Marcel Gauchet talks about democracy and social media

French philosopher, historian, and intellectual Marcel Gauchet discusses to the role of innovation, new technologies, and social media in our current democracies to Maddyness.

French philosopher, historian, and chief editor of the magazine *Le Débat*, Marcel Gauchet has been asking himself for almost 50 years about the construction of democracy and the issues of political power. Last year, he published the book *Robespierre: l'homme qui nous divise le plus*, *Des hommes qui ont fait la France* ("Robespierre: the man who divides us the most", "Men who have helped build France"), which is dedicated to the legendary character of the French Revolution.

During the USI (Unexpected Sources of Inspiration) conferences, Marcel addressed a parallel between this founding event of modern democracy and the *gilets jaunes* movement (yellow vests movement, a French political movement for economic justice), which is seen as a contemporary revolution. Maddyness took a moment to discuss the role of innovation, new technologies, and social media in our current day democracies with him.

Maddyness. Are we programmed to reinvent what has always existed?

Marcel Gauchet. We have the choice between being subject to a resurgence of the past, which psychanalysists call suppressing, or we can take control of our past. We are faced with this challenge in our cultural situation today. For decades we've experimented with a sort of power takeover by knowledge

which justifies the expression "knowledge society." We don't live through past glories. Yet, past events are susceptible to being called into question in terms of optimising knowledge, capable of providing better answers than those that have always existed.

The inconvenient part about this method, which won't disappear anytime soon, is that it's just the initial stage. It leaves out some important questions: what'll be left of this past that we're trying to improve upon if we don't ask ourselves how it was created, to begin with? When we forget about it or we don't take it into account, it has a tendency to keep coming back to remind us. We must reclaim the past so that we're not subject to it or we'll become puppets who have a grasp of reality but who're always exposed to the debate of a past that we don't control.

Don't we support an idea of a better past with the saying "it was better before"?

This expression is the fruit of ignorance. When we're aware of the past, we don't have a tendency to think that it was better before! Nostalgia is the fruit of disregarding the past. It's a daily debate, represented by opposition between technophiles and technophobes, who're both wrong. Saying that it was better before doesn't give any idea about what it was like before. It isn't a good start.

You talk about "presentism" which disregards the past to focus on the present. What about "futurism"?

Futurism is just a form of presentism. The obsession of an unreasonable, more or less imaginary future leads to connecting yourself to the present because that's where the future stems from. It's because of the future that we get so caught up in the present without asking ourselves about what the future will be. No matter what we do or want, there will always be a mix between a legacy of the past and the product of the present.

How can we constructively integrate our past into a political or technological project that aims towards the future?

This is the cultural challenge of our times. We're entering a new period of the relationship between technology and the future that we've been building over the last few decades. There isn't one solution, but we'll need to find meaning in the past. It isn't about being obsessed with the past, but we do need to understand that the past continues to dwell within us. Collective psychoanalysis should be done, which doesn't mean taking care of ourselves but giving ourselves the best way to approach and enrich the future. Individuals who do this personally are already giving themselves an advantage.

Some have understood it; their actions are guided by a sort of search for

balance. They ask themselves questions about end results and have a better vision of these results. In terms of economic-political efficiency, what you ignore from the past will confront you and you have to be prepared. The constant surprise of political figures about things they did not even seem to suspect was possible is one of the features of our society. However, it's generally not very hard to foresee them.

Is social media the incarnation of Robespierre's idea of democracy?

I think that he would've been interested in it for sure. Yet there's something that would've shocked him, which is that, contrary to one of his favourite guiding principles, people aren't united. In fact, they're very divided. This is the biggest difference between the yellow vests movement and the sans-culottes (literally "people without breeches", the lower-class people who revolted

against the French government because of the poor quality of life in late 18th century) who thought that the people were united and had a common idea: the general interest. Through democracy, yellow vests think that it's not necessary to try to create unanimity, which would've been artificial. They're still unified, but they admit that they don't agree on everything. This would've deeply disturbed Robespierre.

Is it up to social media to highlight these diverse points of view?

This is the nature of social media. Everyone communicates with everyone, but a unanimity can't be reached. Democracy teaches us that unanimity never leads to very reasonable political decisions. There are always contradictions to consider, which is necessary for political excellence. This is why the yellow vests movement should be studied; they are perfectly conscious of this.

First of all, they don't want representatives. But why? Not just because the representatives will inevitably be drawn into the official political scheme, but also because it's impossible to represent so many differences. Power is an enormous challenge. When you have so many different complaints, it's even harder to respond to them. This is the society that we must live with.

Does social media not inherently favour the emergence of the collective interest so dear to Robespierre?

Of course! But they're just at the starting point. They provide the raw material. The approach would be to create unity from diversity without destroying the latter. This is an almost mathematical problem, but maths is simpler than a real-life situation!

Robespierre was very attached to controlling representatives. Could social media platforms become tools for control?

They already are, but this rudimentary control isn't used to the best of its abilities. Control isn't about insulting, systematic bad-mouthing, a hostile frenzy, or hate. It's the drive to go deeper into why decisions are taken in order to better challenge them and be reasonable. We're in a learning process where we're rather relaxed about control, but later on, we'll reach a second phase, where we'll be more reasonable.

Social media is extraordinary, but we must know how to use it and for the moment, we don't know how to use it well. We're realising that it's just as difficult to represent honest people as it's to control representatives honestly. It takes time to build, yet this isn't easy. I like to think that we're at the beginning of something important. I find a lot of young people who struggle to find a way to start a true political or civic discussion through social media, a discussion about the control of government action as well as how we can fix these issues.

It's not enough to criticise or condemn what the government does, but there are many solutions that can stem from a vast number of domains. We naively thought that collective intelligence was going to magically sprout from social media. This is not the case. These platforms can be used to achieve collective intelligence, but intelligence is a shared job that still needs to be worked on! We're at a tipping point because everyone is tired of this surge of insanity that even tires those who produce it. The moment of insanity has passed, and the time of exercising rights has started to take off.

Read also

_____

5 tips to help you contact journalists through social media

Basically, we forget that technology is just a tool.

Absolutely! We also forget that collective intelligence has rules, a discipline, and elaborate workings that are anything but obvious; it's quite complicated. The more that we enlarge the circle – and that's the idea of social media – the

harder it'll get to produce something with a genuine consensus, which means something that doesn't come from higher up, but is born lower down, among the people. The challenge is finding a way to allow a common thought or at least a shared diagnosis to circulate among many people since there'll always be a divide of opinions in a democracy.

I think that this could be one of the main functions of civic discussions about social media. We're aware of the difficulties of democracy, yet we're trying to navigate through them. Occasionally, we find solutions to problems that we weren't even aware of, yet we still have problems that we can't seem to find solutions to. We've gone from the era of people who could inspire a large number of people by professing personal judgements – and I think that we won't see any more of this – to a world where everyone can speak out. We're no longer obligated to turn to people who know better than us.

Do the "bubbles" of social media that we shut ourselves into with other people who have similar ideas to ours keep us from working together as a whole?

In a democracy, there are always two stages. The first stage comes from the activists who feel like they were born to talk on behalf of others. They speak out and we realise that no one identifies with what they're talking about. The second stage is an awakening of what's been falsely called the silent majority, which is made up of people who're a little less sure about their ideas that they've thought about a little too much. These people will express themselves in the end. I recently read an article about the effects of Twitter that said that the biggest mistake of political figures is thinking that what they post on Twitter reflects the public opinion. Not even close! This shows the most extreme points of view in these famous bubbles.

Political figures need to get this fallacy out of their heads. But the problem now is to give shape to the majority who must stop being silent and speak out. We're arriving at this point. By definition, these activists are intolerant, extreme, radical, and biased, but the population isn't like that. They can see both sides of the story and this is what stops them. When you're without nuances, you can express yourself freely and in the complete intolerance of those who don't think the same way as you.

The real function of social media in relation to its oversimplification will be to help these perplexities, doubts, and interrogations develop better. We must realise the evolutions that have happened so far though. Social media has already allowed movements and processes to evolve. We haven't reached the final stage of social media yet; it's still in its joyful childhood.

Therefore, could we reinvent representative democracy? Couldn't technology favour direct democracy?

I don't think so, no. The democratic process is an argument between two fundamental elements: peoples' differing interests and unity among them. Social media increases diversity, separations, and variety to such a point that some say it is chaos. This makes creating coherence even more necessary. Representatives should work towards this and must keep in mind what may come from this societal expression and what may be amplified by social media.

If you just put everything that emerges in this new public space end to end, you're unable to define any definite and consistent direction or priorities! Because if there are only extreme emergencies and you have limited resources, you can't do anything.

French philosopher, historian, and chief editor of the magazine *Le Débat*, Marcel Gauchet has been asking himself for almost 50 years about the construction of democracy, the issues of political power, technology changes and more recently the impact of social media. Last year, he published the book *Robespierre: l'homme qui nous divise le plus*, *Des hommes qui ont fait la France* ("Robespierre: the man who divides us the most", "Men who have helped build France"), which is dedicated to the legendary character of the French Revolution.

During the USI (Unexpected Sources of Inspiration) conferences, Marcel addressed a parallel between this founding event of modern democracy and the *gilets jaunes* movement (yellow vests movement, a French political movement for economic justice), which is seen as a contemporary revolution. Maddyness took a moment to discuss the role of innovation, new technologies, and social media in our current day democracies with him.

Maddyness. Are we programmed to reinvent what has always existed?

Marcel Gauchet. We have the choice between being subject to a resurgence of the past, which psychanalysists call suppressing, or we can take control of our past. We are faced with this challenge in our cultural situation today. For decades we've experimented with a sort of power takeover by knowledge which justifies the expression "knowledge society." We don't live through past glories. Yet, past events are susceptible to being called into question in terms of optimising knowledge, capable of providing better answers than those that have always existed. The inconvenient part about this method, which won't

disappear anytime soon, is that it's just the initial stage. It leaves out some important questions: what'll be left of this past that we're trying to improve upon if we don't ask ourselves how it was created, to begin with? When we forget about it or we don't take it into account, it has a tendency to keep coming back to remind us. We must reclaim the past so that we're not subject to it or we'll become puppets who have a grasp of reality but who're always exposed to the debate of a past that we don't control.

Don't we support an idea of a better past with the saying "it was better before"?

This expression is the fruit of ignorance. When we're aware of the past, we don't have a tendency to think that it was better before! Nostalgia is the fruit of disregarding the past. It's a daily debate, represented by opposition between technophiles and technophobes, who're both wrong. Saying that it was better before doesn't give any idea about what it was like before. It isn't a good start.

You talk about "presentism" which disregards the past to focus on the present. What about "futurism"?

Futurism is just a form of presentism. The obsession of an unreasonable, more or less imaginary future leads to connecting yourself to the present because that's where the future stems from. It's because of the future that we get so caught up in the present without asking ourselves about what the future will be. No matter what we do or want, there will always be a mix between a legacy of the past and the product of the present.

How can we constructively integrate our past into a political or technological project that aims towards the future?

This is the cultural challenge of our times. We're entering a new period of the relationship between technology and the future that we've been building over the last few decades. There isn't one solution, but we'll need to find meaning in the past. It isn't about being obsessed with the past, but we do need to understand that the past continues to dwell within us. A collective psychoanalysis should be done, which doesn't mean taking care of ourselves but giving ourselves the best way to approach and enrich the future. Individuals who do this personally are already giving themselves an advantage. Some have understood it; their actions are guided by a sort of search for balance. They ask themselves questions about end results and have a better vision of these results. In terms of economic-political efficiency, what you ignore from the past will confront you and you have to be prepared. The constant surprise of political figures about things they did not even seem to suspect was possible is one of the features of our society. However, it's generally not very hard to foresee them.

Is social media the incarnation of Robespierre's idea of democracy?

I think that he would've been interested in it for sure. Yet there's something that would've shocked him, which is that, contrary to one of his favourite guiding principles, people aren't united. In fact, they're very divided. This is the biggest difference between the yellow vests movement and the sans-culottes (literally "people without breeches", the lower-class people who revolted

against the French government because of the poor quality of life in late 18th century) who thought that the people were united and had a common idea: the general interest. Through democracy, yellow vests think that it's not necessary to try to create unanimity, which would've been artificial. They're still unified, but they admit that they don't agree on everything. This would've deeply disturbed Robespierre.

Is it up to social media to highlight these diverse points of view?

This is the nature of social media. Everyone communicates with everyone, but an unanimity can't be reached. Democracy teaches us that unanimity never leads to very reasonable political decisions. There are always contradictions to consider, which is necessary for political excellence. This is why the yellow vests movement should be studied; they are perfectly conscious of this. First of all, they don't want representatives. But why? Not just because the representatives will inevitably be drawn into the official political scheme, but also because it's impossible to represent so many differences. Power is an enormous challenge. When you have so many different complaints, it's even harder to respond to them. This is the society that we must live with.

Does social media not inherently favour the emergence of the collective interest so dear to Robespierre?

Of course! But they're just at the starting point. They provide the raw material. The approach would be to create unity from diversity without destroying the latter. This is an almost mathematical problem, but maths is simpler than a real-life situation!

Robespierre was very attached to controlling representatives. Could social media platforms become tools for control?

They already are, but this rudimentary control isn't used to the best of its abilities. Control isn't about insulting, systematic bad-mouthing, a hostile frenzy, or hate. It's the drive to go deeper into why decisions are taken in order to better challenge them and be reasonable. We're in a learning process where we're rather relaxed about control, but later on, we'll reach a second phase, where we'll be more reasonable. Social media is extraordinary, but we must know how to use it and for the moment, we don't know how to use it well. We're realising that it's just as difficult to represent honest people as it's to

control representatives honestly. It takes time to build, yet this isn't easy. I like to think that we're at the beginning of something important. I find a lot of young people who struggle to find a way to start a true political or civic discussion through social media, a discussion about the control of government action as well as how we can fix these issues. It's not enough to criticise or condemn what the government does, but there are many solutions that can stem from a vast number of domains. We naively thought that collective intelligence was going to magically sprout from social media. This is not the case. These platforms can be used to achieve collective intelligence, but intelligence is a shared job that still needs to be worked on! We're at a tipping point because everyone is tired of this surge of insanity that even tires those who produce it. The moment of insanity has passed, and the time of exercising rights has started to take off.

Basically, we forget that technology is just a tool.

Absolutely! We also forget that collective intelligence has rules, a discipline, and elaborate workings that are anything but obvious; it's quite complicated. The more that we enlarge the circle – and that's the idea of social media – the harder it'll get to produce something with a genuine consensus, which means something that doesn't come from higher up, but is born lower down, among the people. The challenge is finding a way to allow a common thought or at least a shared diagnosis to circulate among many people, since there'll always be a divide of opinions in democracy. I think that this could be one of the main functions of the civic discussions about social media. We're aware of the difficulties of democracy, yet we're trying to navigate through them. Occasionally, we find solutions to problems that we weren't even aware of, yet we still have problems that we can't seem to find solutions to. We've gone from the era of people who could inspire a large number of people by professing personal judgements – and I think that we won't see any more of this – to a world where everyone can speak out. We're no longer obligated to turn to people who know better than us.

Do the "bubbles" of social media that we shut ourselves into with other people who have similar ideas to ours keep us from working together as a whole?

In democracy, there are always two stages. The first stage comes from the activists who feel like they were born to talk on behalf of others. They speak out and we realise that no one identifies with what they're talking about. The second stage is an awakening of what's been falsely called the silent majority, which is made up of people who're a little less sure about their ideas that they've thought about a little too much. These people will express themselves in the end. I recently read an article about the effects of Twitter that said that the biggest mistake of political figures is thinking that what they post on Twitter reflects the public opinion. Not even close! This shows the most extreme points of view in these famous bubbles. Political figures need to get

this fallacy out of their heads. But the problem now is to give shape to the majority who must stop being silent and speak out. We're arriving to this point. By definition, these activists are intolerant, extreme, radical, and biased, but the population isn't like that. They can see both sides of the story and this is what stops them. When you're without nuances, you can express yourself freely and in the complete intolerance of those who don't think the same way as you. The real function of social media in relation to its oversimplification will be to help these perplexities, doubts, and interrogations develop better. We must realise the evolutions that have happened so far though. Social media has already allowed movements and processes to evolve. We haven't reached the final stage of social media yet; it's still in its joyful childhood.

Therefore, could we reinvent representative democracy? Couldn't technology favour direct democracy?

I don't think so, no. The democratic process is an argument between two fundamental elements: peoples' differing interests and the unity among them. Social media increases diversity, separations, and variety to such a point that some say it is chaos. This makes creating coherence even more necessary. Representatives should work towards this and must keep in mind what may come from this societal expression and what may be amplified by social media. If you just put everything that emerges in this new public space end to end, you're unable to define any definite and consistent direction or priorities! Because if there are only extreme emergencies and you have limited resources, you can't do anything.