

## THE UNEXPECTED EXHILARATION OF LOCAL POWER (A JOURNEY INTO EGO-POLITICS)<sup>1</sup>

Alan Faure, CNRS Research  
Director, Pacte Research Laboratory  
Sciences Po Grenoble, Université Grenoble Alpes

Introduction : the mysteries surrounding the taste for political power

How do we explain the mysterious pull of power which can lead individuals to dedicate their whole lives to the political arena and to fight with so much fervour and energy to 'represent' their fellow citizens? The fairly consensual answer usually given to this question in the academic literature on this subject is to assume that those elected are motivated by an impulsive and instinctive thirst for exercising power, authority, and influence. In the collective imagination, political success comes from a certain mental toughness, associated with acquisitiveness, pecuniary or other, implying domination and conquering power and then holding on to it. But in Winston Churchill's celebrated words, politics involves not only blood and sweat but also tears, and it is this latter facet that the literature of the social sciences often neglects (although this is not necessarily the case for historians, as we shall see below). Our aim is indeed here to defend the hypothesis that local power is concerned more with taking knocks and harbouring doubts as much as registering quiet or joyful satisfaction and that it is through the intensity of these emotional fragilities that the real attraction to local politics is often to be found.

Such emotional equations, it has to be said, are rarely to be found in sociological analyses. And yet such an approach is not altogether new if we think back to the 1960s to the work of Pierre Clastres on the Guayaki Indians in Amazonia<sup>2</sup>. The anthropologist had discovered that the 'chief' derived his authority from some mystical group incarnation that did not involve the giving of orders. The leader of the tribe was even explicitly forbidden to dictate rules, to acquire privileges or material advantages. The researcher concluded with astonishment that the chief's power and authority was somehow bound up in the hidden restraints and subtleties of the language used or visual expressions that he conveyed. He drew his legitimacy from his capacity to enunciate the values of the group, values that he could only intimate through poetic and dreamlike facial expressions and deliberately dramatic body movements. He who represented the collective whole was merely the chosen conveyor of a rather spellbinding incantation of local values and identity. The group had handed over to him the mission of expressing the aesthetic and even sensual meaning to be understood by the whole community. And this act of communion did not involve any sense of coercion (unless the matter involved conflict with another tribe). This Clastrian discovery was received with a certain scepticism in our western academic circles and by our theoreticians of political power. In political science for example, the 'standard' authorities tended to refute this notion with the double argument that the results only applied to small communities in demographic terms and that modern post-Enlightenment thinkers accorded a very subordinate role to human emotions in political discourse and that in any case Clastres was referring to Stateless societies (whereas Clastres himself dismissed this argument on the grounds that he was analysing situations of societies that were set *against* State power). Even if several intellectuals brilliantly took the matter further (particularly the philosopher Miguel Abensour<sup>3</sup> and the anthropologist Marc Abélès<sup>4</sup>), this analysis of non-coercitive power being exercised *against the State* has been largely abandoned by political scientists.

Our present concern is to focus on the 'tears and smears' and also on the emotional compensations to be derived from the practice of present-day local politics, and which can be seen to echo

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is an English version of a text first published in French with the title *Les ivresses inattendues du pouvoir local (voyage en ego-politique)* in the Review *Sens-Dessous* (April 2018 pp. 27-42). The text has been translated from the French version by my friend and colleague Robert Griffiths - with a few modifications as a result of our discussions on the subject.

<sup>2</sup> Clastres P., 1974, *La société contre l'Etat*, Paris, Editions de Minuit.

<sup>3</sup> Abensour M., 2004, *La Démocratie contre l'Etat : Marx et le moment machiavélien*, Paris, Le Félin.

<sup>4</sup> Abélès M., 2014, *Penser au-delà de l'Etat*, Paris, Belin

the work of Clastres. In our own investigations into the work of local officials in several metropolitan areas around the world, it appears that access to and the attainment of local power is often associated with emotional satisfaction and even exhilaration, far removed from coercive factors. Our investigations involved a sample of 250 interviews carried out in France, Italy, Canada and Japan of individuals who had spent a long period of their lives occupying major elected positions in local government. We questioned these leaders about their motivations for undertaking their political engagement and a good part of the questions concerned their childhood and adolescence. This reflective way of addressing the participants – ‘on the couch’ so to speak<sup>5</sup> – yet using a standardized research formula, allowed us to note several recurring comments which were clearly far removed from the power and domination-oriented motivational aspects which we had expected. The replies of great sensitivity applied particularly to specific stages in their political lives: one concerned the events surrounding their entrance into politics, their sentiments linked to their first electoral experiences and the description of the tensions and pressures of their daily political activity. To adopt the celebrated metaphor of William Reddy, the elected officials revealed their ‘navigation of feeling’ throughout the formative years of their life.<sup>6</sup> The narrative data revealed was clearly of an emotional order, concerning feelings and other clearly psychological elements – even bordering on the psychoanalytical. In undertaking an analysis of these replies which took many different forms, the complicated work of its codification necessitated of course a strict rule of anonymity and pointed to the need to extrapolate the sociopolitical characteristics which went beyond simple personality traits or factors of cultural significance.

At the end of this investigation (which we deliberately concluded in Japan, being a country where the expression of emotions is particularly restrained) it seems possible for us to draw several general conclusions from what is essentially quite sensitive data. Two types of results are presented and proposed for discussion in this article. The first concerns predispositions and preconditioning before politics: we have discovered a surprising recurrence, in the cases investigated, of the prevalence of certain emotional childhood experiences, exposing the young individuals to the outside world in an abrupt way at a particularly time and that these early experiences, often hardly visible or detectable, have their effect on their future conditioning for exercising power. The second lesson to be learnt concerns politics existing through certain inherent personal tensions and pressures: by deciphering the narratives of those elected, we have been able to observe the central place that political promises occupy in their daily activity of mediation, and that the spoken word is always used to capture the confidence of electors, to vaunt the advantages of a particular place or cause, or to defend or justify public policies or actions. This power of words suggests that the exercise of power can be correlated with the emotional charge of promises made and that it is this justificatory process of an earnest nature (rather than the assumption of prerogatives and privileges) that explains the elected individuals investment of time and energy in local politics. As a form of conclusion, we shall assess the extent that a narrative of emotional expression concerning local political engagement accounts for the underlying exhilaration to be found in local politics everywhere,, including Tokyo. From this we can conclude more generally that emotions have an impact on democratic behaviour and that ‘ego politics’ must be taken seriously as constituting the end production as well as a method of analysis.

#### *ACUTE EMOTIONAL FEELINGS AND SENSIBILITY PRECEDE AND THEN ACCOMPANY ENTRY INTO POLITICS*

In asking questions of political officials about their earlier life, we have been surprised by the emotional intensity of their replies, whereas early memories of feelings are not normally perceived as relevant to future vocational prospects. Children usually have a strongly negative and often disturbed view of politics, as a world of adults involving violence, taboos and confusion, remaining as an enigma, an activity which nobody bothers to teach or explain. Politics are opaque for children but whatever memories rise to the surface later are often very emotionally charged. None of the elected officials interviewed had undergone a ‘revelation’ that they would later be working in ‘it’ as a job, but they had certainly come to associate ‘politics’ with passions and emotions. And it is this emotional imprint that is left as the general impression from the earliest recollections of people in conflict which the child simply does not understand. At first this is worrying, and is then interpreted as leading to divisions between adults approving or disapproving, by their facial expressions and often animated discourse, without the child ‘understanding’ what the

---

<sup>5</sup> Faure A., 2016, *Des élus sur le divan. Les passions cachées du pouvoir local*, Presses universitaires de Grenoble

<sup>6</sup> Reddy W.M., 2001, *The Navigation of Feeling : A framework for the history of emotions*, Cambridge U.P, Cambridge and New York

expressed serious emotions are really about. Whilst the situations of the human disputes which can be remembered from childhood are very varied, both attractive and strangely repulsive, our interviews have allowed us to pinpoint several recurring narratives and mental imprints left from childhood memories as also of the first political engagement later on.

#### *The torments and scars of childhood.*

To the question « What is the first emotion, in childhood, that is to be later echoed in your attraction to a political life? » the replies are at first the predictable ones. Often mentioned are the torments when the child hears the parents having a row (about values, political or cultural outlooks, conflicts between places). There are also strains in different family relationships, either in political terms or social ones, revealed perhaps at mealtimes, etc. Grandparents, uncles and aunts, brother and sister rivalry, recomposed family relationships, religious differences, here are some of the subjects where politics can possibly acutely affect what is said and leave strong impressions on children, especially when voices are raised. Family relationships constitute the first codified space in which the first political emotions are forged and this is no surprise. The direct or symbolic filiation between the memories and the actual position of the practicing local politician occupies a far from negligible place in this sequence, even if each scenario presents an infinity of variants. A political leader who has inherited his or her position accounts for 20% of the sample, but the others can be classified as the overly ambitious (*capacitaires*) or (*leaders en herbe*!). In this sequence, the testimonies reveal an unexpected result concerning the decisive place of certain influences and of certain events. Take for example, the figure of the father: in 80% of the testimonies, the image of the father is acutely perceived by the child as linked to questions of authority and power. In certain regions examined, the father-image is omnipresent; whether held in admiration or as a source of conflict. In Naples, for example, it appears almost impossible for an elected official to talk politics without recounting in a quasi-psychanalytical way paternal influence as a supreme moulding factor in an emotional as well as political sense.

In similar fashion we were surprised at the number of references to traumatic and deeply hurtful earlier experiences. Where we expected happy childhoods as leading to 'success stories' (as is often inferred in published biographical information), we often heard instead of childhood years filled with family drama, crises and revolts. All of our interviewees claimed to be hypersensitive in their childhood to the inequalities and injustices which surrounded them. The narratives also followed the paths of failure and doors shut in their face in describing the world around them. School years for example brought back contrasting memories; of rebelling and of turbulence, of not being understood or neglected. Time and time again references were made to the difficulties of political socialization. In some of the narratives, it was illness and death (which they had to face in their close environment when they were a child or adolescent) which sparked off the recognition that politics has a major role to play: it exists to tackle injustice in the world. But more predictably perhaps, there were many accounts of memorable occasions, for example meeting outstanding individuals or witnessing events (political turmoil, mass meetings, strikes, tragedies).

For all the myriad of pieces of information conveyed, it is the emotional charge at a particular moment which retains the attention: the politician's awakening of political consciousness often happens spontaneously; it is an emotional 'moment' and the suffering of the moment is palpable in the telling and it has been occasionally the case that the teller breaks down and weeps during the recalling of a particular incident. Such 'evidence' is powerful through the emotions spent in the telling; and the resulting data are difficult to analyse yet must not be passed over.

#### *The first political campaign*

A further trace of the initial imprint is observable in how the future politician first became involved in the political arena. This question has been studied in great detail in many works dealing with the mechanisms of transmission, of filiation and of the reproduction of power. The sociological data inform us about eligibility constructed around the rules which apply to the representations of power in each given territory. But – and this is the second surprise in our work – we discover in the course of our survey that entry into political life is always seen through the filter of a particular emotional experience. At first reading, the elected politicians almost invariably declare that they entered into political life « by chance » and that their story can hardly ever be generalised because their case was « atypical ». This way of perceiving their own case as being out of step with other political professionals (even when they are

clearly inheritors of power) teaches us something that sociologists have often passed over in silence: their first electoral experience is always described with hindsight as an ordeal that is unique and without equivalence. Emotions do indeed occupy the central place: candidates experience feelings of acute and physical emotion (of danger, adventure, of intense shock at entering into the unknown), feelings which they have not experienced before.

The descriptions of the first campaign all insist on the heady emotional experience of this first exposure to others. . This is the first time 'in the field of combat', discovering for the first time what politics is really all about. Looking back on the experience they describe the moment as a heady one, exciting if not euphoric, exhilarating, unique. They remember exactly the details of being part of a team, the first tracts and pamphlets handed out, the campaign slogans, the public meetings, the shaking of hands, the smiles as well as the earnest expressions, the first time at the count, and they also happily recall certain encounters for the first time with key figures, sometimes a VIP, or a mentor or a particular member of the team or arguing with an adversary for the first time in public. And the narratives all converge on the same conclusion : whether winning or losing, it was through the intensity of the experience as a whole – being exposed to the opinions of others as well as voicing their own – that they have suddenly caught the political virus.

In this way the shared emotions of childhood experiences as well as the first exposure to adult political meetings both contribute to throw light on this little known dimension of political life. Before being fully involved and well established in political life, there has to be a sense of *territorial eligibility*, which, in the anthropological sense of the term, defines certain socio-political qualities which will constitute the potentiality of a candidate in a particular place. But the candidate's eligibility only takes on its fullest meaning through an over-exposure in a particular place, with its attendant emotions of anxiety, desire and jubilation. The memories of the early days are bound to include setbacks, rivalries, and disputes. But there are also the indelible friendships that are forged in these early days. The data throw much light on fidelity and longevity in political life. And this is one of the first unexpected results of our inquiry: the tears and stresses which precede and accompany entry into politics serve as strongly emotional structuring experiences, in the sense that they give us a better understanding of the extraordinary mental determination which characterizes any subsequent political engagement.

#### *THE PROMISES WHICH SHAPE THE FUTURE EXERCISE OF POWER*

A second enigma surrounding the taste for political power concerns the energy that local elected officials expend on a daily basis to fulfil their mandate, through interminably long days and evenings, making all sorts of personal contacts, darting in and out of innumerable public and private meetings, and working sessions. This activity has recently been objectively analysed, demonstrating the extent to which politicians' agendas are oversaturated.<sup>7</sup> Yet these studies rarely delve into the underlying psychological secret workings that motivate the political individuals, - other than resorting to the somewhat tautological explanation of their 'taste for power'. It is true that the hectic life of hyper-activity of local politicians gives full vent to indulgence in emotional excess: there is much bravado, euphoria, pride and enjoyment of confrontation, but there is also the less publicised side of frustration, of impotence and even of solitude.

In our interviews, we have tried to gauge the extent that elected officials manage to keep a sense of equilibrium and composure when faced with this emotional effervescence and polemical abrasiveness in their daily routine. A part of the explanation is perhaps to be found, once again, in the discoveries of Pierre Clastres when he touched on the transcendental nature of the discourse of the chief in relation to his tribe. The anthropologist noted that in the tribal communities being studied, the adrenaline of power was to be found in the magical nature of the words that the chief used, words which were intended to embody and encapsulate the values of the tribe. The leader drew his legitimacy from the fact that he stood out from all the other members of the tribe by his unique ability to conjure up and understand the tribe's shared experience and hence to perceive and pursue the collective sense of wellbeing.

This quasi-transcendental approach merits consideration in the light of the replies of the elected politicians being interviewed. For these officials are clearly striving for a linguistic and communicational

---

<sup>7</sup> Godmer L., Marrel G., 2016, *La politique au quotidien. L'agenda et l'emploi du temps d'une femme politique*, Lyon, ENS Editions.

competence which reflects the emotional and mystical expressivity of the tribal chief. They are constantly striving not only for the right words but also the right gestures that are appropriate to their particular territorial location (we shall return to this territorial aspect later). We have often been impressed in the course of our interviews by the particular attention that they pay to the underlying ethical base to the political subject being treated, and the need to find the right means of expressing it. Sincerity and authenticity are always revealed to be the underlying objectives, even if the discourse is often disjointed and hesitant in practice.

#### *What others see and think of them*

It is not surprising that the main aim is to gain and to keep the confidence of the electors. But this clear preoccupation is not expressed in what we might consider to be the appropriate rhetoric for fulfilling such an aim. The emphasis is invariably on action and hence on how they intervene in disputes and take decisions. This might justify a wry smile if we recall the image of the traditional local 'notable' as obsessed with 'keeping the peace' and reconciling divergent interests. But rather is the emphasis on political engagement in practical and dynamic political action, whether applying to a local population of 500 or 500,000. Politics is about 'doing' and about translating words into actions.

This expressed contract of confidence concerning action implies an emotional empathy between the electors and the elected and this has an obsessive character in local politics. The elected politician recognises that he or she is accountable for promises made. This comes out clearly in the documentary film of Yves Jeuland devoted to the mayor of Paris in 2013.<sup>8</sup> In a direct form, facing the camera, Delanoé recounts forty years of political engagement with a disarming sincerity and the film admirably reveals a dimension of politics which is very difficult to describe but which permeates the sense of almost all the political interviews which we carried out: a dedication to politics which combines pride and doubt, superiority and humility, self-assurance and yet a certain self-doubt. Concern with what others think is paramount and this governs the way words are used. « Words do violence to things » wrote Michel Foucault to describe the invasive power of language over the interplay of power.<sup>9</sup> This documentary gives us a sharp picture of how political promises constitute the first expression of symbolic violence: it also shows how elected officials bring together action and representation, power and empathy.

#### *Order and Place*

The other source of the adrenalin of local power concerns the discourse on local identity. The local elected official is permanently summoned by his or her entourage to assume a representational function in the spatialized sense of the term: he or she is expected on every occasion to embody the given territory in all its social as well as its physical significance. Whatever its size, the official is understood to incorporate its whole significance, to be imbued with the spirit of the place as well as its history, its unique administrative characteristics as well as to be acquainted with its 'secret spirit' and underlying attractions. And all this has to be invoked, if only implicitly, every time he meets a new individual or a new group. And the way this specific territorial identity is espoused constitutes what the political scientist Zittoun calls its generic '*narrative line*'.<sup>10</sup> Our interviews led us to identify two main types of 'narrative line'.

The first concerns the rhetoric associated with the local order of things. With the major decentralization laws voted in recent decades everywhere in the world, local government has been transformed through the professionalization of its structures and its missions. The widening scope of activities has led to new responsibilities affecting all domains of public action. The senior local elected official is henceforth a major decision-maker surrounded by civil servants and counselled by experts. He or she attends to major public policy matters in a professional entrepreneurial mode previously more associated with the work of a minister or senior national government civil servant. This development has been the subject of much academic study by political scientists and sociologists. In describing the so-called 'neo-liberal turn' of the 1990s, political scientists, considering the place and role of local political elites, have very often been very critical of the mimicry and standardization of procedures which this process has entailed.<sup>11</sup> They comment on the way the 'order of things' has been extended through involvement of

---

<sup>8</sup> Jeuland Y, 2013, *Delanoé libéré*, France 3, 50 mn (broadcast on 18/10/2013)

<sup>9</sup> Foucault M., 1966, *Les mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines*, Paris, Gallimard.

<sup>10</sup> Zittoun P., 2013, *La fabrique politique des politiques publiques*, Paris, Presses de Science Po.

<sup>11</sup> Jobert B., 1994, *Le tournant néolibéral en Europe*, Paris, L'Harmattan

competitive principles applied to much larger territorial areas under public control. Other writers have insisted also on a phenomenon of *glocalization* in public policy regulations which has led to an inefficient blurring of responsibilities between the public, private and the various levels of governmental work.<sup>12</sup> This confused overlapping is reflected in the way local elected officials understand their decision-making roles. They make free use of supposedly virtuous discourse such as 'intuitive and 'imaginative thinking', needed, so they say, to ward off the stale phrases of traditional management. The local official now avoids 'down-market' standardization by describing the local area as a 'particular eco-system', requiring 'situational expertise', using compendious words or concepts such as 'governance', 'sustainable development', 'budgetary rigour'.

The second narrative line concerns the particularly sensitive way in which the 'spirit of the place' is evoked, thereby linking together at the same time the person's sense of identity and the values attached to the specific community concerned. One facet of this strange alchemy has already been revealed by an American sociologist, Mark Kesselmann, in his study of rural communes in France in the 1960s.<sup>13</sup> He clearly demonstrated how the mayor took upon himself the role of conductor of an orchestra in order to enforce a rather ambiguous consensus. His strenuous efforts aim at establishing a natural harmony but it is his conductor's baton that sets the tempo and imposes the nuances of the musical score, often to the exclusive advantage of several dominant political forces in the particular territory concerned. Fifty years later, the metaphor remains an appropriate one for identifying the way in which certain interest groups capture and exercise local power through language. A lot is now being written, for example, to reveal how dominating power is being exercised by particular groups in the recently constituted inter-communal governments being set up in urban metropolitan districts, as also in suburban and rural areas. And yet it seems to us that the magic of the spoken word operates also without the political leaders themselves being aware of it, in the sense that these leaders have no other choice but to spout forth on the basic harmony of the community and the marvelous sense of identity, all of course being notions carrying a strong and deep-rooted emotional charge. This sort of discourse on 'rootedness' reminds us of what the historian Yvan Jablonka calls « the tension of the real » : claiming one's belonging to a particular place means exposing one's childhood, family, neighbourhood, religion, school, surrounding countryside..... such narratives are powerful because they are looking inwards (one's own background, family, upbringing, early friends and basic identity) but also outwards (what is close by, neighbourhood, solidarity and teamwork).

This basic expression of trust and confidence, together with order and orderliness and the sense of place, are the three ingredients which keep on recurring in the discourse of local elected officials. The emotional charge that accompanies their evocation suggests that the political engagement is nourished on this adrenalin. Very sensitive questions, almost existential ones, are touched upon : the need to be held in the high regard of others, to embody on the personal level the values of the particular place, and to uphold a collective identity with those around you - all these form the quintessence of local politics - not any reference to political in-fighting and struggle.

*Conclusion : The signs of sensitivity in politics, stretching to Tokyo*

To what extent does this underlying sensitivity that we have detected in all our inquiries constitute the staple ingredient of local political power? Each time we have found much emotional intensity in all the replies given. Replying in the first person singular, tears and strenuous and earnest promises featured more than references to conflict and fighting. A somewhat comparable exercise was carried out fifty years ago by Paul Veynes with his theoretical reflections on the historian as a *narrator and story-teller of the true*.<sup>14</sup> His objective was double : looking at the past by reconstituting the feelings of the actors who were living it, and secondly analyzing the particular perspectives adopted by writers concerned with the processes of memory. Historians who have worked along these lines have always been careful not to dissociate the socio-historical data from their emotional understanding, trying in a sense to combine the clinically scientific with the literary understanding of a writer. A contemporary writer, Ivan Jablonka, has perceptively illustrated this hybrid approach in which the description of life

---

<sup>12</sup> Muller P., 2015, *La société de l'efficacité globale*, Paris, PUF.

<sup>13</sup> Kesselman M., 1972, *Le consensus ambigu. Etude sur le gouvernement local*, Grenoble, Cujas.

<sup>14</sup> Veynes P., 1971, *Comment on écrit l'histoire : essai d'épistémologie*, Paris, Seuil.

trajectories are constantly combined with emotional factors which are always contextualized.<sup>15</sup> In our own work on elected local officials we have been inspired by this approach to make our own type of ego-politics. Childhood memories, and the memory of the first electoral campaigns as well as that exhilarating feeling often accompanying the daily exercise of power, all these are treated as essential data, and it is these that provide the potential and mysterious link of present political engagement with the underlying and formative emotional imprint. And through giving voice to elected officials delving into their own experience, we have revealed the degree to which adrenolin (through the emotional reactions of others, through the magic of the place, the exhilaration of promises) has a visible effect on the daily exercise of power.

All these signs of the cult of sensibility lead us to take seriously the contribution of 'ego-politics' to the whole field of political science. We should note that the notion has already been utilized by Christian Le Bart in 2013 to describe the campaigns of local elected officials.<sup>16</sup> In a period characterized by a growing individualization of politics, the political scientist notes that candidates are prone to much more self-exposure, throwing off veiled pretensions of objectivity and openly playing the card of personal empathy and proximity. Political mediation is therefore taking a personalized and emotive turn, breaking with traditional professionalized political expertise. Christian Bart's definition of ego-politics can be broadened in two different dimensional ways. The first is descriptive and inductive. Ego-politics is the emotional or emotive way in which individuals embrace individually what is at stake collectively. It is a question of widening the focal distance of their emotive vision which is a part of their intrinsic representation of politics, whether in their childhood or adolescence or in their first practical confrontation with issues of power. Taking this as the perspective of the local elected official, this means that it is his or her emotional reactions and expectations, whether through anxiousness or yearnings which precede and accompany them on their trajectory, moulding and constituting their attraction to politics. The second dimensional way of posing the problem is to consider ego-politics – following the example of historians with their 'ego-history' – as an analytical, critical and historicized process of identifying the essence of democratic politics through the individual analysis of what the observer observes, with what analytical sensibility or with what analytical research objective. Returning to the enigma of what turns people to seek local political power (which was our starting point above) these two separate approaches have each their own load of explanations, prompting further questions to be asked.

On the descriptive side, ego-politics has led us to claim that the yearnings for local power are of the same nature in all the parts of the world that we covered. This was an unexpected finding. By concluding our investigations by six months of immersion in Japan, we were putting our findings elsewhere to the test in a country where the role of emotions in politics is particularly hard to discern. Roland Barthes has indeed shown that corporate harmony can be formed, and dominate or can also crack wide open depending on the extent to which participating individuals can manipulate and interpret the signs.<sup>17</sup> But we also know that in Japan all personalized expression of emotions is banned from the political stage, notably through the Japanese conviction that the quest for truth is never revealed through individual subjective pressure and that elected officials assume this denial of personal individual effect to be the social norm (a denial that is also evidenced by the fact that in the private domain Japan is the only western nation where psychoanalysis virtually does not exist in terms of its use for personal individual therapy). In the interviews, all undertaken on an individual basis (in their maternal tongue and under the seal of confidentiality), the participating elected officials all showed the same extraordinary corporal impassivity, but, to our great surprise, they all, without exception, agreed to break the ice of formal convention by accepting to describe very explicitly their deep reasons for their attraction to politics. For example, on the imprints of childhood, we were able to register intimate personal recognition of total sincerity of family dramas and childhood suffering. And in their narrative of electoral campaigns, the same adrenaline as that encountered in Naples or in Montreal marked their first experiences (such as a recurring narrative on this subject, rather incongruous to us in France, where the candidate recalled the entrance to the railway stations, with a megaphone in his hand to present his political programme, but was faced with general indifference). These results very much resemble what had been observed in our previous inquiries elsewhere. Once the initial nervousness about the first question had been overcome (sometimes after a long silence, but – once having agreed to take part – general courtesy more or less

---

<sup>15</sup> Jablonka I., 2012, *Histoire des grands-parents que je n'ai pas eus*, Paris, Seuil ; Jablonka I., 2014. *L'histoire est une littérature contemporaine*, Paris, Seuil

<sup>16</sup> Le Bart C, 2013, *L'ego-politique. Essai sur l'individualisation du champ politique*, Paris, Armond Colin

<sup>17</sup> Barthes R., 1970, *The Empire of Signs*, New York, Hill and Wang (1982)

obliged our interviewee not to avoid our questions), the sense of total sincerity and honest exposure of deepest feelings prevailed totally in the interviews. This emotional sharing applied equally to the recalling of the anguished trials and tribulations of one's first political experience, or commenting on the frail and artificial feeling of consensus in political combat (together with the frank admission that one was really obsessed with how others thought one was performing) or yet again in cases where one spoke about a veritable aesthetic of general universal order (but always combining such universality with emotional pleas to the specific spirit of the place where one was campaigning). The results of this Japanese immersion therefore suggest a form of universality in the ways in which the passions of local politics are felt and lived. As in Naples (where one rather expected the blood and thunder of vote-catching trickery and corruption) or as in Montreal (where we were told to expect the cynical influence of 'big business') or as in the areas of local government in France (where it was the traditional figure of the local '*notable*' strategically placed at the crossroads of local interests who was supposedly the embodiment of confident local political power).

On the analytical side, these results provide further stimulus to the rather fledgling state of debate on the place of the emotions in social life (although historians seem to have already displayed more confidence in this domain.<sup>18</sup>) Taking inspiration from some stimulating work in political sociology<sup>19</sup>, we have recently attempted to open up a field of collective controversy on politics and emotions over the wider field of the political sciences.<sup>20</sup> Participants contribute in different ways to advance the notion of an '*emotional turn*' in the different ways of analyzing politics (in similar fashion to the ways in which a *linguistic turn* was debated in the 1980s, or more recently a *territorial turn*). The cult of *democratic sensibility* is still at the stage of being a *terra incognita* in analytical terms. Our work on local elected officials contributed to the development of the theme by showing that political engagement is accompanied by a singular form of total exhilaration (verging on intoxication) which combines diverse forms of euphoria. In a tentative exploratory way, it seems to us to be possible to divide these strong emotional states into three distinct registers. The first concerns respect for the authority of the State and the famous *voluntary servitude* theorized by Etienne de la Boétie. The taming of the passions<sup>21</sup> has seemed to be less in evidence in recent decades, as if the emotive charge of the arguments against the hegemonic State was gaining ground. The second register concerns the *magic of the place*, a rhetorical phrase often used by local officials wishing to express their fervent attachment to the collective horizon much more relevant to the audience than reference to the national level. The third register concerns the aspirations to political citizenship often conveyed through social media and in local meeting halls, and this is in the clear domain of local elected officials. Here we find claims to unlimited happiness and an egocentric esthetic which harks back to the philosophy of the passions (both sad and joyful) so dear to Spinoza followers.<sup>22</sup> These three facets - doubts about the gigantic State, the magic of the place (the local territory) and citizenship at the grass roots - are all the vital keys to explain the enigmatic phenomena of contemporary localized politics. All these lead us to a renewed analysis of basic political theories and the role of the emotions concerning popular consent (of individuals), subjection (to power) and contentment (of the citizen). The voyage into ego-politics, viewed in this perspective, offers some stimulating keys to understanding. And this applies also to the researchers themselves, in their moments of exhilaration as well as in recognition of their blindspots, in the quest towards renewed sensitivity in practicing and understanding local democracy.

Alan Faure, CNRS Research Director, Pacte Research Laboratory, Sciences Po Grenoble,  
Université Grenoble Alpes

Research Notebook: <http://enigmes.hypotheses.org/>

---

<sup>18</sup> Corbin A., Courtine J.-J., Vigarello G, 2017, *Histoire des émotions. De la fin du XIX siècle à nos jours*, Paris, Seuil ; Jan Plamper, 2015, *The History of Emotions : an Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford U.P.

<sup>19</sup> Braud P., 1971, *Le jardin des délices démocratiques*, Paris, Presses de la FNSP ; Traini P, 2009, *Emotions... Mobilisation !*, Paris, Presses de Science Po.

<sup>20</sup> Faure A., Négrier E., dir., 2017, *La politique à l'épreuve des émotions*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes

<sup>21</sup> Elias N., 1939, *The Civilizing Process* Oxford, Blackwells (new edition 1994)

<sup>22</sup> Lordon F., 2016, *Les affects de la politique*, Paris, Seuil.