

Prix
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de l'Essai
2024

A large, bold, black serif letter 'E' that serves as a background for the text. The text is positioned to the left of the letter, with the words stacked vertically.

English versions of the speeches. Only the spoken text is considered authentic.

The jury's motivation for the 46th European Essay Prize, delivered by Mr Jacques Zwahlen at the award ceremony on 28 August 2024

Dear Laureate,
Ladies and gentlemen,

How can we face up to each situation, both individually and collectively, in order to act appropriately in our everyday lives, having taken the measure of what is at stake in preserving our planet? And this, all things considered, at the crossroads of human time, the historical time on the one hand, which may already seem very long to the individuals that we are, and the time of the life of our planet, the geological time on the other, which can be counted in multiples of thousands and millions of years.

This is the issue you help to clarify in your book *Après le réchauffement climatique, penser l'histoire*, which we are honouring today with the 46th Prix Européen de l'Essai.

In fact, to become aware of geological time having evolved *for* and henceforth also *by* humans, must be like our ancestors admitting that the earth revolves around the sun. As we know today, this awareness, this immense scientific and philosophical upheaval, has overturned many hierarchies and caused much unrest. But in our time, it's no longer the sky and its stars we're talking about, but the Earth, our Earth, whose limited and closed nature, in contrast to the infinity of space, was revealed to us by scientists and economists in the early 1970s, gradually making us aware of the absolute necessity of radically rethinking our development model and our way of life. Since then, political and social movements have mobilized to try and correct this fatal trajectory which, as we now know only too well, is rapidly leading to the mass extinction of living species, including possibly our own.

Faced with this unprecedented challenge, with the hindsight and depth of the historian that you are, you wanted to take the measure of what was now happening to *humanity*.

Indeed, from this perspective, given the destruction of nature by the globalisation of our activities, what place can we still reserve for the human in the dominant sense in which we still understand it in the West, more particularly in a Europe so quick to pride itself on having been the cradle of humanism? By breaking down our traditional timescales, you trouble our good consciences by observing, and I quote, that 'the global is a humanocentric construct, whereas the planet decentres the human'. This is the first major, even vertiginous, questioning of our world that the reading of your book raises.

A second, equally abysmal question concerns the *universality* of our human condition in the face of the climate challenge. To make us think about this, you give us the example of India, the country where you grew up, with its ban on air conditioners running on hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs). The dilemma you present is as follows: to despair today a population that can't afford to buy the carbon-free model, but then to make them practically die of heat, physically or socially; or tomorrow, to seriously threaten the population who will see the average temperature rise at an accelerated rate, precisely because of these HFC air conditioners, the only ones currently accessible to the greatest number, but which contribute massively to global warming.

You tell us, and I quote, that “We wouldn't be making any headway in debates on climate policy if we didn't understand why the nature/culture divide has found a new and original articulation in the imagination of the colonized”; adding that “on this question, postcolonial critique can contribute to the discussion”.

Now that we've reached this point, the third essential question you've asked us to ponder is that of *hope*. How can we maintain it? Where can we turn for answers? When you come to these questions, which are perhaps the most critical in your masterly synthesis, you show great humility: rather than scientists or politicians, you call on the religious, aesthetes and artists. You then convince us of the essential role they have to play in getting us out of the rut and overcoming the impasses into which, led by the West, humanity has strayed and now finds itself bogged down. And “although we often speak of it as a scientific issue”, you make it clear that “climate change is *first and foremost* a profoundly political and moral problem”.

By calling for the evolution of *Homo* from *Sapiens* to *Prudens* - in other words, for nothing less than a “new philosophical anthropology” - we see your book as a major contribution to ensuring that both the world and our continent in particular are inspired by a spirit of peace that is enlightened, responsible, equitable and, above all, growing at a time when the urgency of climate change is becoming more apparent every day; and this, quite simply, so that our planet can be made truly and sustainably habitable - for all of us, the living of today and tomorrow.

For this book, dear Laureate, we would like to congratulate you and thank you very much.

Thank you for your attention.

Jacques Zwahlen, member of the jury of the Prix Européen de l'Essai
Lausanne, 28 August 2024

Speeches delivered at the presentation of the European Essay Prize
to the author Dipesh Chakrabarty at the
Lausanne Palace on 28 August 2024

