

The Perspective of the Drowning: Alain Supiot on Simone Weil

A conversation with Alain Supiot, about Simone Weil's wide-ranging thought.

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Simone Weil only lived till thirty-four years of age, but she left behind a powerful body of work that enlightens us even today. Born in Paris in 1909, she was a pupil of "Alain," a graduate of the ENS, and a qualified philosophy teacher. She could have remained a brilliant interpreter of Plato and Descartes. But her taste for justice instead drove her toward an unrelenting political engagement, as a trade unionist, as a pacifist, and as a member of the Resistance. It drove her toward writing, as she authored texts that married theory with her reflection on work, law and politics. She had a continuing desire to experience the world: from travelling to Germany to understand the rise of Nazism, to working in a factory in order to live the working-class condition, seeing the war in Spain first-hand, and taking part in the Resistance from London. She mixed all of these experiences in a spiritual quest at the edges of mysticism. She died in England in 1943. *L'Obs* asked the jurist Alain Supiot, a specialist in labour law and a professor at the Collège de France, to give his reading of this out-of-the-ordinary philosopher's composite-looking body of work.

You have just organised the first conference to be devoted to Simone Weil at the Collège de France. How did you become interested in her works?

Firstly, on account of her writing on labour. Then one thing led to another, and I came to read a good part of her oeuvre. Simone Weil is one of the great minds of the twentieth century, and even when she is annoying, she still makes you think.

When does she annoy you?

She rarely deals in half-measures, which sometimes leads her to excessive or cookie-cutter judgements. For example, the virulence of her critique of Judaism or of Roman culture contradicted her acute sense of our debt to the intellectual and spiritual treasures built up by past generations. She recognised this debt in her *l'Enracinement* [The Need for Roots]. I think that her Jewish side was still very much alive, but that she had not managed to pacify it.

Was Simone Weil's particularity not precisely the fact that she never had a peaceable relationship with anything?

Some photos show her smiling and joyful. So she must have had moments of contagious happiness. But we could not say that she lived in peace. The people of her generation, reaching their twenties in the 1930s, lived with a sense of foreboding of the coming catastrophes. Unless, that is, they believed in the promise of a revolutionary *grand soir* [the climactic "great night" of upheaval] — and that was not the case with Weil. Her fundamental altruism placed the whole world's suffering on her shoulders. For example, Raymond Aron depicts an episode with Weil in the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris. He was taking a walk there with his family. It was nice weather and everyone was joyful except Simone Weil, whom they found almost in tears. "There is a strike in Shanghai and the troops fired on the workers," she explained. Simone Weil was one of those people who never manage to abstract themselves from the torrent of suffering in which humanity finds itself engulfed in.

Was it this sensibility that gave coherence to an oeuvre that mixed together such varied questions as work, physics and the history of religion?

These questions are in fact closely bound up. In order to understand that, we have to begin from the question of work, which is central in Simone Weil's thinking. "It is through work," she writes, "that reason grasps the world and takes hold of the wild imagination." For Simone Weil, work is the articulation-point between the limitless character of the representations in our minds, and the situated character of our physical existence. It is through the encounter with an external obstacle that the

imagination is domesticated and becomes an instrument for mastering and transforming nature. In Simone Weil's work, the critique of the reification of labour is inextricably bound to the critique of classical science, which tends to reduce all study of natural phenomena to a calculation of energies. Having thus conceived energy on the model of slave labour, deprived of any intention of its own, science projected this model onto all kinds of work, thus opening the way to the dehumanisation of labour. This critique today applies to governance by numbers. While the computer was first conceived in the image of our understanding of brain function, it today serves as the model for the organisation of all intellectual labour. In her own time, Simone Weil was utterly au fait with the latest progress in the sciences, especially thanks to her mathematician brother André and his friends in the Bourbaki group. Not only did she clearly see that Taylorism relied on a vision of science that had already become outdated, but she foresaw the ravages that the latest developments in science might bring. In particular, algorithms (which she calls "algebra"), in the broad sense. They substitute the sign for the signified, and drive us to conceive of thought itself like a "tool."

Another example of the unity of Weil's thought is the fact that her experience of work led her to distinguish between rhythm and tempo. In the factory, what dominates is the tempo of the machines, and the fact that the workers are obliged to adjust to this tempo, as if to the ticking of a clock. Rhythm, conversely, allows us to adjust our efforts to an internal time. Take, for instance, the rhythm of a peasant who suspends his motion — even if just for a moment — before again swinging his scythe. This sensitivity to rhythm is inherent to poetry. It is inherent to the metre of the verses, which bring thinking and emotion in one same movement. That is why Weil wanted to put poetry and especially Greek poetry within reach of the working classes. That ran against the class reflex which today, even more than in the past, reserves this poetry for children from well-off neighbourhoods. To pass from rhythm to tempo is to repress this biological temporality. Today, the digital technologies pose us this same problem. How can we reconquer properly human temporalities, in the face of tools which are not only marvellous but also menacing — tools which we must domesticate?

Is work also a point of entry for understanding the mystical side of her work?

I am less familiar with this aspect, but her famous "Letter to a Priest" shows that in the various religions that have marked history she saw so many manifestations of one same spiritual aspiration peculiar to our species. So for Simone Weil, there was no hierarchy to be established between Christians and those who have invoked Osiris, Dionysus, Krishna, Buddha, Tao etc. In her view, we should not confuse particular religions with human societies' imperative of being able to rely on self-evident truths, on dogma. She says that while these are not something we ought to affirm, they are things that we ought to look on with attention and respect in order to enrich our activities.

How can we link this relationship with the religious to the way in which Simone Weil's own philosophical and scientific thinking operated?

There is a profound relationship between the great spiritual experiences and scientific discoveries. For example, in Islam the normal way of achieving harmony with the order of the world is respect for the Law. But there is also a faster route which proceeds by way of mystical experience. Sufism is one manifestation of that. In the scientific domain, the faster route is Archimedes's "eureka!," the sudden intuition of a truth that reveals itself to the understanding, and which we then work to demonstrate, so that it acquires the status of a scientific law. Any researcher could have this experience, but it is proportional to their genius. Simone Weil was a genius, like Mozart, and she died at more or less the same age as him. She saw things. And she affirmed that the true definition of science is the study of the world's beauty. She often proceeded by way of statements that look like flashes of lightning. Once she had understood, she moved on to other questions.

Is there not a contradiction between this religious sentiment and other characteristics of her thought, such as her Marxism?

That depends on what you mean by contradiction... If we consider religion as a promise of salvation, then we can say that Marxism is a secular religion. But that is not what Simone Weil took from it. She

considered historical materialism as a tremendous discovery, at the same time as she criticised revolutionary utopias.

It is difficult to understand Simone Weil's political logic. She was a Marxist without being a revolutionary, she wanted to unite the unions, during the war in Spain she hung around with the anarchists, she was a pacifist and then in the Resistance, but also criticised the Gaullists' grip on the Resistance. Where would you place her?

She was an anarcho-syndicalist. Like Proudhon, she advocated, *avant la lettre*, a kind of ecological restraint. She attacked any idolisation of the state, as well as the massacres committed in its name; she fought to get rid of political parties; and she considered unions the only legitimate organisations, insofar as they remain anchored in the lived experience of the working classes. The bad thing, for her, is when they allow themselves to be captured by what she called "big-money concerns." So she conceives a distinction between two kinds of organisation: interest groups responsible for questions of money, and groupings based on ideas. These latter should be open and lucid places for thinking. Something in the spirit of *Nuit debout*. That is an experience in which she would surely have participated, telling everyone why it was necessary to take a different approach. This conception of politics is very relevant today, when we consider the general discredit into which political parties have fallen, or the search for collectives for reflection and action which avoid the traps of media spectacle and organised politics.

You are a jurist. What was her relationship to law?

Just as the critique of economism is the indispensable prior condition of genuine economic thinking, the critique of legalism — a critique that she especially elaborated in her "The Person and the Sacred" — is the first condition of a good use of law. She locates this latter in a "middle region" between the skies of values and the realm of pure force. Her critique of a social order founded on the recognition of individual rights that are detached from any obligation was quite a visionary one, as were her very concrete proposals for reforming labour law.

In what philosophical tradition would you place her?

She was almost unconditionally Platonic, admired Rousseau and Montesquieu, and recognised her debt toward Marx. At the same time, she took up Sanskrit in order to be able to delve into Indian thinking. One of the philosophical aspects of her thinking that most interested me is the contradiction that she identifies in Western thought, between the complete supremacy attributed to natural laws, and the pretension of grounding human laws in justice rather than in force. "For two or three centuries," she wrote, "we have simultaneously believed both that force is the unique master of all natural phenomena, and that men can and should ground their mutual relations in a justice that they recognise by way of reason." This, she concludes, "is blatantly absurd." In order to try and escape from this contradiction, we have invented what she sarcastically calls "marvellous little mechanisms." These latter allow the force that enters into human affairs to be transformed into a principle that automatically produces justice. And the first of these mechanisms is economic liberalism and its famous "invisible hand," as if by magic converting the forces of money into a factor for justice.

What does she propose to resolve this contradiction?

A critique of scientism: science is valuable for responding to the question of means, of "how can we live?" But it is powerless to respond to the question of ends: "what should we live for?" When they claim to reply to this, scientists act like "new priests" whom we should bow down to. Reading Simone Weil today helps us understand the bases and the dead-ends of governance by numbers, as well as the absurdity of dissolving the human sciences into the natural sciences.

Are you well-disposed to her writing?

How could I not be? In her writing there is a certain elegance of style, an economy with language, a sureness in her choice of words, an evocative power, which demand the respect even of those — for instance, Susan Sontag — who think there is nothing truly worth discovering in it.

And do you get the impression of being able to see her behind her texts, almost physically?

Indeed, from the texts there shines through a physical vitality, and an appetite for living in an out-of-the-ordinary way. Georges Bataille painted her as simultaneously being radiant and gentle, ugly and dirty. He notes that "on the inside she was more alive than she herself believed." Heavily short-sighted, she must also have been very clumsy, as we see from the fact that she spilt a pan of boiling oil over her foot during the war in Spain. But she had no kind of disdain for the body. Quite the contrary. Running against a whole juridical and philosophical tradition, she gave physical needs — starting with the need to eat — first place in the list of duties toward the human being.

The fascinating thing in Weil is that she took an interest in very varied subjects: quantum theory, a "training manual for the front-line nurse," the history of religion, trade unionism...

She conceived of philosophy as a way of life, and displayed her close attention to the surrounding world. Moreover, in her thought this notion of attention remained primary, as she reflected on the relations of law and justice. The feeling of injustice emerges with the cry "Why are you wronging me?" And justice begins when attention is paid to this cry. This makes me think of Goya's painting of a dog drowning. We see everything that the dog sees. Simone Weil invites us to remain attentive to the perspective of those who are drowning.

Yet she also had great physical and intellectual courage. In the 1930s she took part in hard-fought protests. She was arrested. She worked in a factory, and came out of it exhausted. In London she insisted on being sent to France so that she could help the Resistance. When she met Trotsky she gave him a telling-off. She was amazingly self-assured, often alone against everyone else.

She frequently emphasised that when we think, we do so alone. This is a point that I find it hard to follow her on. She was very distrustful of the "We." And that has some contradictions with her call for us to conceive intellectual milieux in which we can develop a collective reflection. Her distrust for the collective doubtless responded to the forms of ideological indoctrination which were prevalent in her time.

What about her writing do you find dated?

Not a lot. She remains a visionary on many points. For example, in her analysis of the corrupting effects of colonialism, which affect the coloniser as well as the colonised. Or again in her distinction between economic exploitation and oppression at work. That should encourage us to ask what a really human system of work could be, in the era of globalisation.