

Interview with Edgar Morin

French Philosopher and Sociologist

«I've been driven to writing this neo-messianic book I call 'the way'. It is a message to save humanity from disaster»

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per Ana Sánchez



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I have never been able to separate Edgar from Morin. I met him in 1980 when I began to translate *La Méthode* (Method) while working on my PhD Thesis (which relates Morin's complex thought system with feminist theory). I was invited to his home, where we talked about his work and he immediately invited me to dinner on the very same night. It was there that I met the sadly missed José Vidal Beneyto, a close friend of Edgar. After that, we have met on many occasions and have always brought work and personal life together. In his epistemological proposals Morin poses the inseparability of subject and object, in his private life the union of the theoretical and personal.

Due to his theoretical-personal concerns, Edgar Morin is and has been a journalist, sociologist, political scientist and epistemologist. His prolific work has been translated into multiple languages, from Japanese, Chinese and Korean languages to more closely related languages like Spanish, Catalan or Portuguese. He has been awarded the title of *doctor honoris causa* by several universities including the University of Valencia, which he has visited numerous times.

On this occasion I am accompanied by Rosa Iniesta –Morinian musicologist who wishes to act as photographer–. First, the interview: Edgar Morin is lucid, relaxed and energetic, his voice is calm; his strong hands never stop moving. Then he takes us out to diner at *Marché des Enfants Rouges*. Edgar Morin is in good health at 88 years of age. He has had a liver disorder since he was 40, but knows how to take care of himself. He is tremendously active – we've had to wait several months to conduct the interview: in August he was in the Amazon, then Egypt, Italy... When in Paris he receives constant visits, from all over the world, so he's now considering spending a few months away – perhaps in Cuernavaca, perhaps in Cartagena de Indias- where it will be easier to write up his penultimate project.

His work *La Méthode* (Method) can be analyzed as an example of trans-disciplinary research that has not broken away from the original project, a complex anthropology. Its scope covers physics, biology, sociology, politics and epistemology in an attempt to sketch what humans are. Thus, he establishes complex knowledge of humanity, which reconnects, weaves together, all dimensions or aspects, currently disjointed and compartmentalized, of human reality: physical, biological, psychological, social, anthropological, mythological, economic, sociological and

historical.

The idea of a fundamental anthropology emerged in *L'homme et la mort* (Humanity and death), in 1951, in which he proposed considering history specifically in the context of its human reality and man in the context of historic reality, and he called it genetic anthropology. What were his key theories at that time?

To start with, for me, Marx was a transdisciplinary thinker: *i.e.*, he was a scientist and also discussed economy, history, ethnology, while returning to philosophy, and at the same time he was a politician. From his philosophical thought and scientific knowledge he had extracted the elements of politics.

Perhaps this is why you sought transdisciplinary academic training, was it?

Yes, this was the vision that, when I entered college, made me enrol in philosophy, which at that time encompassed sociology and psychology. I also enrolled in history, in law –because one studied economics– and political science. Then, I already had a literary cultural background, which I continued, and this gave me grounding in human sciences and a little philosophy. But I must say that what inspired me in *L'homme et la mort* was the anthropology of Marx, which we find in his youthful writings and at the time were called «political economy and philosophy». It's the idea of generic mankind, man's self-construction, and I understand the meaning of anthropology as in nineteenth-century German, not in the modern sense, *i.e.*, reflection on the human in terms of different scientific achievements. This is the first theoretical basis.



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What was your other theoretical foundation?

The second basis is the dialectic, above all that of Hegel, because before *L'homme et la mort* I plunged into Hegel. What attracted me to the dialectic is that it is a train of thought dealing with contradiction and holding contradictions together, rather than the idea of overcoming them; since I had this way of thinking I could see the contradictions...

In other words, your theoretical bases were transdisciplinarity and dialectical...

Yes, because from these two bases I could reflect on man and history and see human attitudes in prehistoric societies and in different cultures and civilizations, as well as from the standpoint of religion, or of mentalities for which there is no life after death, from psychology, from psychoanalysis or through child psychology. I had to take a trip through all the sciences and also journey through biology because you cannot avoid the fact that death is a biological phenomenon. And I came to two paradoxes: that human beings are horrified by death but, at the same time, come closer to it for religious or other reasons; the second paradox arises because human beings, who are mortal just like other animals, think they can have a life after death. And I delved into this paradox because the idea that there is life after death is a denial of the actual reality of death. The proof is that all cultures are aware of the problem of decomposition of the corpse and try to address this problem, avoiding contamination by burying, burning, isolating and so on. In humanity there is the specific consciousness of death and at the same time the denial of death.

So, right from the beginning, you felt the need to reunite separate areas of knowledge.

In fact, my idea was to reconnect all this scattered knowledge. The idea was not to juxtapose, but to understand why certain civilizations, like in Asia, developed the idea of rebirth in metempsychosis while in the West from the Roman era there developed the idea of resurrection, which was also manifested before Christianity with the Orpheus cult. Finally, Buddha's message, with the idea that life is suffering, which means that you must escape life, *i.e.*, the ego, and merge into a whole, while in the West it is the opposite, death appears as an abominable abyss and the promise of resurrection is thought up. Yes, it was an exploration in which I sought to see the differences and try to reconnect them. I was able to reconnect them, because in societies –as shown by prehistoric tombs– either one finds weapons, food or the corpse is in foetal position to be reborn... So the purpose was to reconnect them, taking the dialectical idea of facing the contradiction, and I think without knowing it I paved the way for the complexity method; elementary, without doubt, because I lacked certain conceptual tools.

Regarding the International Symposium on «The Unity of Man», organized in 1972, you had set up a research centre devoted to fundamental anthropology, which also entailed the biological dimension of man. What resulted from that project?

Before speaking of the outcome, I'll talk about the history: the opportunity to spend almost a year in a highly developed Institute for Biological Studies in California, the Salk Institute. I discovered a biology that differed greatly from that I had contemplated in *L'homme et la mort*. Also I was introduced to the knowledge of systems thinking, of Gregory Bateson, of von Foerster, of Norbert Wiener. When I returned to France I had the idea of setting up an institute, a centre for what I called fundamental anthropology, which would focus on biological man and psycho-cultural man. And this was done with the help of eminent biologists, Jacques Monod, François Jacob and Salvatore Luria, and other friends like Castoriadis and Claude Lefort. Thanks to Monod, we were able to hold the symposium, for which I invited Henri Atlan, who was considered marginal at that time, not deemed reputable among biologists. I also invited von Foerster, which shocked my friend Monod, and Serge Moscovici, who had studied the relationship between biology and humanity and had written a wonderful book, *Society against Nature*, in which he considered not only the anatomical, physiological and genetic evolution from primate to man but also the sociological evolution.



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What was your contribution to this symposium?

I gave a fairly long talk, which was the forerunner of *Le paradigme perdu: la nature humaine* (The lost paradigm: human nature). What I was doing at that time was following the same obsession, to reconnect everything that was totally disconnected: What was disconnected? The animal world and the human world. But since the sixties we had access to the research by Jane Goodall, who had lived with chimpanzees and had shown us their great sociological and psychological complexity. And further studies followed on the complexity of the mammalian society. We also invited the Gardners to the conference, who had brought up a chimpanzee that had learned vocabulary –not verbal, but with sign language–. One could see that they also used metaphors. For example, when they were not happy they used the word *dirty*, also when you put them in front of the mirror they looked into it, so we realized that the gap between animals and men was not so wide... So I placed this in relation to archaic hunter-gatherer societies, that is, the big problem: How did language appear? How did culture appear? But above all, the double articulation of

language.

Are you saying the gap between animal and human decreased?

At that time I showed the link and the split between the animal and the human world. And I could because I had already adopted the idea of self-organization: it was a complex linking ethical, anatomical, physiological, cerebral and social aspects and was transformed by the interaction of all elements. And then I started using the recursive loop, and I also had the contradiction at that time that it revolved around *Homo demens/Homo sapiens*. This idea was developed later with *Homo faber/Homo mitologicus*, *Homo economicus/Homo ludens*, *Homo prosaicus/Homo poeticus*. That was the result: thanks to the conference I was able to undertake this writing. It is the book I've written with greatest ease, with most euphoria, without feeling the pain that I always feel when writing a book.

Anthropology has sought uniformity hidden behind diversity: given the array of customs, you had to find some universals. How did you reconcile the local and the global?

I think that almost at once I saw as the central idea the link between unity and multiplicity, and at that time I accepted the domination of binary thinking in order to see either human unity or heterogeneous diversity. The controversy had already begun between Voltaire, who said that the Chinese are like us, and Herder who said that cultures are incommensurable. And my main idea is that diversity is produced by human unity. For example, culture is a human anthropological phenomenon, but only culture exists through different cultures. Language has the same structure, but only exists through extremely different languages. Music exists only through different types of music. In other words, unity creates diversity, and at that time, as many saw only the diversity or the unity, I said that the treasure of human unity is its diversity and the wealth of human diversity is its unity. It never ceases to amaze me that this idea which seems so obvious to me is so difficult to assimilate, because people are subjected to the paradigm of disjunction, and are led to separate the biological from the human, which continues to renounce a great deal of new knowledge.

In your early writings you speak of «man», why do you now prefer to use the term «human»?

Because I realized that, while «man» was in principle a neutral term, it was tinged by its masculine aspect. I also discovered, in part thanks to you, that in *Le paradigme perdu: la nature humaine* I had underestimated the cultural, civilizational aspect of the women who gathered and knew about plants, in short, that culture was the product, the symbiosis of two cultures, the male and the female. As I was mesmerized by the idea of the importance of hunting I had underestimated women's contributions. Therefore, at some point in my writing I decided to use the term «human beings».

You say in the preface to the latest edition of *La Méthode* (Method) that your task was to rethink the problem of knowledge from new conceptual possibilities. Are these conceptual innovations the dialogic and recursive loop?

That's right. I transformed the dialectic in the dialogical because what mattered to me then –both in the physical world and the biological world, as well as in the human order– was that in phenomenalist terms there were fundamental antagonisms which were complementary, there was a link between antagonism and complementarity. There can be superceding but the fact is that they constitute the world and particularly the human world. So dialogic, although it is the daughter of dialectic, above all the daughter of Heraclitus doctrine, because Heraclitus described contradiction very beautifully when he said «awake, they sleep». So I took up the phrase for the end of *L'Humanité de l'humanité* (Humanity of humanity) because he says two realities at once: «we are awake and we sleep».

Regarding biological reductionism and cultural reductionism you propose *La vie de la vie* (The life of life), through a dialogical analysis, the innate/acquired loop. How do you see such indissolubility?

In the most simplistic terms, the more that is innate, the less is acquired and the more that is acquired, the less is innate. Chomsky helped me with this: understanding the fact that there is a strong innate component, capable of organization and cognition, which enables you to make many acquisitions; where the organization of the innate is very weak there is not the ability to acquire, so a lot of innate is required, but not innate programming, rather a potentially innate organizer to facilitate acquisitions. This brings us to the paradox that the ideas that eliminate the importance of the innate corresponded to the Stalinist idea that man can be shaped as desired. But if we think that in man there are a number of principles and structures that give you the ability to be human, to be brotherly, to be intelligent, you have to respect the innate. In this sense, much of innate allows plenty of acquisition, thus overcoming the banality of opposing them.



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Why, since *Introduction à une politique de l'homme* (Introduction to a politics of humanity), is your anthropological project linked to politics? How did the idea of anthropolitics arise?

Always from the same perspective since Marx, politics can be considered as something separate. In the sixties I reflected on the idea that various elements also entered politics, in particular biological ones –the limitation of the number of births, abortion, demography– deep down, many human problems enter politics, and I saw that they were the source of such policies. Since *Introduction à une politique de l'homme*, which was part of *Le vif du sujet* (The heart of the matter), I have always worked on political thought starting from a critique of Marx, which was neither a rejection nor a revision of Marx, but focused on the fundamental weaknesses of his thought: that is of inner man, the psychic, spiritual needs... the human reality. He only saw man the producer, and did not see other aspects of humanity. There was reductionism in Marx. I longed for politics that showed a better understanding of the human and social reality and understood better the transformations of the twentieth century. It was when I wrote *Terre-patrie* that the question arose whether it had become central. I wrote *Introduction à une politique de l'homme* because I realized that Western civilization, which has produced many positive things such as individualism, technical development, democracy, human rights and even the beginnings of women's rights had negative aspects that became increasingly important. And these negative aspects were not only in European countries, but everywhere: Westernization was the other face of globalization, and this applies from São Paulo to Shanghai, etc. And I developed a policy against this fundamental flaw in Western civilization.

Does that mean to say you did not abandon any of your left-wing ideals?

In a text called *Sur les ruines de la pensée socialiste* (On the ruins of socialist thought), I tried to analyze how it could revive left-wing political thought. Something I currently continue with the book I'm preparing named *The way*. From the moment I realized that the current path was development/westernization/globalization with the likely disasters that accompany it, I wondered how to change track. And I know that changes always start with a deviation, be it religious in nature (Jesus, Buddha, Muhammad) or to do with modern science (Galileo, Descartes, Bacon) or socialism (Proudhon, Marx). At first, a small movement, ridiculed and object of contempt, but which triumphs in difficult conditions because it responds to certain aspirations. And today there are such aspirations: in the world there are thousands of creative initiatives –organic food, cleaning polluted rivers, rural revival, etc.– Thousands of aspirations that show we want another world, another life. My idea is that you first need to know such aspirations, reconnect them, we must be aware that at any given moment many reforms are initiated. We must restructure everything. Not only is it the problem of inequality, the problem of making administration and government less bureaucratic, hierarchy needs to be transformed, solidarity to be re-found... We need to reform food, agriculture, economics, medicine... I have counted up to 35 issues that need reforming. And my idea is that if we become aware that reforms are inter-solidarity and that at a given moment must be combined in multiple paths that cross each other, at that time the old way could fall into decline and the new path would lead to metamorphosis.

Recently you said that you were abandoning the notion of revolution in favour of metamorphosis.

The central idea is that when a system fails to address the problems of life it is doomed to lose ground or to decay,

unless it is able to get out of the rut, is able to make a metasystem. However, the Earth's system is unable to address these vital issues. The potential suicide posed by nuclear weapons, the deadly potential of biospheric degradation, economy totally out of control, the problem of traditional civilizations disintegrating into modernization, with this very modernization in crisis... Well, since the Earth is unable to do so, it is doomed to ruin, to catastrophe, to decay or else to metamorphosis. And this idea can reconcile things that until now were irreconcilable. Because metamorphosis is the transformation: a caterpillar turns into a butterfly, but there must be certain continuity for the caterpillar to become a butterfly. Following the path of reform we will achieve transformation and metamorphosis will replace the word *revolution*, which is now tainted. It is a curious path because complex knowledge led me to complex thinking; complex thinking led me to reform thought and therefore education. But at the same time politics must be reformed and one must think within the global framework.

And what are you concerned about nowadays?

I've been driven to writing this neo-messianic book I call *The way*. It is a message to save humanity from disaster. When I return to the Marxian project, the slant is to free it from its unconscious Judeo-Christian nature, the idea of the Messiah in the form of the proletariat. Today there is no Messiah, the saviours will be women and men, young and old. There is no apocalypse (classless society) will make a new history, a new world-society which is still not inconceivable. And it will not be on a national but on a planetary scale. My prophecy is founded in other terms: it is the world's growing inability to deal with the problems of life which can create the metasystem. The current crisis, like any crisis, is creative: it allows for imagination while allowing for regression representing situations of uncertainty.

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oUfqZE-Ywts>