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Jaccuse Centenary comments

On January 13, 1898, Émile Zola wrote the doubtlessly most famous newspaper article of that period, indeed, maybe of all times. It appeared in the Parisian newspaper *Aurore*. The background was the ongoing court proceedings against French Army Captain Alfred Dreyfus. Dreyfus, as it happened also a Jew, was accused of high treason in the pay of arch-enemy Germany. He had been arrested in October 1894, had seen trial by a closed military court, and had then, on very flimsy evidence, been demoted and received a life sentence. He served five years on Devils Island in French Guyana.

As time passed, more and more evidence appeared that as a matter of fact another officer, Esterhazy, was the true spy. This was extremely uncomfortable for the higher military establishment, where the atmosphere was both anti-German and anti-Semitic. Absurd steps were taken to prevent insight and transparency when scrutinising evidence. The question became more and more politicised. Demands for a new trial clashed with patriotic honour of officers and the military court.

With the power of a thunderbolt the Dreyfus Affaire was pushed to the forefront of the political agenda. Under the heading *Jaccuse* Zola pleaded the case for Dreyfus, at the same time accusing the military leadership of moral corruption. As a result he himself became prosecuted. The whole of France became involved, for or against. The effects reached all Europe. No longer could anything be concealed. Due process had really started (and one might compare Watergate in the US as a comparison).

Yes, Zola was found guilty of offending the honour of the Army. He was sentenced to one year in prison and was heavily fined. But the serious doubts about the guilt or innocence of Dreyfus could no longer be evaded in silence.

In August the same year another officer committed suicide, leaving a note confessing forgery on behalf of the Army in order to conceal how the Dreyfus court proceedings were being conducted. The way now lay open for the court to be reorganised and a new trial was launched. But not even now was the previous sentence against Dreyfus repealed. So infected was the atmosphere, so bone-hard the attitudes and the principal antagonisms that a third trial was not held for another six years. Only with a complete court revision in 1906 was Dreyfus fully rehabilitated and reinstated in his rank as officer.

This Affaire became in reality an extremely important milestone not only in the history of the Third Republic of France. Zola's article became the starting point for the modern contemporary discussion about the role and responsibility of the intellectuals for politics and society. It coincides also with another modern phenomenon and formative factor in society the modern mass-distributed press. The newspaper *l'Aurore* sold an extra 200.000 copies the day Zola's article appeared. Yes, a free press was a precondition for the due process. But was this enough to explain the course of events? No. Somewhere a deeper social responsibility remains to be analysed.

The interesting and time-less element in lAffaire Dreyfus lies in the tension between demands for loyalty towards the collective, and the right to react according to private conscience. The former has throughout the ages been the prime uniting social factor. Power elites have defined this value system, and thus also the concept of the public good, and consequently the individual has been required to stay silent and accept.

To maintain the right of the individual to stand aside, the right to maintain critical distance to power, is part of our rational heritage from the Age of Enlightenment. It is a continuous, ongoing, process.

The militarism of the turn of last century was followed by the nationalism of the World Wars, totalitarian regimes, the black-and-white map of the Cold War, the manipulation of Cultural revolutions and religious fundamentalism. Everywhere with a call for a better world. Who can, under these pressures, resist calls for involvement. loyalty and crusades? Who can be the one to dare to challenge, question, and be a champion of alternative Justice, alternative Morals?

The answer cannot be allowed to become a simple contempt for involvement. Not the philosophy of disengagement, not a silence that can be mistaken for cowardice or indifference. What a fighting humanism demands is a distance to the sort of involvement which demands submission, or belief systems of a religious kind which so often are combined with blinkers and moral tunnelvision.

The social responsibility of the Humanist is to try to support the individual who is pressurized by collective group behaviour and unreflecting demands for collective loyalty. It was this responsibility Emile Zola took one hundred years ago. And a century later we are forced to observe that the struggle against prejudice, and the narrow interests of the ruling elites, for transparency and due control of administrations, must continue. The Intellectuals however we define this elusive concept are those who defend these values. Shared hopefully by a citizenship intent on creating and preserving these values in its aspiration to attain the good democracy. Everyone knows that this struggle is never won once for all.

Freedom of Speech and Expression provide a legal foundation, but that is not all there is to it. We all also have a responsibility for how we ourselves make use of freedom to write and of freedom of expression. We have an ethical responsibility to act for these rights also on behalf of those deprived of them. We have a moral responsibility to react when and where these freedoms are abused. Violations which offend humanism must be subject for arguments and dialogue. Fundamentalist and Totalitarian movements become an obligation to condemn.

We must always defend the individual against all that diminishes him or her as a human being, or reduces him or her solely to a means to achieve a putative higher goal. Zola died exactly 100 years ago. His article from 1898 is not a bad point of departure for discussions on civil courage and our responsibility of today. Parallels small and large are sometimes surprisingly and uncomfortably - close.

Few centuries have reminded us more forcefully of our responsibility for how Free Speech is used. If anything should be underlined, it is that freedom without morals is as dislikeable as pure

Repression itself.

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