

What legitimacy does authority have?

JEAN-PIERRE LEBRUN

Yesterday's world was represented as pyramidal (or vertical) with, at the top, the more or less recognized figure of a master or leader who dictated the laws and constraints governing the way society functioned. This conception was structured like that of a religious organization, where God and his representative obviously occupied the top spot with complete legitimacy. Horizontality was not absent, but it was not prominent, and it was mainly women who occupied this space. Today, the world sees itself as horizontal (networked). This has led to a discrediting of verticality. We have even come to think that where there is still any verticality, it immediately implies domination, and therefore abuse that must be fought, which is far from always being the case and can, paradoxically, only lead to endless conflict. Here we can introduce a crucial question, because there are two ways of interpreting this shift from verticality to horizontality. Either it is thought of as the possibility of freeing oneself from all verticality, from all transcendence; or it is an evolution that would allow one to emancipate oneself from the abuses and excesses of yesterday's verticality, thus moving towards greater equality, but without suggesting that it would be possible to get rid of verticality altogether. So today, as Charlie Hebdo's defense attorney Richard Malka writes in *Après Dieu: on ne remplacera pas les religions avant longtemps* (After God: Religions will not be replaced anytime soon), there is no unifying transcendence that is as effective. The ideologies, communism and Maoism, that were supposed to replace it lasted only a blink of an eye and caused crimes against humanity worse than those for which religious fanaticism is responsible. Tens of millions of deaths. (...) We need another transcendence. In a recent article, I mentioned three reasons for thinking that we cannot completely free ourselves from verticality: the need to distinguish the different participants in a group from the group itself; the fact that language imposes an asymmetry of positions on us—listener and speaker—and therefore automatically applies to everyone; the fact that there will always be a vertical relationship between parents and children, and denying this will not help the child find his own way.

As we shall see, this distinction between the two different ways of thinking about emancipation will prove crucial for the future of our society. Linked to this perception of horizontality is, logically, a strong desire for equality (economic, financial, cultural, etc.), which sets itself the goal of eliminating all verticality—and therefore all asymmetry of positions—as this is immediately interpreted as domination. Our implicit conception of the world, which was previously organized around verticality, has therefore changed radically, but what we need to understand is that the constraints of the human condition are nevertheless still the same, despite the radically different ways in which they are transmitted. For example, in yesterday's world, authority was taken for granted and was recognized in those who occupied the top position, whether it was the father in the family, the teacher at school, the boss at work, the ruler over the ruled... This authority was logically and implicitly recognized as legitimate because it came from above. It could be challenged in the way it was exercised, but its principle remained relevant and was immediately legitimate. Parents had it to educate their children in the family, teachers to teach their pupils at school, bosses to command their workers in the factory, politicians to lead their citizens... In today's world, which prides itself on being horizontal, this

authority is no longer taken for granted; it is even rejected in principle because it is seen as a source of inequality, and therefore nothing legitimizes it from the outset. This is how the problem arises today in schools: it is not that teachers no longer have the authority they once had, but that teachers and students can no longer refer to it as a third party to which both partners can refer. This has led to numerous protests that ultimately make teaching itself difficult, if not impossible, and by extension any form of governance.

In his latest book, *Le nœud démocratique* (The Democratic Knot), Marcel Gauchet summarizes in a few lines the revolution that has changed the face of the world both practically and intellectually. (...) From a vertically ordered world, we have moved to a world that unfolds horizontally. Verticality was that of the spectrum of sacred mediation and its logic of imposing unity. It has been replaced by a triplicity of mediations that one is tempted to call "horizontal" [law, politics, history] since they operate on the same level as the terms they connect, without any concern, moreover, for bringing everything back to the same focal point, as vertical mediation did. (...) To put it bluntly: we used to see only the whole within which the parts had to struggle to find their place; now we see only the parts, without the whole in which they take their place, even though it conditions their existence. What we need to perceive, then, is the extent to which this new horizontal model certainly privileges the individuality of each person but finds it very difficult to make a whole out of all the "scattered mismatches." It no longer allows us to make a whole simply because such a desire is immediately interpreted as wanting to prevent the emergence of each person's particularity. It is as if the only thing that matters is the emergence of individuals, but it is no longer self-evident that with all these small individuals, it is still possible to achieve commonality. However, this allows us to grasp the hope that the change in which we are caught up brings. To put an end to a verticality that legitimized inequalities and made its deleterious effects invisible.

To illustrate the progress that such a new world can bring, we can look at the film and television industry, which has been particularly affected by the machismo of yesterday. It is only by challenging this verticality that the veil has been lifted on the excesses and abuses committed by many powerful men in this industry. Let us also consider the recently revealed scandal of Bétharram's appalling practices and what the spontaneously vertical model allowed to happen with impunity. However, in my book *Clinique de l'institution*, I pointed out how this change led to a reversal of what is expected and tolerated of the "au moins-un(e)" (the one who occupies the position of exception): Yesterday, recognition of the legitimacy of such a position made us accept as inevitable the fact that those who occupied it could take advantage of it, even abuse it, and that in any case, as long as they were in place, they were the strongest! But today, now that this position no longer has its spontaneous legitimacy, we no longer accept their excesses. Instead, we demand that they submit to the laws in force. To put it more conceptually, yesterday, being "outside the law" spontaneously authorized those in charge of making the law to abuse it. Being in power almost spontaneously gave them the status of father of the horde. Today, we demand that those who occupy this position also be "within the law," and we no longer accept their possible excesses.

In short, those who now occupy positions of privilege are also required to submit to castration. And this is where we see the value of distinguishing between the two ways of conceiving the collective that we mentioned earlier. Either the horizontal mode of social organization claims to rid us of all verticality and thus serves only to intensify the passion for

equality. To do this, it suffices to read all the asymmetries in terms of domination that need to be overturned. In doing so, however, it invites another form of domination! Either the prevalence of horizontality does not eliminate verticality, which always has its "logical place" even when it no longer spontaneously legitimizes the law; we must therefore ensure that this law can no longer authorize any domination, nor should it allow anyone who still occupies a position of exception to avoid submitting to said law. In other words, we have a huge task ahead of us, as functioning collectively in a horizontal manner makes it particularly difficult to still recognize the legitimacy of the logical place of verticality. However, it is only through the persistence of legitimate authority that it will be possible to limit abuses of power. This is a paradox that we are far from readily accepting.