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## A Father, What for?

In connection with the show "Lettre au père" of Jean-Yves Ruf,  
according to the text of Franz Kafka *Dearest Father*

CHRISTINE CASTELAIN-MEUNIER, BERNARD LAHIRE, GÉRARD WORMSER

**Abstract:** Can the young man of today visualize the impossible dialogue of Kafka with his father? The evolution of the society has questioned the father's long time role of supervision and authority. However, does that not open up a restructuring of his figure? The depth of the father's influence is far-reaching. The English paediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott said, "He can become a maternal substitute for infants, providing child care from the ages of birth to two years as is maternity care". Paternal love and everyday father/child relationship has a critical role in the development of early childhood. However, is this structuring enough? Does this not open up an era lacking references? Today, what is the father's place at a time of contemporary changes in family life?

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Christine Castelain-Meunier, Bernard Lahire, Gérard Wormser

**Gérard Wormser (Sens Public)** – Before welcoming Bernard Lahire and Christine Castelain-Meunier, we are very pleased to share a moment with Roland Auzet, who presented this great show in the season's programme. *Dearest Father*<sup>1</sup> of Kafka is a monument of contemporary literature. The text was not published during the lifetime of the author, and his posthumous destiny is that of a few great texts. Would it be anonymous it would be a great text. The life of Franz Kafka and the relationship to this autobiographical text impose an approach to history of literature, literary biography. This certainly justifies that we can give him a place in the theatre — it would probably not be enough if this involves merely revisiting the literary monument that is Franz Kafka. The text itself is a very profound reflection on the so-called existential dimension, at the same time.

Roland, can you tell us something about the show, the reasons that led to create it, the conditions attached to its presentation at Oullins?

**Roland Auzet (Renaissance Theatre)** – It is obvious that in the theatre in general, and at the Renaissance Theatre especially, the will is of course to give the place to creators, to living authors, but also to the authors of fundamental texts, key words heard when we cross through life. *Dearest Father* is of course there. This is a key word, universal, necessary to cross, hear, that we read it or tell it. Hence, when I knew that Jean-Quentin Châtelain began with the stage director Jean-Yves Ruf on this text, I was interested to propose it to the theatre. Indeed, it is more about something that is not a matter of theatre or a play, but a word. I find even better to say that this is a word rather than a text, because these are the words almost put in each one's ear. It is almost, in fact, a form of meditation. Therefore, Jean-Quentin is one of those actors who say, “I do not address all audiences, but each of you”. It is the one thing that I find special in this *Letter*, the correlation between the theatre artist, as he is, those words and that attempt to address not all, but each of you. Thereafter, the tendency of the stage director is not to be in the

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<sup>1</sup> See the text on line: <http://thirtythreesteps.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/letter-to-my-father.pdf>

historic relationship. It is not the role of artists to say, "I am going to put myself into someone else's shoes, he is 36 years old, he is dead, his father is alive or dead and no matter, he is fat or thin, he lived at such a time", but it is to ensure that the texts that are strong and universal words can be heard as if it was this man who is going to tell us these words directly. This means having the simplicity of listening, attention, and of being able to capture these words almost this way, as if someone addressed them to you, in particular. I think our speakers arrive. You are going to hear from the experts, unlike me, I am no expert, but simply the Director of the Theatre. You have the opportunity to be able to discuss with very academic people on both Kafka and social things.

To conclude, the role of theatre is also to ensure that these words reach everyone. That is what Jean-Quentin wants. This is also the reason why the gauge is very small, as we feel that it comes and tells us, or reads that letter for us. In fact, I like the word, in line with the theatrical or non-theatrical literary material. I like the idea of mechanics that we have just distilled the words as something from clock making, and the meaning of the world illuminates with the words of the poet. This is what pleases me in this project; in this text, the experts explain to you.

**Gérard Wormser** – We discussed with the comedian on staging approaches. The question has arisen as to how to stage a text to the first person. However, the staging we adopted does not follow this explicit device.

**Roland Auzet** – I am here speaking for Jean-Quentin Châtelain and Jean-Yves Ruf. We wanted to explain the text of this letter written by Kafka to his father. It implied hearing the voice of the father in the light of the letter. Jean-Quentin worked on this. At the same time, in the evolution of the project, I know that with Jean-Yves Ruf, they had several versions. Therefore, they tried out two solutions: either Kafka actually reading the letter, told to the first person "Father, I...", or the father discovers the letter that the son has written, and who reads the letter, so then says "Father, I...", as something addressed to him. The theatre research work of Jean-Yves Ruf and Jean-Quentin Châtelain is remarkable. Within the representation, this gives us the possibility of addressing words to us, whether we ourselves generate them towards a family tie, as if the receiver and the transmitter is the same. This coming and going is interesting, and I find that it considerably expands the perception and provides the key meaning of multiple choices.

Basically, this is indeed the work definition of the stage director, and it is not simply to say: "go, run, a garden, a little brighter light, a lower volume sound", but it is also to provide the key meaning so that the audiences can have a panel, a choice which is not compulsory, and that each of us builds with the words of the poet, direction, a life through the representation to generate

illumination which serves as their light, their vision, what we experience with the representation from the work of the stage director. In my opinion, it is very appropriate.

**Gérard Wormser** – That which is important and justifies the table organized tonight, is the writing work done by Franz Kafka, where a part of the literary conscience simultaneously encounters a changeover of a period. Moreover, I think that is where our two speakers actually have to provide us. When we are just before or after the 1914 war, there are macro-social phenomena that may return around this changeover period, preceded by changeovers, followed by other changeovers. It is also a moment when the literary conscience is more demanding than it has ever been in the large European cities. When we think of Proust and Valéry in France, of other authors throughout Europe, we only want to mention Thomas Mann or Stefan Zweig, contemporaries of Kafka, who, for their generation and in the German language, elevated the literary conscience to a level of virtuosity that could be compared to that of the musicians of their time, like Schoenberg or Webern, or painters like Kandinsky or the *Blaue Reiter* movement, or others in France (Picasso, Braque or Matisse) who changed the vision that individuals bearing creativity brought to their own creative world.

Franz Kafka, and the names mentioned could be used for elaborating or possibly comparing, in a particular time when the subjective consciousness of the creators was at the sharp edge of the changeover times of a European society, at its maximum industrial and economic power, and at a time when the decline of the West appeared as the immediate consequence of excess power and of will to power cultivated throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. The first one to be really featured was the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche who, in connection to the West and the post-Kantian moral, the Kantian morality and its aftermath, showed how this desire for self-control in all the manifestations of reason, even associated, as was also the case with Kant, with a concern for sensitivity, beauty and self-expression that contemporary romance developed to the fullest, even accompanied by this relief the sensitivity could provide, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe was a world of control and domination. I think this transforms and transfers immediately on to the sociological status of the father throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

To cite just one example, and relating to my own work on Jean-Paul Sartre, when Sartre was working on Flaubert, the issue of the father-son relationship is obviously at the heart of this magisterial work which is *L'Idiot de la famille*. Indeed, Flaubert's father is a surgeon in Rouen, seen as a figure in his city, and the son Flaubert — not the good one — Gustave, is not intending to succeed the father in the course of the practice of medicine. He carelessly studied law at Paris (this reminds me of the journey of Franz Kafka who will study law in Prague) and casually devotes himself to some form of smoking and an evening filled with a variety of ways, to writing, which

will take him a lot of time to produce works that will be published, then implicated as insidious under the Second Empire. Hence, from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, writers more sensitive than others oppose the issue of paternal authority from the inside to this excess power that somehow condemns individuals to finding themselves outside themselves if they cannot assert this identity between the individual and the power.

At the other extreme, I want to quote a few lines of Robert Castel, extracted from *La montée des incertitudes*, the history of coming to the end of this story by skipping mediations. Robert Castel says:

“There is no individual without support, because being just an individual is a terrible experience. The vagabond of pre-industrial societies exemplifies this existence free from all attachment, foreign to the work order and to any community registration. He paid this reduction of being a pure individual with a difficult fate. But in the modern world, in terms of the sequence of historical events that unfold in the West from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, there are those who are not much better off, and, the proletarian detached from the traditional relationships [...] The complete individuality, it is the complete disaffiliation, the detachment from any belonging and support, that places the individual in a kind of social selfhood. Then we realize that to be a positive person, you must be affiliated or reaffiliated.”

The word “affiliated” or “reaffiliated” is here a doublet of the word “filiation” we will focus on during this discussion. Bernard Lahire has worked extensively on the sociology of education, on the status of writers, on the aspect whereby subjective identity cannot be separated from the socialization models that allow us to exist both by saying “I” and by saying “we”, and by referring us to many “we”. We are indeed in complex meeting places, branched, and often uncertain, to take into account the same vocabulary as that of Robert Castel. Furthermore, Christine Castelain-Meunier has long worked on the uncertainty accompanying the manly status in contemporary societies, where the very term “manly” is no longer used. In fact, I deliberately use it, this word does not figure much in your vocabulary because it is precisely to this emasculation that was devoted a large part of the evolution of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This emasculation culminated in June 1940 in France. Some novelists perfectly described how the military disbandment of June 1940 was absolutely an inbred inability to assume the manly status that precisely the soldier had to assume, knowing that the soldier father fought in the trenches of the Verdun, and that the soldier son was fleeing from the Stukas and the German Panzers a generation later.

There is therefore no stronger symbol to analyze the end of the reign of manhood in the West, to see how the war produced the effects contrary to what precisely identifying manhood and violence

of war, both controlled and expressed, may have constituted from feudalism for the virile identity. To say, this June 1940 is not just an accident. See how the Vietnam war produced the same effect in the United States, while the GI's of 1944 could return, whether they were white or black, with a rather reaffirmed masculine identity status. Thus, it has taken 40 more years for this same process to take its course, first among American soldiers, then we saw in the 60s and 70s in the Red Army, crowned with a European victory (including conquering Prague in 1945) but which, after the 70s, understood that its uniforms would soon be sold at a flea market close to the Wall that divided Europe. Today, we even see the name "Red Army" appearing on the poster of rhythmic ballet spectacles where the body control is associated with uniforms. Manhood was perhaps always a show: first theatre of war, it transforms itself into the ballet-pantomime, as if the opera firefighter became the symbol of this emasculated manhood which contemporary societies no longer really know how to assess it today.

How are we to rediscover Franz Kafka in the context of a century of changing status of men? I am going to ask each of our guests to provide their reading. Let us begin with Bernard Lahire, because the connection with the show is clear, due to his recent book, *Franz Kafka. Éléments pour une théorie de la création littéraire*<sup>2</sup>. Please, Bernard, tell us what motivated you to take an interest in Kafka. In this book, of course, the question of the relationship with the father is omnipresent. I would not say that those are 600 pages around *Dearest Father*, but finally, many of the elements of *Dearest Father* are present. You have analysed them practically one after another by linking them with the essence of all that has been written about Kafka for a century.

**Bernard Lahire** – I do not know if you read *Dearest Father*, or if you have seen, it recently staged. This is a rather amazing letter, great from my point of view, including from my sociological perspective. I think it is a letter from the quasi-sociological structure of the family, with remarkable lucidity on the role of each other within the family structure; the father, but not exclusively. Indeed, are also mentioned in this letter, his mother, his sisters, and even characters outside the family. In reality, his father never read this letter, even though we have every right to have it read by the father as a staging option. His father never read it, and I think in any case, it would not have made much difference in their relationships. Even if they had a stormy relationship, it is important to know that Kafka lived all of his life with his parents. This is something we must bear in mind. In fact, he left his parents two years before he died. As he died very young (41 years), he lived so long within the family context which, however, made him suffer a lot.

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<sup>2</sup> Lahire, Bernard, *Franz Kafka. Éléments pour une théorie de la création littéraire*, Paris, La Découverte, coll. « Textes à l'appui/Laboratoire des sciences sociales », 2010.

To figure out what is going on in this family, we may already need to place it in a very macrosociological context. We see that Kafka is a part of a group of intellectuals, artists, journalists, politicians, etc., who were children with fathers who did very well socially, mainly economically. Kafka has stopped reading autobiographies or diaries. He loved to read stories of sons who broke with their families, or who had conflicts with their father, namely the newspaper of Kropotkine<sup>3</sup>. We must remember that Kafka associated with anarchists, socialists, etc. Kropotkine was a Russian anarchist communist whose father was noble. Taking a step to the side, he took the serfs' side. In *Dearest Father*, Kafka says that he took a "stand for the staff" of his father's store. These sons will break with their father and reject the inheritance. There is a serious issue. He is not the only one, it will be the same for Paul Kornfeld, writer of the time, whose father was a businessman, who decides not to pursue the road of business success of the father, but to take a step to the side and study literature. The same is true for the poet of the time Franz Werfel<sup>4</sup>, whose father was a businessman. This is also the case with Sigmund Freud. It is perhaps no coincidence that the name of Sigmund Freud may be mentioned. Indeed, *Dearest Father* is actually very Freudian. At the same time, Kafka kept a distance from Freud. There is just a personal notation in his diary where he says something very bad about Freud, and that is all he says about Freud in his writings, his letter, etc. But we are seeing the same shift in Freud, whose father was highly successful economically.

These children of the economic bourgeoisie are taking a step to the side, refusing the inheritance of fathers to enter in literature, painting, journalism, or politics (philosophy, science, etc.) In some cases, this really causes conflicts. In fact, the father's relationship with the son is

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<sup>3</sup> Like Bakounine, Proudhon and Jean Grave, Piotr Alexeïevitch Kropotkine (1842-1921) was one of the leading theorists of collectivist anarchism. Nicknamed as the prince of anarchism (he came from the highest aristocracy of Moscow), Kropotkine was a remarkable geographer, like his friend and colleague Élisée Reclus, with whom he founded the anarchist newspaper *Le Révolté*. Believer of Bakounine, he authored many principles of anarchism, an optimistic and humanistic anarchism, libertarian, inspired by Marxism, and who embraced cooperation and collectivism, quite the contrary, for example, of individualist anarchism of Max Stirner

<sup>4</sup> Austrian writer born in 1890 in Prague, Franz Werfel comes from the German-Jewish bourgeoisie, but he is educated in a catholic school, that permeates his work. At the high school in Prague, he befriends Franz Kafka and Max Brod, and publishes poems at an early age. He is first recognized as a poet (with a success comparable to that of Stefan George and that of Hofmannsthal) before becoming a playwright and novelist. Married to the widow of Gustav Mahler, Alma Mahler, he lived until 1938 in Vienna. In 1938, the couple fled from the German troops and sought refuge in France, in Sanary-sur-Mer. In 1940, they are in Lourdes where Werfel is interested in Bernadette Soubirous, after crossing the Pyrénées with Heinrich and Golo Mann, two sons of Thomas Mann, the couple is in Portugal and arrive in the United States. In 1941, he became an American citizen. He died in Beverly Hills (California) in 1945 of a heart attack, at the age of 54.

that of a bourgeois with an artist. Thus, Kafka's father looks at the evolution of his son as a disaster with everything he invested in him. The father comes from a poor background, he is the model of the *self-made man*: he was made by himself. He is someone huge, even physically: he is tall, strong. This very active boss/businessman dominates everyone physically and morally. He is also the boss in the family, the head of the family that his son describes as a despot, a tyrant. We never know what will be his next order or his next anger, but he will inevitably explode, disagree, reproach a number of child behaviours. This is a strong father. He is all the more powerful that he genuinely believes to have succeeded his life on his own. He lived in extreme poverty, and he became a widely recognized bourgeois in Prague, a kind of public figure. He was well established. At the same time, he belongs to the first generation of assimilated Jews, committed to integrating and achieving personal and family success.

He invests in trade and must fight on all fronts, against the enduring anti-Semitism and for business to thrive. He thus develops an extraordinary energy. Kafka therefore lives in a family where the father insisted that his children receive a good bourgeois education, formal, Germanic (there will also be a French-speaking Belgian preceptor). He will go to the best German schools, the Gymnasium primary school, succeed his schooling in fine schools, to University where he will receive his doctorate in law. The father is convinced that he will make a future boss. He buys an asbestos company to put him in the hands, telling himself that his son was maybe going to learn to take care of it. Kafka agrees to associate with his father (and with a brother-in-law), but he does not want to participate in his management. His father asks him to go in there from time to time to monitor the smooth operations. He tries to "catch him" like that, but he does not want. While Kafka holds a doctorate in law, he may be a business leader, the father would be ready to open another business for him, he rejects all this. He takes a job with an insurance company. He starts in a company where he works too many hours per day, but he leaves it because it prevents him from writing. He takes another part-time job, refuses most responsibilities, because it would take too much time.

He therefore despairs his father. This economic bourgeois gives everything to his son, all the opportunities to continue in the same way as him, but the son does not want. Hence, from the point of view of his father, he is wasting his talents. The conflict is then around this opposition here. Furthermore, Kafka had two brothers before him, but who died in infancy. Therefore, he is the only son. Six or seven years are going to elapse between him and the birth of the first of his three sisters. So everything hangs over the son from an inheritance perspective. For the father, there is only he who will continue the heritage of the Kafkas. This is therefore even more horrible for Kafka. In his *Letter*, he portrays the family structure by analysing the path of the father. His



father, from a very low base, is successful and condemns his children for having a life too easy. There are many fathers like this. Whenever I talk about the *Dearest Father*, people tell me: "I know someone who...". Indeed, there are many stories about this in our surrounding; sometimes, we have experienced it ourselves: successful fathers measure everything against them. Kafka's father blames his children, son as well as daughters, of living too easily: "I bring you everything", "you have had nothing to do", "you are ungrateful".

Furthermore, add a layer of authoritarianism, which, at the time, was quite characteristic of authority structures within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In the case of Kafka, the completely unjust and unjustified layer is added, from a son's perspective in any case, the father blames him. He describes him as the tyrant or despot par excellence, since the children never knew exactly what was falling on their head. They could never predict what would happen, because they never knew by what laws they were prosecuted and punished. Every night, they feared the father returning from the store, he getting upset, angry, blaming. Furthermore, Kafka sees a contradictory father, reproaching his children for doing certain things he does himself. Here again, this is the figure of the despot who is above the law. He decides the law at any time. When he finally decides to introduce a new law, he establishes it without justifying himself. That is the power structure of the Kafkas.

Kafka produced his work in such circumstances. *Dearest Father* was not at all a literary text, but a letter that he wanted to write to his father and gave it to his mother. His mother put it aside. She did not want to give it to her husband, fearing that it only makes things worse. This is an untitled letter. Often people ask if it is *Letter to the father* or *Letter to his father*. But publishers chose the title, because Kafka did not entitle it, as this was a letter he sent to his father. This is therefore a genuine letter. Before writing it (in 1919), he wrote many literary texts in which he works the relationship between the father and the son, explicitly or indirectly. Up until the end of his life, he will continue writing texts to discuss the relationship with the paternal authority. The very essence of his work revolves around that topic. Indeed, *The Trial*, *The Castle*, *The Metamorphosis*, *In the Penal colony* speak of the power, the arbitrariness of power, the feeling of guilt that we can have when we do not understand what is going to happen to us, and that we have absorbed the fact that we probably made a mistake. The character of Joseph K. (character of *The Trial*) ended without knowing why, and when he wants to talk, you do not tell him. It is therefore a very strange situation. People thought of the Moscow Trials that will take place much later.

Obviously, Kafka could not predict the Moscow Trials! This is a mock trial in *The Trial*. He speaks of this trial in *Dearest Father*. He says something like: "there is an ongoing trial between you and we [the children]". So he uses the metaphor of the trial, and he goes right to the end of the metaphor by featuring someone who has an ongoing trial, but does not understand exactly the case against him. This is a fantastic court, it is absurd, and it is quite odd.

People often ask me if he would have written this work if he had not gone through all suffering. Obviously not. This does not mean that people who are suffering are able to produce a work as great as that of Kafka. However, it is clear that if he had been a happy heir, we would have retained his name as that of a corporate Director of asbestos in the suburbs of Prague, or else we would have retained that he was a legal expert or a good lawyer. In fact, he defended the workers, at the forefront of social law to the extent that he worked in a workplace safety and insurance company. That is, by the way, no coincidence that he worked in this company. Indeed, these were the first companies related to social law. He paid visits to companies to tax them, to insure their workers, because they felt obliged. He would therefore observe workplace risks. Kafka knew quite well the world of work and workers, and he was afflicted by the relationship of authority and exploitation everywhere. Here again, he was very sensitive to it considering what he knew of his father, his relationship with his employees and with himself. He saw these authority structures playing in very different areas, including the companies he visited for his work as a lawyer.

**Gérard Wormser** – Thank you for this challenge. Without transition, we will go to Christine Castelain-Meunier. What does it mean to be a son? What does it mean to be a father? A situation that Kafka found himself in and what is perhaps today the aftermath and something more.

**Christine Castelain-Meunier** – I wanted to start with a song extract.

"Mr. President  
I'm writing you a letter  
That perhaps you will read  
If you have the time  
I've just received  
My call-up papers  
To leave for the front  
Before Wednesday night."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> From the song *Le Déserteur*, written by Boris Vian. Originally, this song is a poem. The first interpretation was distributed in May 1954, created by Mouloudji in a pacifist version. Mouloudji performed this song, the day of the defeat of France at Diên Biên Phu that marks the end of the Indochina war.

These few words of Boris Vian who announces that he is going to desert, to bridge the gap between past, present and future, and so to speak, with what each of you said, to question masculinity and the issue of the father. Finally, this is the first time I realize that Boris Vian may be relied on, who knows, *Dearest father*. I never thought about that. He addresses the "father" of all the French people, the President, but he is daring to break away, disobey, furthermore, by outlawing, exalting desertion. I would like to refer to the history and the peak of the industrial rationality, which generates in a specific historical context, a type of father and the disobedience of rebellious sons and I would like to draw attention to the emergence of subjectivity, also at its peak, in its rather fabulous dimension with Kafka, Zweig and others. I want to say here, something very special happened in the sense of precursors who eventually announced all that is going to happen in the future on the side of masculine subjectivity, and that was massively emerging in the early 1970s, with the movement of women and men who accompanied it. Arriving eventually at the masculine gender, more comprehensively and in a dialectic of male-female relationships. It was indeed, to define masculinity differently, beyond the famous male domination.

Thus, some men will say that they have supported the empowerment of women whereas they are claiming to exist as a subject having civil and social rights, and not just as a wife and mother. I am thinking mainly of Kafka's mother who was in the shadow, who did not have the right to exist on her own, especially with a man, a husband, and father of her children so authoritarian. The transformation of men is beginning at an early stage both socially and sociologically in the 1970s, but it has emerged before, through literature, and through certain precursors, to whom Kafka belongs. And there were some changes we see today inherent to the uncertainty of models of manliness, manly status. With the need to articulate both the gender equity, egalitarian culture, and the fall of a male pedestal, and at the same time, the search for oneself. Without being the copy conformed to the feminine gender or former model and not forgetting the manhood. Today, we are at the heart of the contradictions concerning the masculine gender, between respecting equality and subjectivity and specifically concerning the manhood, which they must find. Including a plural approach, but on an individual basis, because we get out of the virile monoculture.

Let us come back to Kafka, with setting this scene of the mystery of manhood. What impresses me so much in the case of this letter is that we can perceive him through his writings, that he remained living with his parents as has been said. Moreover, three times, he refused to commit to marriage. This letter to his father impresses me because it is both curious and extraordinary that he speaks to him in this way. However, it is a communication gateway. He seeks to communicate with his father, while the authoritarianism of the father makes it impossible.

He aspires to exceed the impossible, at the same time he is heading straight for a dead end. I wonder why he has not switched to disobedience thinking "to the extent that the communication with my father is impossible, I will live my life, turning my back on this dominating father, and let me assert myself this way". I think it is great that writing, daydreaming, imagination, the ability of running away from reality allow him to withstand the dependence in which he is, and of which he is unable to get out. It may be overwhelming in terms of seeking self-affirmation, manhood by creation, because he has an enormous self-awareness. Few human beings have a self-awareness like his. How to be able to talk about himself this way, the other and the relationship of existing domination, between his father and him, is remarkable. Hence, writing prevents his emancipation, empowerment, but daydreaming and imagination allow him to remain in writing by finding his "self", his personality, self-awareness. I think that is fabulous.

Coming back to the issue of manhood, he certainly describes himself all the time as extremely feeble, and he describes his father as too strong. At the same time, we say that he cannot become autonomous from this paternal authority, because he needs it. He needs it there where probably in his time, we cannot assert his position as a man without needing the reference to such an almost symbolic power. In fact, he praises his father as a kind of "Olympian". I think this character of the father could almost prefigure and it is paradoxical, Nazism in power, through the cult of the body, confidence and exposure to so contemptuous superiority. Kafka, short, fragile, sick, needs his father as a crutch to exist as a man, in a hyper-rational, hyper-industrial society, with an overwhelming patriarchy. In contrast, we are no longer in the golden age of fathers before the French Revolution, where the father had complete authority, including over adult children. Voltaire has also been imprisoned, because he did not want to marry the woman chosen by his father. I do not understand why Kafka had so much difficulty becoming independent. His father had no paternal authority in the past, prior to the French Revolution. He no longer had the power he then had on adult children, also including that of disinheriting his children. He could have emancipated himself from the paternal authority.

This need to assert yourself by the symbolic, the power of writing complementing the virile power embodied by the father, even if it turns against him. And at the same time, asserting yourself through writing and self-awareness was an extraordinary consistency.

**Gérard Wormser** – Would we not be at the beginning of the phenomenon that you are deeply analysing in *Les métamorphoses du masculin*? There is the idea that it is through the media, public communication that the symbolic images associated with the social roles are changing, as if to speak directly with the family, the son to the father, was a kind of existential impasse. The relationship with the father could not have evolved if Kafka had managed a way of literary

transformation of his work that would have led to invest a theatre, or literary journals, short media and mediation scene. This would allow him to speak to the father through attempts to participate in a literary life, whose status in Prague was quite consistent at that time. Bernard, you show very well how the temptations that Kafka may have were to get closer to the Czech scene by leaving to some extent the identification of education, and Germanic and German culture. This dimension of publicizing social roles, is it not one of the factors by which the representation of these roles thus contributes to their potential development? What Kafka lacked within his extremely narrow family circle.

**Christine Castelain-Meunier** – Certainly, yes. Thank you for referring to my book *Les métamorphoses du masculin*<sup>6</sup>, which gives an account, inter alia, of the changes at the level of three generations of men, concerning the relationship with oneself and the body, the relationship between men and intimate relationships between men and woman, paternal bonds. It is very interesting to speak about Kafka's "existential impasse between father and son", while the public communication on the transformation of men, is lacking at his time, as just mentioned not allowing the "symbolic images associated with the social roles to change". We can add at this moment, Kafka was actually very isolated, including seeking self-affirmation as a man, at a time when it was not appropriate to challenge traditional models of masculinity. It is not what he does knowingly, he does it using his own experience. And the fact that he expresses his subjectivity, and it is as much in the self-awareness, is something very rare, unique. Although we were told that, it was part of a very interesting literary romantic movement, it is extremely marginal. It is only now that we are talking about the search for authenticity by the exit of roles, constraints, uniforms. At the time, he was still isolated in the sense of a cultural movement that was emerging through literature, and which could include people like him, artists, creators, interfering in the concept of masculinity by seeking to be closer to their subjectivity.

Furthermore, it is true that the media contribute to the diffusion of changes in the models. However, there is also the role of direct interactions, mediation and specifically the role of smugglers. I am currently working on the household, men, women, and children. In the book entitled *La sorcière, la fée du logis et le prince charmant: the question of household* comes out on Stock. And I realize that many smugglers allow women to leave behind their role of homemaker, enable men to step down from their character role outside the domestic realm and a real transformation is underway. Some of Kafka's friends certainly encouraged and supported him in publishing his work.

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<sup>6</sup> Castelain-Meunier, Christine, *Les métamorphoses du masculin*, Paris, PUF, 2004.

**Gérard Wormser** – In the work of Christine Castelain-Meunier, it is striking that the perceptions of roles fully relate to how the sphere of publicizing these roles. This is both an investigative material, and a transformation vector. We shall return to this point.

**Bernard Lahire** – There are things that happen within the family structure. In fact, when studying *Dearest Father systematically*, we realize that Kafka takes his mother's side over his father. Indeed, he always takes up the feminine pole. Similarly, there is an opposition between the economic hub and the literary center, which aligns with the opposition between male and female. Literature is conceived as something very secondary.

**Gérard Wormser** – Almost a matter of maintenance.

**Bernard Lahire** – Literature is not something serious for a commercial bourgeoisie. Moreover, his mother would like the writing to be a mere hobby. For him, talking about "hobby", it is a real horror. He says he "hates everything that is not literature". Hence, imagine his relationship with literature. He always occupies positions opposite to those of his father. His father eats a lot, he eats very little; his father is very robust, he is thin and fragile; his father is brave, he is not; his father has a great self-esteem, he devalues himself constantly, etc. Steadily, when we are looking at family lines, paternal and maternal, his positive references are from the mother's family. They are more spiritual, more cultured, more readers. So he chose his mother's side. Kafka has many feminine traits.

**Christine Castelain-Meunier** – He has a huge male superego following the death of his brothers.

**Bernard Lahire** – Yes. At the same time, because he is admiring his father, he internalized the negative view that the father has on him. One wonders why he does not rebel. Why does he not leave the family structure? There are two explanations for this. First, he gives one: the unclear role of his mother. He says she was "like a hunting reel". He is terrible with his mother. He said that if she had not been there to explain to her children "your father has so many worries, which is why he becomes angry, but that does not matter; we need to understand him", to act as a buffer, of course they would have broken with him. The hunting reel is the one that brings the game so the hunters can shoot over. This description is terrible.

**Christine Castelain-Meunier** – Thus, his father is the predator.

**Bernard Lahire** – Indeed. Furthermore, he says his mother is "the loving slave" of his father, and he his "loving tyrant". It is therefore clear. Yet, he admires his parents, he loves them, but he describes them with cruelty, and, I think, a rather astonishing truth from the perspective of the

function they have. So he says it is a little bit of the fault of the mother, but at the same time, he does not want him to take the blame. This *Letter* really says that there is no personal responsibility. There are interrelationships between all the members who make up the family, but we are not saying it is the fault of fathers or mothers. Indeed, each has played a role in the family. He actually sees his mother contributed to yelling at him — he uses this term — in what he calls the “the family pet”. He considers that the family is like a natural body in which everything is interrelated, each member is like an organ with its function. He suggests that his mother played a role in his inability to radically break with his father. As he had internalized the negative view his father shared on him, the situation is terrible for him. First, he will live what all his friends will live, that is, a breaking away from his father unwilling to study commerce or industry, not being interested by money, but by literature.

Second, he does not radically break with his father. Indeed, he is admiring his father, he sees himself in the way his father sees him. Hence, he suffers constantly. Thus, in his personal diary, he can write a few sentences where he will say *broadly* that he is going to revolutionize literature, and two lines further, he comments by writing: “but who do you think you are to write such things?” So he internalized the gaze of the father. He has extraordinary ambitions, to the extent that he sets the bar very high. He hates most writers of his time. We always see Kafka as a modest person, nice, but he feels extraordinarily ambitious. And at the same time, he lives a state of permanent self-deprecation. He has a rather special psychological structure. Apparently, he suffers much for this reason.

Literature has a therapeutic function for him. It is really to expel a number of things outside of him, to understand, he writes. Literature is clearly, for him, a means to understand. At the same time, he sees his literary experiments as an experience to expel a number of problems that are haunting him, and that he cannot understand. Hence, all his literary work is a work that he does almost in a state of trance. He wrote *The Verdict* in a single night. He says: “I do not know what I got out of me, but it is disgusting, it is dirty”. He takes the image of a sort of very deep well, with very dark things and rot. He expelled all of this. He says he does not know how he did it. Thus, he did not see all this as someone who has a three-part plan, with a system of characters and a very clear plot. He is not in the literary calculation. This is why he never published in his lifetime his novels, because a novel is a long written work, and he cannot maintain the strength and energy he can put into his short stories. He therefore published only short stories in his lifetime. Indeed, *America* was never published, we do not even know the specific sequence of chapters. *The Trial* or *The Castle* were unfinished works. So he was in this relationship of expulsion, because he was working on his existential problems.

**Christine Castelain-Meunier** – He empties his guts and he moves elsewhere at the same time. The universe he reconstructs is impressive. For example, the universe of *The Metamorphosis* is another universe. It is elsewhere. He moves elsewhere, and always carries his family elsewhere. Indeed, it is always with him. So he is constantly struggling with this psychologically, emotionally and intellectually dependent relationship. So he was in this relationship of expulsion, because he was working on his existential problems. Kafka's father is the symbol of the *self-made man*, the successful social mobility. Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in *The Democracy in America* that we have moved from an aristocratic political system to a democratic political system through social mobility. It is understandable that at this time, it is difficult to assert otherwise to the masculine gender. When Kafka says he is just a minor "official" in the insurance, we really feel that it is socially not exciting. Indeed, his ego and superego are dissatisfied with the demands of times, which focus on asserting manhood by professional success. Today, asserting manhood, fatherhood, is always referring to the importance of professional success, including for women, but we also sense new changes to be taking place. Through the mobility of identities, choosing how to assert, claiming rights, including being oneself and being respected as such.

I think it is great that Kafka is a precursor when he talks about himself, his gut feelings, at a time when it is "prohibited" with regard to the industrial rationality model for success. I am not surprised that he says writing, is good for nothing, and that his father returning him to writing, is useless. Today, few fathers would dare to think it is useless that their son writes. Certainly, it could throw a critical look. But today, the perception of the father's role is different. The father is rather relational, less locked into an institutional role; he accompanies the affirmation of his son allowing him to assert his individuality. Today's father would be much more like a *coach*.

**Bernard Lahire** – Unfortunately, some fathers continue to be like Kafka's father.

**Christine Castelain-Meunier** – Well. The more things change, the more there is a shift back. Change causing anxiety, we need to build on what has proven its worth in history, in the past: namely the tradition.

**Bernard Lahire** – I think of a student who did a thesis in sociology and whose father has been highly successful economically although he came from a working-class background. He was somewhat similar to the father of Kafka, with a very strong economic capital and very important responsibilities. While his daughter passed the entrance examination for the *École Normale Supérieure*, he considerably disregards the school choice that would make many parents happy and proud. In fact, there are still situations, which, without being powerful and so exaggerated than that experienced by Kafka, are very similar. This said, at the time, there is a mix of



modernity and great traditionalism. Indeed, Felice Bauer, with whom Kafka almost got married, was a young woman working in a modern world: she sold the first recorders. Kafka wrote letters to Felice Bauer making her an advertising plan, telling her that she could sell them in various ways, because doctors can use it when they dictate letters to their secretary, to sales representatives, etc. Indeed, the fact that this young assimilated Jewish girl works and assumes responsibilities in her business is not a problem for the Kafkas.

Hence, the place of women in traditionally male professional spheres is on the rise. It is therefore interesting to see that we have both a strongly traditional and very authoritarian family structure; and at the same time, we see the beginning of the empowerment of women through work.

**Gérard Wormser** – Authoritarian society, yes, but at the same time, journey and permanent mobility. Indeed, we cannot say that stability was the rule for the Kafkas. At the end of his life, the father did not have the situation he had at the beginning. Anyway, Austria-Hungary no longer exists, political and social frameworks were upset, so we cannot really speak of stability in any way for the times of Kafka's father and of Franz Kafka himself. Changes in gender, paternal and filial roles, are part of a constant change. We spoke earlier about the issue of the rebellion, of the superego. I want to mention here a very nice job of a psychoanalyst from Grenoble, Jean-Pierre Fresco. He worked precisely on these texts of Kafka that we are discussing. He comes up with an idea of Isaac's complex by reference to an expression that is no longer used, developed by Gaston Bouthoul, sociologist of the 1950s.

Indeed, the latter had proposed the idea of Abraham's complex to talk about the violence of fathers as generating wars. To simplify, Gaston Bouthoul worked on institutional violence. He assumes that the institutional violence derives from a kind of violence complex that the biblical texts symbolize in their own way. Jean-Pierre Fresco says we could by way of symmetry, think on Kafka supposing a complex of Isaac, that is, the potential victim designated in advance, and who would have internalized his guilt or the reason for his possible expulsion of life. And simultaneously, this would allow him to feel the unique and special character of his own existence, and to constitute himself while even breathing his last. Jean-Pierre Fresco shows that through the various texts of Kafka mentioned, we can draw a psychological development of Franz Kafka.

He says that the first texts such as *The Metamorphosis*, *The Judgment*, and *Dearest Father* could be opposed to the later texts of Kafka, especially the famous text that is *A Report to an academy*. In this text, Kafka draws a monkey who makes a report to the academicians of Hamburg. They ask him to explain how he is humanized. Jean-Pierre Fresco distinguishes between different stages

of the autobiography Kafka: first, when guilt is ontological, existential and that it is inescapable, secondly, it would be an action progress of his own situation through *In the Penal colony* and some other texts in which it is a matter of a trial. Trial implies objectivation in the horizon. Hence, we would not be into the idea of an eternal atonement, Isaac's complex that we would no longer be able to get out of, but we would be in the situation of having to actualize patterns/concepts and consequences.

Finally, in the last texts written by Kafka, we would have the possibility of imagining that speaking is the fact of those who otherwise felt guilty and expelled from the world of paternal authority, to find a form of self-expression. It is particularly interesting because he does it in the guise of a monkey, because this means that it is through a phenomenon of training and self-monitoring that this monkey manages to humanize. Here, because we talk about Kafka as a precursor, we would move, somehow, from sociology, bureaucracy as someone like Max Weber<sup>7</sup> was able to express at the time when Kafka wrote. There is this idea that the routine of the insurance company and the very greyish role of these officials or similar staff members, these bureaucrats of modern states, is transformed so much that we could also find at Kafka's home, an announcement of personal dynamic sociology, which would perhaps yield more to texts read today, but Kafka could not read, such as those of Norbert Élias<sup>8</sup>. In fact, the latter shows how subjective roles have been able to form the antidote to these bureaucratic forms and social status that were in static order.

We can therefore ask ourselves to what extent the social and political chaos in Prague of the inter-war period is not one of the elements that increases the particular sensitivity of Franz Kafka that enabled him, even through autobiographic texts where the issues of violence and submission are objective themes, feeling the possibility that an individualisation through self-monitoring and the ability to put in the aesthetic and literary affects, a part of self-identity as yet taken in the social, economic, and political status, was not one of the elements that make Kafka one of these precursors.

**Bernard Lahire** – With respect to Jean-Pierre Fresco, there is a problem of assumption. Indeed, the date of *A Report to an academy* is 1917, before *Dearest Father*. Furthermore, in *A Report to an academy*, Kafka speaks of a monkey that tells how he humanized himself with much

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<sup>7</sup> Max Weber, born on 21 April 1864 and died June 14, 1920, is a German sociologist and economist. He is, with Vilfredo Pareto, Émile Durkheim, Georg Simmel and Karl Marx, one of the founders of modern sociology.

<sup>8</sup> Norbert Elias is a German writer and sociologist, born on 22 June 1897 in Breslau, died August 1, 1990 in Amsterdam. He is the author of a major work of historical sociology, *Sur le processus de civilisation*, published, in France, in two volumes, *La Civilisation des mœurs* and *La Dynamique de l'Occident*.

suffering. So it is for him a graphic way of telling a potential marriage. It may sound strange, but for him, being married is becoming an accomplished man. Moreover, he doubts his marriage. If you follow the correspondence between Franz Kafka and Felice Bauer, you realize that for seven years, she once heard "I love you, my life depends on you", they get engaged, and then he tells her "I am a depraved being", "why do you want to live with someone as weak as me", she reassures him, comforts him, etc. These exchanges have persisted for seven years. Therefore, he wrote *A Report to an academy* to try to resolve the problem he has with marriage. He imagines that at last, he managed to marry someone. For him, this is a very difficult affair. Moreover, in *Dearest Father*, we see that the one who managed to succeed his marriage and family is his father. This is the incredible obstacle for him because he says he does not have the strength of his father, he will never succeed. Furthermore, he wants to set aside time to write, and have a wife and children takes time. This would require another economic strategy because it could no longer be part-time, he would have to shift to full-time. So the literature is over for him. He then starts telling the story. It is really a story where he tells how someone moves from being an animal (the monkey = the unmarried man) to being an accomplished man (= the married man).

Furthermore, the context of the times is extremely agitated from a cultural and artistic perspective. We cannot imagine that today. Kafka's friends were writers, philosophers, journalists at university. He studied law, but he was spending more time in the reading room where there were new things, conferences, every evening. He thus attended conferences, in particular on Nietzsche. That is how he met Max Brod<sup>9</sup>, who became his executor. He knew all these people, because we had what we no longer have in our universities: a rich cultural life. People do have an academic background, but they did other things during their extra-university time. At the time, there was the writers' circle; the claims of the Czechs were reflected in a young Czech literature, the eastern Jews came in with a theatre and a Yiddish literature. Kafka also wrote a text on minor literatures from very impressive literature, such as the German literature. For Kafka, Goethe prohibited writing. After Goethe, what you want to write? In fact, he wrote so well. So Kafka would seek inspiration and energy from minor literatures.

It was a time of a very strong political and artistic agitation, with children who were not following the fathers. There was a kind of contagion. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein<sup>10</sup> had exactly the same journey as Kafka. Indeed, he could inherit a huge fortune, but he refused the

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<sup>9</sup> Max Brod is a Czech writer and journalist of the German language, born in Prague on 27 May 1884, died in Tel Aviv (Israel) December 20, 1968.

<sup>10</sup> Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein (born in Vienna, Austria-Hungary, on 26 April 1889, died in Cambridge, UK, April 29, 1951) is an Austrian philosopher and British, who made decisive contributions to logic, mathematics theory and language philosophy.

material heritage, he took the money and he has made grants for writers. So he refused the inheritance, and at the same time, he, like Franz Kafka, was much more faithful than the other heirs who continued the father's path, because they initially wanted to follow the father. In fact, Kafka in many texts, in his letter, speaks of literature as a shop, in the image of his father's shop. It is his store. He wants to follow the father. Starting from scratch, he starts his literary company. Wittgenstein did exactly the same thing. He kept telling me that he wanted to be as efficient as his father, *businesslike*, but in philosophy. Therefore, he had to solve the problems like his father, settled problems in his business. In philosophy, we need to clarify, move forward, decide, etc.

We see that, Wittgenstein or Kafka is somehow, faithful to their father. They are not taking over the inheritance, but the father's approach which involved building by ourselves, except that they are stepping aside and that they turn to literature. Kafka achieved this because of the extremely flourishing background of that time. You should also know that initially, Kafka wanted to become a designer. Some of the artwork was also published after his death. Cultural and artistic horizons opened to this entire generation.

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**Gérard Wormser** – This is a time for the audience to intervene.

**Audience** – How he met Felice Bauer?

**Bernard Lahire** – He met her at a friend's house, and the same evening, he wanted to marry her!

**Audience** – He described her as a rather ugly person.

**Bernard Lahire** – Yes, Kafka finds her very ugly. Indeed, he was a bit "twisted". Maybe that reassured him. Seeing the pictures of Felice Bauer, we understand what he describes. In fact, she had her teeth redone in gold. She therefore had a "brilliant" smile, probably. In the sentences, he wrote of her, he describes her as an ugly woman. Regardless, he wants to marry her. I tried to analyze the attributes of the various companions of Kafka. In fact, he is even further moving away from the father in the attributes of the companions. Initially, about Felice Bauer, the father is very happy, because she is considered Jewish, she is from a middle-class background, and her parents are bourgeois. Therefore, she is from a "good" background. The fact that she is working does not bother the father at all. Having said that, maybe she would have given up her job if she had children, but we do not know, because she is not married to him. Then Kafka will gradually be

attracted by other types of woman, one of whom is Milena Jesenska. He gradually moves away from what might please his father : they are Czech, of a much lower social status, emancipated and leading lives of originality for the time. This is the case of Milena, even if she was dominated by a very violent husband. So Felice Bauer was well liked by Kafka's parents.

**Gérard Wormser** – I'll be glad to hear Christine Castelain-Meunier talking to us about the ongoing changes, of the situations highlighted in the 20s or 30s, of everything that has changed ever since the contemporary reconfigurations. Roughly speaking, does a figure such as Kafka still exist today? Are the complexes of Isaac or Abraham still the dimensions we then work on? The world where fatherhood is going hand in hand with the authority and the consequences of guilt involved, does that world remain an analytical framework even today? On the other hand, has it totally disappeared? In that case, what analytical frameworks we can use today to analyse the fatherhood and the various forms it can take?

**Audience** – You were talking about manhood. Currently, I see that for people in social difficulties, in a precarious situation, many fathers are wishing to be authoritarian, while they are also completely undervalued. Why? It is a clinical finding.

**Christine Castelain-Meunier** – I will answer your question by elaborating on the idea of the context, which was a real chaos. What strikes me is that, ultimately, in the family area, this has not actually created chaos. Indeed, later there was a transformation of customs, roles, positions, and functions within the family. It is just that for example in the case of France, in 1970/72 the paternal authority is replaced by that of parental authority, divorce by mutual consent began in 1975 and the principle of joint parenthood in 1993. The rights of children and the International Convention on the rights of children came later. The family has transformed with separation: between the blood relationship and the social filiation, parenthood and conjugality, sexuality and procreation, MAP. As Dolto stated, positions within the family, between men and women, around the apprehended child were redefined as a small individual who has to be supported in strengthening character, by respecting his personality.

There is also the saying that the more things change, the more there is a shift back. In the case of fatherhood, the desire of regaining an authority and a traditional role is juxtaposed by the new status as a father, and is based on models that have proved successful in the past. Bearing in mind that the relational status as a father, contrary to that which was institutional cannot depend on the transmission, it is improvised and built in interactions. Moreover, there are difficulties for each of us in finding his or her place in a changing society of parenting with the weight of the imperative of academic success for children, educational excellence for parents. A combination of

uncertainty and reinsurance through tradition, however, this combination also exists on the women's side.

**Audience** – At the same time, I am seeing in these families that the girl can decide.

**Christine Castelain-Meunier** – Of course, she takes responsibility "on her shoulders". I am working on boys' education. 40 years ago, Belotti wrote *Little girls*<sup>11</sup>. The problem, then, was the education of girls, how to push them towards social empowerment, sexual freedom, to be freer, less dominated and stuck in domestic roles. Today, the education of boys can present a problem, torn between equality and difference.

So I come back to the contradicting start: at the same time, how to be keeping with the parity, and self-affirmation, performance, victory, reference to force, competition, risk. without being accused of male chauvinism? It is all about overcoming a certain number of contradictions, contradictory demands. The education of boys is not as obvious as before. Moreover, punishments against the boys are usually severe than for the girls, because they are viewed as being more "tough" than girls are, they appear to be more turbulent, more agitated. At the same time, we push them in this direction. We are talking about obsolete models sometimes poorly adapted to the current complexity, with manhood less defined than before.

**Audience** – What must replace this authority, this authoritarianism of the fathers for the child?

**Christine Castelain-Meunier** – With a presence, along with a lapse, the father is like a *coach* for his child. Canadians say that the woman provides the emotional *cocooning*. The father encourages the child to take risks, to be in action, where the mother tends to protect him. All of this continues, and at the same time, some women strongly encourage their daughters. Strongly encouraging the boy may reference a logic considered macho.

**Bernard Lahire** – In the current discussions on family, sociologists, historians and anthropologists can say that there is nothing natural about the current structure of what we call the family. It is sufficient to note, and it is not a value judgment, what was the family, what were the forms of exercising authority, etc., to know that it has been set in extraordinarily different forms, in different societies, at different times. In some societies, the uncle is almost more important than the father is. You will find all. This is what is good about doing history, sociology, anthropology, human and social sciences in general. Children do not have a "natural need" to live with their biological parents. They are and become what you make of them. A child can become a

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<sup>11</sup> GIANINI BELOTTI, Elena, *Du côté des petites filles*, Paris, Éditions des Femmes, coll. « Femmes Poches », 1974.

“wild child” who does not know to speak, who cannot develop, if you are not including them in a human group. Some abused children, kept in closets, malnourished, fail to develop normally. Obviously, nobody wants to do this to children, but you can develop a child, as you can make of them an extremely cultivated, competent individual, even a virtuoso.

If you are considering the history of the student within the educational institution, you can see in the past, the student was “drawn up”, a term non-stigmatized at that time, and is passed to the model student “endowed with reason”. So the social world has a huge responsibility of organizing how children are raised. About the current discussions on family, we can say that there is nothing “natural” or “normal” in itself. Grandparents raise many more people than the parents. Nobody is talking about it most of the time, because this is not a public issue. This is when it becomes a public issue that some begin to say “parents” who are educate the child must necessarily, of course, be the biological father and mother. That is far from obvious.

**Audience** – If we recognize these issues, would the school be a possible lever? Teaching gender issues in schools, would it not be a solution?

**Gérard Wormser** – Bernard has recently published an advocacy for the inclusion of humanities and social sciences in the school curriculum at a very early age.

**Bernard Lahire** – There are political fantasies about gender theory. Gender theorists say that the ways of behaving are cultural, not because you are biologically a man or a woman that you are behaving as you do, but it all depends on how you are developing as a person in social interactions. Indeed, a woman can be a truck driver as well as a dressmaker. The social world decides how we treat people. I do think education may help, and I publicly and recently said at the User Manual Festival that, especially on girl/boy issues, this would relieve many girls of hearing at a very early stage that there is nothing natural about few things. They feel that certain treatments, which they undergo, without saying a word so far, are by no means clear or normal. During these debates, it is quite interesting to hear stories of rape or abuse. People suspect, when some victims speak after 10-20 years, or even later, and we wonder why they did not tell, when they “really saw” that it was not normal. So sometimes, they are suspected of making up stories.

In fact, we must realize that children do not understand the situations like adults. If parental authority around them, or family friends who are implicitly benefiting from the authority of the parents, inappropriately touch or commit acts of abuse, children do not immediately understand this situation as completely abnormal. Therefore, they have neither words nor forms to say that this is wrong. We have to realize that, in order to appreciate that if we were educating children on analysing the social world, building our habits, our ways of doing things, thinking and acting, I

believe there would be many situations where victims would be able to say: "No, this is wrong" or "I don't want this". We are in a country that teaches sociology in the second class, and again just a few hours a week! It is terrible to think that for fifteen or sixteen years, we let children have no knowledge about how the social world operates. Today we would not tolerate this for "hard" sciences.

From the first steps of the child, we explain to him the storm, electricity, that they are not gods or strange spirits, but there are laws and types of operation. I think it is natural that we are teaching them that the world has regularities, laws, that it is not the willingness of the human spirit or god, which animates the physical world. However, we let children completely uninformed about the social world. Hence, there are magical relationships with the world. This is not surprising as many terrible things are happening in our society, especially within families. We are way behind on these issues. We are leaving citizens completely in the dark.

**Gérard Wormser** – A new phenomenon is perhaps going to add fuel to the fire or obliging you to specify a bit. I am talking about the phenomena of communication, such as Facebook and anything around, extremely powerful generational phenomena where children experience group relationships, with the ensuing phenomena of communication. The latter can have the *leadership*, authority, imitation, jealousy, at a time and we may have taught them what it means in their organizational models, but at the same time, they are seeing its effects to the extent that certain Facebook pages are closed, because others made an intolerable use of them, or, on the contrary, we need to gather friends as much as possible, because that is part of the social status of children from the age of 7 or 8. Consequently, this learning about the social world becomes a natural learning, leading to contrasting effects, because there is no explicit school of thought within the family or educational institutions.

**Bernard Lahire** – Trying to track what my own son does, I am not sure if there is much learning about the social world. Certain things are bouncing around, but in my opinion, they are not things of that nature. There is considerable sharing of music, tastes, and jokes. I may be wrong. There needs to be a study.

**Christine Castelain-Meunier** – It comes later on, for girls. It is a shame, because it is once they are in difficult situations, and this is spreading among girlfriends. An interesting solidarity is springing into place. Of course, for the humanities at school, naturally for giving an intelligibility of the world we live in, and in which young people live, as well as the openness about the environmental problems children are very sensitive about, include expectations as transparency



concerning the origin of the light, for example, but in a very specific and concrete manner. In fact, we have no longer any idea how the world we live in is made. This is important.

Other things seem to me to be interesting. Indeed, Sweden is moving towards this direction, where gender equality is in principle, quite good apart from other countries. You have probably seen it somewhere, this video on a school in Sweden, featuring the behaviour of schoolteachers, educators with children. We find the behaviour is very different with boys and girls. Teachers had no awareness of how they were behaving so different with boys and girls. At the same time, they have both coeducation and single-sex in place. So when the boys are together, if we give them toys usually intended for girls, or that girls consistently used, any boy can play with the toy he likes. At the table, in the canteen, no girl routinely does fetch milk, and boys do as well. So respect the child depending on what he likes, without any *preconceptions*, free of stereotypes. I find it unfortunate that we do not have it in place in France.

**Audience** – These gender studies are carried out in France. We know the results, but nothing is implemented in the government types.

**Christine Castelain-Meunier** – Of course, there is resistance. I think research, in principle, must be open. In 1988, when I began working on the transformation of men, it was pointed out that I was anti-feminist, but for me, it was obvious that being involved in the male transformations means also being interested in female transformations. I certainly was part of the transformation of the female, but with the idea that the dialectics is fascinating. For me, it was not at all anti-or pro-feminist.

**Audience** – Do you feel that we are moving towards a matriarchal society?

**Christine Castelain-Meunier** – Why do you not think that we are moving towards multiple models? This means that we have passed through a family composed of a father, a mother and a child, first religious before the French Revolution, with the impossibility of starting a family without entering through religious marriage, the inability to have a family without going through a civil marriage; then, in 1975, there were changes with divorce by mutual consent, and then single parenthood, broken families, stepfamilies, single-parent. I think we are moving towards the matriarchal, patriarchal models, etc., towards a diversity of models in this direction.

**Audience** – I do not feel that the society is weakened.

**Christine Castelain-Meunier** – We did not say that.

**Bernard Lahire** – Certain things are relaxed, denaturalized. For this reason, different models are implemented. They are becoming more apparent, because certain things have existed for a very long time, but we did not care, or that we did not consider them perfectly normal. Therefore, nobody talked about it.

In *The Male Domination*<sup>12</sup>, Bourdieu says that men are dominated by their dominance. Relaxing the necessity of paternal authority should also relieve men, because it is an extremely demanding and exhausting role. Kafka's father gets angry in the evening because he always plays the role of the leader everywhere. He is the leader in his shop where he must demonstrate his authority; he goes home, and he does the same thing with his wife and children. At one point, in *Dearest Father*, Kafka said that, from time to time, his father was relaxing a little bit, when they would go on vacation and that the non-family members were present. In these moments, Kafka was seeing in his father someone much nicer, much softer. He stepped out of his burdening role of professional or family tyrant.

I am not sure that fathers have much to lose not always assuming these roles. We talk about "male domination", but it has negative effects over men. For example, in some cases of long-term unemployment, men live it much worse, because their identity is solely tied to the work. Consequently, they feel like those who should be the head of the family providing all that is necessary for their family. They fall into a depression, because they are no longer any of all this. So there is a terrible psychological toll to pay, assuming such powerful roles. Today, some are calling for a return to manhood, authority, etc. After all, if they do not think these ancestral social roles are too crushing and too overwhelming, they assume them! However, I believe that very different types of family structures exist today and are competing with each other. Things are happening, changing and influencing the distribution of parenting roles.

**Audience** – Finally, this man-woman relationship has changed.

**Christine Castelain-Meunier** – This is quite passionate. At the same time, it is delicate. This requires adjustments, understanding, respect, self-esteem, and respect for others. And we are not necessarily in a society that revolves around it, but rather in a society where the hierarchy of values, means having and not being. Therefore, what is interesting is that if the society transforms itself by putting being at the top of the hierarchy of values, and has less, the profit or the imperative of performance, competition. I feel positive for the future that there is a deep movement of thought in this direction. What Chomsky<sup>13</sup> or Edgar Morin<sup>14</sup> say is very interesting about this idea that we can enhance the value of empathy, that this takes on a different meaning,

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<sup>12</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre, *La Domination masculine*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, coll. « Liber », 1998.

that the hierarchy of values at the workplace requires a transformation, and especially not by systematically putting at the top the one who makes the most profit to the business, but perhaps also the most friendly, the most caring towards others, etc. We have the right to dream, utopia is useful.

**Gérard Wormser** – In order to move in this direction, I believe that one of the fundamental elements of the contemporary transformations is the need for all of us to have a constant upgrading of both our emotions and our links, which is a very contemporary aspect of social life. The man/woman, work/life reformulations or geographic locations, if we are speaking of Kafka's father who takes a weekend from time to time, between relaxation and why not tourism or travel, and times when we are visiting supermarkets, queues at fuelling stations, and bank counters, these different times now necessarily involve reconfiguration and continuing education in all areas, including the fact that we have been invaded by machine-to-machine, which are at the same time continuously reforming and reformulating our lifestyle.

I think this relaxation of social roles accompanies partly because of the need to reformulate. The superior elaborative dimension by which the school system may help seems to me to be absolutely going along with this idea that there is the need to formulate these rules, insofar as we have to transform them in our lives and in our relationships. It is of course unrealistic to imagine a society where those who are best able to play in formulating these communication rules would be valued more highly in businesses than those, alone in their own corner, have been quite a coup or have been in the good graces of the hierarchy. However, the overall trend of our society is also that the values of social communication are becoming increasingly linked to the changing structures even for economic success.

I do not know if you would call it revolt, or consent, or comment. It seems to me that this is one of the elements making me think that today's girls and boys actually learn something by sharing much of their personal life on social networks that they practise by preparing this way how to learn and relearn continuously, so also to forget and to unlearn all sorts of things that eventually have no more use, because there is a very quick change of model in the present instant.

**Bernard Lahire** – About the problem for the children of today, compared to Kafka: the entire familial socialization of the Kafkas was very controlled. He did not see many people other than parents, but agents selected by parents to educate him (good tutors...). Today's children live in

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<sup>13</sup> Noam Chomsky, born Avram Noam Chomsky on 7 December 1928 in Philadelphia (Pennsylvania), is an American linguist and philosopher.

<sup>14</sup> Edgar Nahoum, called Edgar Morin, born in Paris on 8 July 1921, is a French sociologist and philosopher.

very different areas. It is hence ever less controllable by the parents. Some parents are surprised to see their children coming home with stereotypical patterns from a gender perspective, precisely, because they go to other spaces where very traditional divisions are in place, and children come back with habits or perceptions. Sometimes, the family is not always the place of tradition, but this is taking place elsewhere, and children return to the family with other experiences. That is also one of the complexities of the problem. Today's children are not "family-oriented" as they were a few decades ago and quite clearly at the time of the Kafkas. In fact, the family had a stronghold on education, had a monopoly, but today, even when you come from a family, the opening into the outside world via the computer, television or radio, all of these aspects which did not exist at the time, making it hard for parents to control everything. Parents cannot control some things that happen in the home.

**Gérard Wormser** – I wanted to ask you that question. Do you have specific views on the evolution of advertising and commercial messages, which necessarily reach children, and which have changed as well? I am not specifically aware if messages diffused in this way convey trends in gender roles.

**Bernard Lahire** – My colleague Christine Détrez is focusing on the study of textbooks. She shows that when we are under highly traditional patterns of representation of girls and boys and their roles, more male roles are evident than female roles in mathematical textbooks, especially in problem formulation. Therefore, this is how it diffuses in slightly insidious forms.

**Christine Castelain-Meunier** – That is within the educational institution. However, at the same time, the number of great books that are available for small children impresses me. Things are beginning to happen. I am thinking in particular of a little book on the girl/boy household "stuff": a small boy and girl like to use a magic wand, and the little boy with this magic wand likes to make his sister do chores, like for example, cleaning his room, which he does not want to do. Finally, it does not happen that way, and it works differently. All this is changing, and developing. The creativity here is extraordinary. As well, on the side of the witch, certain things are changing. *Likewise*, on the side of the fairy, although the princesses really fascinate every little girl today, even more than ever. It may be difficult to understand some things in the way they have to adhere to the role of princess, which they would let go of very quickly. I think there is therefore no reason to worry about all this.

I was impressed to see "unisex" toy pages appearing for the first time, in the toy catalogues for Christmas, neither for girl nor for boy, and at the same time, a small household kit that is not at all limited anymore for the small housekeeper, which is no longer pink or blue, but green. Some

small symbols are changing. Certainly, it is moving very slowly. But, in fact, we finally realize that all children, girl, boy, as soon as they can walk, love pushing "stuff" in front of them, including broomsticks.

**Bernard Lahire** – Publications you mention are perhaps not dominant. They are emerging.

**Christine Castelain-Meunier** – When we ask young women on spontaneous male representations, they say that men are fickle and violent and when it comes to less spontaneous representations, they are strong. Likewise, when we ask young men about women, they respond spontaneously that they are soft, beautiful, appealing, and less spontaneously, they say that women want everything turning around them, and they do not know how to deal with them. However, 30 years ago, women wanted everything with the same man (communication, affection, correct sexuality, eroticism, child...). Today, men want everything with the woman, where before they could separate a little more. Finally, we see that aspirations rise, but adjustment is difficult.

**Audience** – This may be an evolution.

**Christine Castelain-Meunier** – It is a complexity.

**Audience** – It can be very fast and a source of anxiety.

**Bernard Lahire** – It is not such a big deal. A recent survey calculated the number of minutes in addition to the time spent on housework for both men and women. I believe it is eight to ten minutes more for men. The gap is still distinct to the disadvantage of women.

**Christine Castelain-Meunier** – At the same time, the statistics use some questions that we have been asking for a long time. When it comes to doing qualitatively, we can see that something else is collected. So for me, something is starting to move, especially for younger generations. All populations are combined in the statistics. Furthermore, a man independently assuming domestic responsibilities is still a big change throughout history.

**Bernard Lahire** – They can also be rich and have servants. Indeed, in Brazil, most of my colleagues at the university live rich and they all have servants. On a daily basis, they do not go to fetch their children nor do they do any housework. So, all this means that they have gender relations very free from any problem of domestic workload, because they have virtual slaves. Often, the issue of sharing of domestic work is resolved by another domination relationship, but we need money for that. Being economically and socially dominant is necessary for that type of strategy.

**Christine Castelain-Meunier** – I lived two years in Chile. We did an overall comparative research in France, Chile and Algeria in all these areas. For the middle class, there is also a concern and awareness that the presence of a live-in housekeeper is closely linked to a reduced sharing of household tasks within the family. Here, there appears to be awareness. As well, in our countries, the *housekeeper* from now on has a status, she is in an employed capacity, and we feel that this is also going to change in these countries. As much in our countries, the services were not expensive before, as they have become. Therefore, all this accompanies the transformation, even if a couple calls on a housekeeper three hours a week.

**Audience** – In a couple's life, now, all the daily routine is different if there are full-time domestic servants or if there is just a housekeeper. Household management is different.

**Christine Castelain-Meunier** – Women have always worked, but they were not employed.

**Audience** – She was working, but not in the same recognisable framework of the society. The fact is that there is a real adjustment of completely different duties.

**Christine Castelain-Meunier** – When it comes to the issue of the environment and global warming, more and more, we will tend towards the self-generation of energy, including renewable energy. Integrating domestic affairs in the effective calculation is a part of this upheaval that accompanies the change.

**Audience** – When you speak about renewable energy, I find the woman improves together with a better resolution of household chores.

**Bernard Lahire** – There is a very large masculine ability of becoming incompetent. A major recurrence of the male behaviour has been to say: "I don't know how to do". Often in the interaction between men and women, within the family, the woman is ahead of the man, because the incompetent way he proceeds is distressing to her.

**Gérard Wormser** – This is the subject of widespread incompetence.

**Audience** – Finally, I would like to know what you think of "a Father what for?"

**Christine Castelain-Meunier** – A human as another must assume educational responsibilities now including short and long term in a context burdened by the pressing need of the good mother, while paternity is seeking its place with the transition from institutional to relational paternity.

**Bernard Lahire** – A sociologist will not answer this question. He served very different things in the history. When Freud describes a father, who represents the outside world, the Law, etc., think of all the women today who get up in the morning to go to work outside. Of course, she is playing this role now. Thus, Freud had the image of a particular family where the father was the only person to go outside the family. Therefore, a father “serves” to different things according to the times.

**Audience** – Finally, is it not always the notion of power and domination that plays everywhere, from Kafka and his father on gender relations? Does this notion not supersede the notion of sharing and living together with our differences?

**Christine Castelain-Meunier** – This is combined. Anyway, individuals also seek power. And at the same time, everyone is seeking his or her place. However, it still depends on whether a society fosters self-esteem, respect for others, and how.

**Bernard Lahire** – I do not want to end on a negative note. The social world coded “child-rearing” as a negative activity. From the moment when there is the desire to have, for example, an access to employment in an equal way, one can feel that the children are becoming a problem. Educating children is to “pass” the child to another, like a hot potato. While everyone should realize that educating, a child is therefore extremely important. As well as spending time with him, transmitting to him a number of knowledge, skills, and values is becoming a real problem. I think that it says something in our society, which is rather worrying about the education status of children. We feel that spending time with the children is not highly valued.

**Audience** – I wonder if what you are talking about is not limited to certain types of societies. In fact, when you see the Nordic countries where a minister took care of his infant while assuming his role, is it not in this kind of society that the role of the father is again valued by a real distribution of tasks? Regarding the status of the child, each one shares and gives as much importance to the education of the child. Is it not in this kind of society that the education of a child takes on full significance and its place?

**Bernard Lahire** – The problem is that people are with the recognized activities. Women empowered themselves by assuming public, professional and recognized positions. Yet, raising children is not a recognized activity. You have no social game, which involves giving good points, congratulations or certificates of honour, because you have been a great father or mother. This is, however, vital in a society, to spend time with the children, to transmit to them a number of things. We can see that there is a real problem. The family travel and transformation is based on

the status issue that society gives to the education of children. If there was a full recognition of this, it may be that both men and women would want to spend more time with their children.

**Gérard Wormser** – This would raise up many questions, including the educational institution. This deserves a full debate.

**Audience** – I had thoughts about all that you just said. Nonetheless, what is bred in the bone will come out in the flesh. Indeed, a man remains a man, a woman remains a woman, and it is very difficult to reverse the roles. For me, being father or mother at home is the best job in the world, even if there is no school or degree. Even though we try to make a great deal of effort in parity, in the home, all sociological studies show that a man will never arrive to really take responsibility for the home as a woman does it. Today may be women should be careful. Indeed, men may be completely independent.

**Gérard Wormser** – I think you have a basic question that deserves a lot of debate, the relationship between what is formal and informal in the individual or group behaviour. This formal/informal dimension is one of the key themes of the modern era. To stay on the topics outlined, for example, all digital learning today are mostly informal, even if they pin on the techniques essentially formalized. Therefore, we are not computer specialists on an informal basis, but we are informal computer users. Today there are very interesting mixed social issues that in fact cover the model, which you have just given us on home maintenance; there are both formal and informal tasks in maintaining a home. To negotiate the transformation of telephone subscriptions, what is the share of formal and informal education on how to match a network partly automated, and manual, in order to modify the home element? Hence, we are on the highly complex knowledge that actually refers to this formal/informal partition. It would be very interesting to hold a debate on issues like this. Thank you.

*Translated from French by Amudha Lingewaran.*

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