



Presentation

Jean-Claude Gillet, a university professor and a committed researcher

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N.B. The notion of « animation », which means in French the organization of activities aimed at enriching people's lives, has no equivalent in English; consequently, the French word will be kept between inverted commas and the people responsible for such action will be called « organizers ».

I met Jean-Claude in the 1980's when he was teaching at the Regional Institute of Social Workers of Talence and wished to leave that job in order to launch into an academic career. He became a substitute teacher at the Institute of Technology Michel de Montaigne in 1990 and began to write a « *What organization of activities in modern society means* », a thesis he presented for his doctorate which he passed with honors in 1994. Appointed as senior lecturer and later as Professor, he put forward both in his lectures and in his writings a theory of the organization of activities as being founded on the strategic intelligence of the organizer and this became the hallmark of the Bordeaux School of « Animation ». After being invited to teach in numerous foreign universities, he set up the International Network of « Animation » in 2003, which brought together in biennial symposiums research workers from a score of countries, still to the present day.

The theoretician of Strategic Organization of activities

Jean-Claude produced a lot of writings on the meaning of this kind of organization, on the role played by organizers and on the strategic intelligence they have to master. In his opinion, an organizer is one who makes easier the relationships between people and who is able to match the currents stakes of an association, of a town district or of a local community and arrange things so that each actor may have his part on the social stage in a clearly identified dynamic process and may modify these stakes according to his own interests and wishes for the promotion of social improvement. He knew that the action of an organizer has limited effects, that he is not supposed to upset social relationships, but only to succeed in creating a process of limited adjustment, on and off, little by little, in the case for instance when someone resents being excluded or rejected. But Jean-Claude considered that what happens on the border sheds a light on how the central body works, which makes possible to create unexpected dynamic social relationships. He used to say that an organizer stands at a crossroads of several different logical processes which are inextricably interwoven. An organizer's action is determined by the influence of many other actors, therefore of many other strategic courses closely connected with the reasons which motivate them. Jean-Claude thought that an intellectual reflexion was necessary to define the way of creating a dynamic action, of conceptualizing its implementation and consequently of initiating a dialogue with actors and helping them formulate the ends to attain.

To bridge the gap between the decision makers and those determined by it, between the constraints imposed by the institutions and the desire for self-independence on the part of the actors was what he proposed to organizers so that they should be able to find a gratifying way towards alternative efficient possible solutions. This strategic competence is at the core of the professional identity of an organizer and will enable him, by linking together several abilities such as the understanding of social relationships and the mastery of different means of communication, including a behavioristic adaptability, to develop one of the key-elements of his qualification. Hence an organizer has the legitimate right to establish a connection between diverse capacities by drawing them all towards a nodal point, the central question posed by his environment. He can make use of this right only in specific situations if different powers come into opposition or in given local socio-historical circumstances. It requires an individual and collective apprehension of such circumstances in all their complexity and at the same time erases the distinction between knowledge and skill.

Such is the way, he said, by which the professional competence of an organizer can be developed, by being founded upon composite and complex modes of knowledge.

Such competence is multiform and « generic », built on rational standpoints and related to the way one sees oneself (confidence in oneself, being aware of one's capacities) and on the ability to adapt oneself to a diversity of behaviors, opinions, cultural and ideological references and to the ways society expresses itself.

Jean-Claude thought that an organizer can become versed in strategy if he is able to bring to work together groups of people whose modes of thought and designs differ and to find where they converge or diverge. If he fails in doing so, Jean-Claude would not exclude resorting to conflict in order to reach a successful end.

The creator of the Bordeaux School of « Animation »

Jean-Claude was not only a teacher and a theoretician, but he also took over heavy administrative responsibilities as Chief of Department of Social Careers at the Institute of Technology Michel de Montaigne and Director of the Institute of Engineers-Organizers which he had created. The latter offers post-Institute of Technology degrees, enabling organizers to find more resources and means of action. Thus, it proposes a pragmatic approach, making it possible to apprehend the classical opposition between theory and practice as a dialectic process combining what one knows and its practical implementation, which favors possible goings and comings from concept to practice and vice-versa. It also privileges an interdisciplinary dialogue about notions and multiform concepts such as territories, actors, equipment, networks, conflicts, development, and culture. Jean-Claude's opinion was that this dialogue must help improve the adaptation of education to a continuous assessment as well as expert evaluations and « animation » strictly speaking. It will multiply the connections with the national authorities to get them to recognize the new degrees and will play a role in the National Observatory of the techniques of organization and of sport (NoTAS). He initiated the Letter to the ISIAT, then the registers of the ISIAT and supervised two collections of academic publications, one at the Bordeaux University Press (Territory and its actors) the other at the Harmattan Editions (« Animation » and Territories). Thus, the Bordeaux School of « Animation » came into existence and was recognized on a national level for its theoretical contributions, its publications, and its annual symposiums. As the spokesman of the school, Jean-Claude travelled up and down France, invited by training centers, leagues of popular education

and local communities. He was also invited to the overseas territories, particularly to Guiana, Martinique, and Guadeloupe. This was the beginning of an international journeying, starting in Canada where he taught several times at the Montreal University of Quebec.

The creator of the International Network of « Animation »

Jean-Claude had always taken a great interest in the world and more particularly in the way developing countries had to cope with their organizational problems. He had a major interest in South America and availed himself of a sabbatical year to visit six of these countries where he established connections with academic people responsible for « animation » and communal action. This brought to his mind the idea of creating an international network of « animation. » He well knew that the existing « animation » centers were referred to under many different names, but he suggested that the terms of cultural promotion, popular education, active democracy, and social services should all be considered as expressive of the central notion of « animation ».

He was also fully aware that all these experiences were deeply rooted in historical backgrounds and ideological currents whose outlines were often blurred. He took note of the differences between the tendencies originating in the « theology of liberation », the ways of educating oppressed people and of treating the ethno-community problems, the anticapitalist points of view and those which were part and parcel of « animation » properly speaking, but he was still convinced that these issues might be the object of debates in international symposiums. Hence his idea of creating an international network of « animation » (INA) whose first symposium was held in Bordeaux in 2003, dealing with « Organization of activities in France and its analogies abroad; theory and practice. » This symposium was followed by 200 people from 12 foreign countries and was succeeded by others every other year in a different country or even continent. Such were the symposiums held in Sao Paulo, Brazil in 2005, in Lucern, Switzerland in 2007, in Montreal, Quebec in 2009, in Saragossa, Spain in 2011, in Paris in 2012, Bogota in 2015, Algiers in 2017, Lausanne in 2019 and one scheduled in Cayenne, Guyana, in 2021. His books, together with his speeches on strategic « animation », have been translated into Spanish, Portuguese and German.

I would like in fine to quote what he said on one of his favorite subjects: active utopias, those which are pregnant with hope: « Animation » has the potentiality of inventing, creating, imagining, even though it sometimes runs contrary to the standpoints of the established order. In that sense, it engenders a profitable disorder, tending towards a new social order, more just and more democratic, as well as more convivial. Animators should be alert to the evolutions of society so that the formal and informal elements, those who set up institutions and those under their yoke might be able to debate, to compromise, even if they have sometimes to come to violent opposition to reach their goal. Such conflict implies tenacious and courageous qualities together with a perfect mastery of competence; both, contrary to the notion of vocation, must be acquired with patience. For that reason, among others, « animation » can be compared to a form of utopia full of hope in the beginning of this third millenary. The etymology of the word utopia means: « the land of nowhere », but over the years it has come to be understood as « the land of happiness ».

Obviously, many contrary forces are at work against the development of these new social and cultural structures or try to turn them into mercantile objects through falsifying and alienating processes. « Animation », which partakes of the aspiration to liberate the dynamic forces of

society towards a better world, is an invitation to lighten the burden off our lives. For nearly half a century, it has proved to be mainly a non-speculative activity.

Yet it must be said that « animation » will only have limited effects, as long as the present challenges to our society are considered as unworthy of serious consideration, namely the fact that democracy is still to be more clearly defined, and that economy is still under the yoke of financial ultra-liberalism. « Animation » is one of the ways of claiming that the present world is not legitimate to act with such eccentricity and of offering a way out through imagination. « Animation » is not promoted by irresponsible people, mere dreamers of illusions. It is a positive combination of reality as it is and a critical apprehension of it. Utopia will always be in contradiction with actuality.

This contradiction is, on the part of professional organizers neither a refusal of reality nor a nostalgic desire for a past happiness. It is an attempt at a cultural experiment, aware of historical contingencies and inescapable circumstances. The organizer acquires the mastery of a strategy, the command of a real practice, and is fully aware of what the world actually is; he is therefore a clear-sighted person, but one determined to keep his hope in the future ».

Thank you, Jean-Claude, for all that you have brought to us, for your charisma and your optimistic sociability. You knew how to hand to us a message that was taken over by Luc, Clothilde, Jean-Luc Pascal and many others. You are still among us.

Your comrade, your brother, J.P. Augustin.