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**MEETING IN CHATEAU DE POUSSIGNOL,  
BLISMES, 58120, France,  
29 JUNE-1 JULY 2018**

### ***SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND THE HUMAN SPIRIT***

#### **AGENDA AND PROGRAMME OF WORK**

##### **Presentation of the subject**

In a country with universities attracting students from all over the world and its scientists regularly rewarded with Nobel prizes, the current government ignores the results of scientific research when they would obstruct its policies. It appears to have contempt for objectivity, intellectual rigor and moral honesty. In so doing it acts as though it had the power, and the right, to shape “reality” at will.

In other countries with long standing authoritarian regimes science is highly respected and scientists are at the top of the social ladder, but scientific research and its results are primarily geared towards the prestige and power of the nation and its ruling elite. Freedom of investigation and creativity are tolerated, even encouraged as long as they serve the objectives of the political apparatus.

In the countries still benefiting from reasonably well functioning democratic institutions and still valuing a disinterested quest for knowledge, scientific research takes place in a variety of public, semi-public and private institutions, including those that have a mandate to serve the public interest. And there are national bodies, for instance committees on bioethics, providing advice to governments and societies on scientific and technological developments that have strong consequences for the human condition and its future.

In a number of the latter countries, however, the *res publica* is at risk of being suffocated by the growing weight of private and corporate interests. For example, a few months ago, the “scientific” evidence presented by the European Commission to legitimize its proposal to the European Council to allow the use of glyphosate in agriculture for five more years has been exposed to be based on data provided by the interested industries. Nevertheless, the European Union accepted this proposal. This kind of “victory” of corporate interests takes place in a favorable environment. Notably, by their acceptance of the privatization movement initiated during the 1980s, most democratic states deprive themselves of the capacity to promote independent scientific research and to orient technological innovations towards applications publicly and transparently debated and chosen.

In the world as a whole, the creativity of scientists, engineers and technicians continue to be mobilized for the development of new and more destructive weapons. Considerable amount of human and financial resources are devoted to armaments and the development of military capacities. According to the Stockholm Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) world military expenditures

rose to \$ 1739 billion in 2017, an increase of 1, 1% in real terms from 2016. Probably both cause and effect, this militarization of planet Earth is occurring in a context of long standing conflicts and increased tensions in several regions. Also, less measurable but equally obvious is the violence, in all its forms and manifestations, that permeates the spirit of our time.

In the present dominant culture, the use of science for destructive purposes coexist with a belief inherited from the scientism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century according to which most problems faced by humankind can be approached and solved through rational thinking. The idea of a continuing linear progress on all aspects of the human condition, central to positivism, has been seriously damaged by the horrors of the last hundred years and faith in a bright future is no longer a widely shared sentiment. But it remains that instrumental rationality, that is a value-free focus on the most effective means to achieve a specific end, is the privileged mode of operation of most governments and other public institutions on the world scene. Faith in social progress has been replaced by faith in technologies. Within the “social sciences” – a concept coming from scientism – economics, with its appearance of scientific rigor, monopolizes debates and policy-making. Other sources of knowledge than science, notably philosophy and spiritual insights, are neglected.

### **Two Proposed themes for discussion**

#### ***I. The situation of scientists in today's world***

This theme might be divided in two parts: the situation of scientists in authoritarian regimes, and, scientists and the corporate culture.

##### ***Scientists in authoritarian regimes***

###### ***Among the possible questions:***

- What are the ethical conflicts faced by these scientists and what are their options?
- Authoritarian regimes, including democratic regimes in war situations, have produced significant scientific advances. Examples? How do we account for this fact?
- Should science and its results be seen as a ‘common good’ belonging to humanity, independent from the political regimes under which it takes place? Then, short of a benevolent world government, is the conscience of the scientist the only protection against a misuse of scientific research?
- How do we define such “misuse” of scientific ability?

##### ***Regarding scientists and the corporate culture***

- What lessons can be drawn from the epic struggle of farmers, individuals and various non-governmental organizations against Monsanto and other similar organizations?
- It is legitimate for corporations to have their own research capacities. But, what effective means are or should be readily available to States to check the use of such research when the public interest may be threatened?
- Given that universities as traditional hosts for independent research are increasingly seeking resources from the corporate world. What do you see as the consequences of this trend? Could it or should it be reversed?

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## II. Technological “progress” and transcendent ideals

The letter of invitation to this meeting dated 4 April 2018 refers to the work of the late philosopher Tomonobo Imamichi and includes the following statement: “Instrumental rationality undermined transcendent ideals and spurred technological progress to a position of primacy over other human aims(...) Today’s goals are circumscribed by the horizons of technological know-how and power.” Thus, “the culture of modernity inverted the classical logical structuring of human intention.”

General or specific comments are solicited on:

- This statement
- The question of sources of knowledge

Among the questions that might be debated:

- How do we understand the notion of “transcendent ideals”?
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- At the individual level, the affirmation that “human aims” should include “transcendent ideals” is rather common, if not shared by all philosophical schools. At the collective level, in terms of a project of society, matters are very different: the liberal tradition protects the freedom of citizens by limiting public institutions to modest functions. Yet, the need in our world for “horizons” extending beyond “technological know-how and power” many agree is very real. If you agree:
  - What should these horizons be?
  - Which institutions should promote them?
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- The use of various sources of knowledge, particularly for the elaboration and evaluation of policies, appears necessary but popular contempt for knowledge and in particular for honest scientific inquiry pose serious obstacles.
  - Is this “accidental” or the beginning of an ominous trend?
  - How can such obscurantism be combated?

## PROGRAMME OF WORK

### Friday 29 June

Arrival at Chateau de Poussignol late afternoon

Aperitif at 1900.

Dinner at 2000.

### Saturday 30 June

0900 opening of the meeting; introductions

1000 -1230= =Presentation of the film on the life of Karl Friedrich von Weizsacker and discussion

[Coffee break around 1100]

1300 PM: Lunch

1430-1800: Discussion of Theme I: *The situation of scientists in today's world*

[Coffee break around 1630]

2000: Dinner

### Sunday 1 July

0900-1100: Discussion of Theme II: *Technological "progress" and transcendent ideals*

[Coffee break around 1100]

1115-1230 Conclusions and exchanges on future work of the Circle

1300: Lunch and Farewell