the concept of change and not regarding it systematically as an enemy.

Thus what the telescope clearly shows is both the discontent of societies that get nothing from their governments and blame outside *evil influences*, the West foremost among them, and the appearance of new powers on the world stage. The ever-present memory of colonization and the humiliation it continues to generate are even more significant elements in the accusation because America, and Israel with it, are stand-ins for the colonizing power for a good part of the world. The two countries have replaced the real colonizers—the Europeans—in the popular imagination. That the

United States has no colonial past²⁵ gains it no credit, because Washington's support for Israel is experienced as support for an enterprise of a colonial character. That is why an America concerned with justice and development and a resumption of the peace process in the Middle East is a factor in world stability, both real and symbolic, even if the most radical enemies of the United States and Israel remain unmoved. That is also why the *dignity* of the Palestinian people has symbolic value in so many parts of the world.

The intention of some nations to take revenge on a West that from their point of view has imposed its law on the rest of the world for too long poses a question of a different nature. The desire for strategic rearrangements is strong. Nations delivering that message, whether India, China, or Iran, will make their voices heard. The problem is less containing their ambitions than framing them so that they do not disturb regional and world peace. In the twentieth century, that is precisely what we Europeans failed to do when faced with the rise of Germany. We know the consequences of that error. It is dangerous to ignore these two phenomena, the desire for revenge and the necessity for strategic rearrangement, or to pretend not to understand their implications.

Another cause for the return to barbarism in the twentieth century has been the growing gap between the progress of science and technology and the absence of comparable progress in the ethical realm. The instability of the contemporary world stems largely from the ever-increasing dependence of people on technology, while the human psyche remains as vulnerable as ever at a time when moral values have lost much of their solidity. The powers of human beings have expanded considerably, whereas the ends of action are more and more confused and psychological equilibrium is constantly threatened by too many stimuli. Jung wrote on the subject frequently, comparing his age to the early days of Christendom:

As at the beginning of the Christian era, so again today we are faced with the problem of the general moral backwardness which has failed to keep pace with our scientific, technical, and social progress. So much is at stake and so much depends on the psychological constitution of modern man.²⁶

The available material means of destruction combined with the psychic forces of destruction may justify anxiety in circles far broader than psychoanalytic ones. In the last century, the gap between the means available to

humankind and humankind's intellectual and moral condition had already led to putting industrialization to work for destructive purposes. Industrial methods revolutionized war in 1914, and as early as 1918 they made possible the advent of the most monstrous forms for the organization of societies and camps.

A scholar of the concentration camp system, Anne Applebaum,²⁷ explains how the new prison industry was set up at the end of the First World War, with internment camps for prisoners proliferating across Europe.²⁸ Both Nazis and Soviets organized and managed their concentration camps along industrial lines; otherwise, such large numbers of prisoners could never have been taken in hand and, later, exterminated. All parties involved used the methods of industrial warfare perfected during the 1914–18 war. And beginning in 1937, Stalinism had at its disposal a deadly system modeled on the five-year plan: it was a simple matter of filling quotas. On July 30, 1937, Nikolai Yezhov, the head of the Soviet secret police, presented to the Politburo order no. 00447, which decreed that regions would be assigned quotas beginning in August for two categories of individuals: those to be killed and those to be sentenced to deportation. The initial suggestion was 72,950 people for category 1 and 259,450 people for category 2. The families of both categories were to be deported. The regions quickly filled the quotas, then asked Moscow for new authorizations. In the end, order no. 00447 led to 767,397 arrests and 386,798 executions. A month later, order no. 00485 mandated the liquidation of members of the Polish opposition and spies and legitimized 350,000 arrests, including 247,157 executions. The regions engaged in real competition to fulfill the quotas. The killing machine was even freer to operate because it had nothing to do with real crimes.²⁹ One of the great problems for Russia today—and an even greater one for China—is that, unlike Hitler's concentration camps, theirs were never liberated and no Nuremberg tribunal ever judged the crimes that had been committed.

The possibilities for political crime opened up by industrial methods were frequently denounced at the end of the Second World War. The bishop of Clermont-Ferrand, on being liberated from a Nazi concentration camp, had this to say:

The criminal institutions of which we were witnesses and victims carry within themselves all the scourges of ancient barbarity and servitude, to which they

have added a new systematization and a new method able to magnify human suffering to the full extent made possible by modern science.³⁰

The most accurate accounts of Nazi and Stalinist documents dealing with the bureaucracy of death are sometimes metaphorical, as in this passage from *The Last Days of Mankind* by Karl Kraus, in which the quick transformation of trees into a newspaper represents the efficient killing of people and disposal of their bodies in the death camps:

Wishing to establish the precise amount of time it takes to transform a tree standing in a forest into a newspaper, the owner of a paper mill had the idea of undertaking a very interesting experiment. At 7:35, he had three trees cut down in the nearby forest and, after the bark was removed, had them transformed in the wood pulp factory. The transformation of the three tree trunks into liquid wood cellulose was so swift that by 9:39 the first roll of printing paper came out of the machine. This roll was taken immediately to a newspaper printing plant two and a half miles away, and by 11 in the morning the newspaper was being sold in the street.³¹

We are not protected against a return to the kind of abstract thought that treats people as things. The increasing influence of virtual reality on modern psychology has revealed new prospects for the negation of the individual and his transformation into a mere statistic.

It is difficult to believe that human misery can be deepened yet more by technology, but there are new fearsome applications available, particularly in the realm of biology. A few months after the Ukrainian presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko was poisoned using a particularly toxic form of dioxin, a former member of the Soviet Main Intelligence Administration (GRU) revealed the existence of a KGB laboratory that specialized in the creation of biological agents capable of killing undetected.³² The sequencing of the human genome has also opened up possibilities for behavior modification and interference with the immune system unknown to the last century. As Karl Kraus remarked, every age has the epidemic it deserves; ours could be literal rather than symbolic. Finally, the globalization of violence has palpably changed the situation.³³ International terrorism has pursued a privatization of violence that has put into the hands of small groups or even individuals destructive capacities that were formerly

the preserve of states. In this sense, September 11 expressed the brutality of our age and the negation of the value of human life. It belongs to the entire world as much as to America.

If we consider the causes of violence, we cannot fail to see them as the expression of an imbalance that has to do with the gap between technological, social, and political developments. One of the great constants in German histories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that attempt to explain the Third Reich has been their highlighting of the speed with which industrialization was carried out in a country that was in no way prepared for it. Rapid industrialization, in that view, was an even more negative force in society because it took place at a time when Germany possessed neither the political balance nor the cultural unity of the other countries of Western Europe. This encounter of modern technology with political and social backwardness—frequently noted by Karl Marx—brutally transformed the life of the German people.

The judges of the Nuremberg tribunal referred in 1945 to that destructive social transformation as they sought the roots of the new political ideology that had suddenly appeared in Germany:

The communitarian racial mystique came out of the spiritual and moral crisis that Germany went through in the nineteenth century, with the abrupt change of its economic and social structure brought about by particularly rapid industrialization . . . While inner spiritual life grew weaker, cruel uncertainty afflicted men's minds, an uncertainty admirably defined by the term *Ratslosigkeit*, an untranslatable word meaning roughly not knowing which way to turn, a cruel state of mind of the nineteenth century that many Germans have described with tragic eloquence. A gaping void opened within souls unhinged by the search for new values.³⁴

The contemporary world provides many illustrations of the same phenomenon, and an important part of present-day violence can be explained in similar ways.

In any account of the regression that took place in the last century, we must therefore consider another major factor. Franz Kafka meticulously described it in his work: a view of the world suddenly deserted by the idea of the divine, revealing unsuspected depths in man. The end of religion and the death of the Father for the majority of Europeans left an enormous

void in Western civilization, of which all thinkers and artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were aware. George Steiner has gone so far as to say that the entire political and philosophical history of the last 150 years in the West can be understood as a series of efforts to fill the central void left by the erosion of theology. We continue to build the Great Wall of a China whose emperor has disappeared. We continue to produce laws although we have no legislator any longer. The replacements for religion that have sprouted from this soil have quickly proved more destructive to mankind and civilization than the faiths themselves ever were.³⁵ Religions, at least, had been restrained by the idea of a superior power, by belief in the corruption of mankind, and by the need for close monitoring of one's actions and impulses. With the end of those beliefs, which constituted so many barriers to action, there appeared tyrannies without limits, capable of any crime.

In the wake of the collapse of so many utopian political experiments, "the unlimited promise of the future" that André Gide trumpeted has ceased to exercise its charm. But the desire to find simple explanations for complicated problems remains. It continues to produce aberrations, one variant of which is Islamic fundamentalism. Scholars of Islam have pointed out how monstrous a deviation this is from Islamic faith.³⁶ But every society and every religion has its share of follies. The followers they attract are secure in their complacency because the "terrible simplifiers" of the day are legion and credulity is one of the most troubling characteristics of the information age.

After the collapse of comprehensive explanations, the establishment of the kingdom of justice still captivates the human mind, but the means to attain it seem more than ever out of reach. Greater justice would require both genuine sacrifice by rich countries and unparalleled political courage on the part of the elites of poor countries. Declarations about worldwide taxation of the products of globalization are rhetoric that deceives no one. That tax has the huge political virtue of being paid by no voter. Donor countries have proved incapable of fulfilling their promise to devote 0.7 percent of GDP to development aid (France gives only 0.5 percent). In addition, development aid as it has been conducted for fifty years, whereby sub-Saharan Africa received more than one trillion dollars while growing more impoverished, is often, like debt forgiveness, an encouragement to bad management and corruption.

The key to development remains education and the capacity for innovation. Neither one is encouraged in countries whose authoritarian regimes understand all too well the risks of a better-educated population. To choose this path would be finally to choose the interest of the people against the interest of governments, instead of prolonging a Faustian pact with regimes that often are detested and have never seriously been required to reform. Africa was a priority of the G8 meetings in Genoa in 2001, Kananaskis in 2002, Evian in 2003, and Sea Island in 2004, and was one of the two principal themes of the Edinburgh meeting of 2005. Conferences on the global problem of poverty, which have tended to become an industry, will produce no results without a lowering of tariff barriers, the development of enlightened local elites, the improvement of the health and education systems, and finally, above all, relentless struggle against corruption and the flouting of law.