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France

Notre-Dame: the tragic consequences of an incendiary policy

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Monday, 15 April 2019 will be remembered as the day when Notre-Dame de Paris was ravaged by the flames. At the time of writing [16 April], the fire seems to be under control and only a few residual fires remain contained by firefighters, who fear the risk of fresh outbreaks. It will actually take several days or weeks to know the extent of loss and damage caused by the fire, the collapse of the frame and the spire, but also the consequences of the hundreds of thousands of litres of water pumped out to extinguish the flames, on the structures and the works of art that could not be evacuated.

The causes of the fire are still unknown, although the hypothesis that it started by accident in the area occupied by the renovation works seems today to be the preferred option of the authorities and the professionals. Only the investigation will make it possible to clarify this factually, but we can already say that the responsibilities should not be sought and identified as possible individual errors ... but in an overall policy and a sum of collective responsibilities at the summit of which is that of the state, responsible for the security of the site and directing the work in progress.

What consequences?

The first information given by firefighters indicates that "the entire roof is damaged, the entire structure is destroyed, part of the vault has collapsed" as a result of the collapse of the spire whose impressive images are displayed on the front pages of all the newspapers. This spire, as well as a part of the roof and the frame, dated from the work carried out in the nineteenth century by Viollet-le-Duc. The rest of the collapsed frame dates back to the thirteenth century, rebuilt with wooden beams dating from the first construction in the twelfth century, and by its scale and size was nicknamed "the forest ". In collapsing the spire took away part of the stone vault of the cathedral but does not seem (so far) to have endangered the general structure. Many relics, works of art and objects will have been affected by fire, soot and water and some of the lead shots of the stained-glass windows have also been affected to a greater or lesser extent. The large organ that had just been restored also seems to have suffered major damage.

The first reactions

A great many Parisians rushed to the scene and gathered, very moved, at the foot of the cathedral ... But much less sincere and spontaneous political reactions were also quick to multiply. Macron the first, probably too happy to be able to escape the announcement of his big oral test [\[1\]](#) and to play the role of "saviour" of France's heritage, the nation and its new-found unity (sic)! Following in his tracks and on the same theme, very quickly all the racists, fascists and patented nationalists succeeded each other to talk to us about the heart of the Christian heritage of the nation (and of civilization!) which were under attack. Some of them were already engaged in conspiracy theories based on the crassest Islamophobia ...

Could we have foreseen or avoided this?

Apart from the specific facts that the investigation will make it possible to determine, a disaster of this magnitude can only be the fruit of a collective chain of responsibility. This accident highlights two structural problems and points to

the direct responsibility of the state: on the one hand, the policy of disinvestment of successive governments in the safeguarding and maintenance of the heritage (as of all public services). On the other hand, insufficient safety standards on heritage sites (as on all construction sites of public buildings). "What happened had to happen. The lack of real maintenance and daily attention to a major building is the cause of this disaster. It is not a matter of looking for those responsible, the responsibility is completely collective because it is the most collective monument in the country", explained Jean-Michel Leniaud (President of the Scientific Council of the National Heritage Institute). Financial disinvestment and lack of staff. The condition of heritage buildings is often deplorable, the need for policies of conservation, restoration and renovation is immense. The professional milieu of conservation and restoration, as well as all staff and officers working on this type of public buildings, were witnesses of this and continued to issue warnings that remained dead letters. Accidents, both human and material, are unfortunately commonplace.

Make the poor pay

According to President Macron "This cathedral, we will rebuild it all together." Let us say clearly in passing, that on the one hand it is not he who will rebuild it (no more than it was built at the time by Bishop Maurice de Sully but by the thousands of workers and craftsmen who succeeded one another over the centuries). On the other hand, to rebuild, it would be necessary for the state to invest in its reconstruction ... which obviously does not seem to be the idea. Macron, on the contrary, has already announced the launch of a "national subscription" this Tuesday, April 16, to fund restoration ... It had already been necessary, in 2017 for a private foundation to find (private) funding and ask authorisation from the diocese to start renovations that were already underway, particularly on the spire and the roof. The latter had not been restored since the 1930s ... The entire national heritage is now a victim of this disinterest by the state. But in contrast to these money interests, the population, including its most popular components, is often attached to the public heritage and to cultural and historical monuments ... particularly Notre-Dame, made famous by Victor Hugo as the most popular living heart of Paris. The perfect opportunity for the government to dump the financing of its restoration on the back of a national collection (!). The manoeuvre is skilful, it lets him avoid his own responsibility for the fire, and the people, sincerely moved, are already hurrying to donate. But it's the state that should pay! Our taxes should already serve to finance public services, including those of culture and of a heritage that is accessible to all! Instead of going on tax credits for the biggest companies ...

But the money is there

But above all this drama is an opportunity to remember that the financing of culture and heritage is by far one of the best tax loopholes that capitalists can find. By killing two birds with one stone, they polish up their image, which is sometimes pretty negative, by "generous" donations, and at the same time enjoy the most advantageous tax credits of all the (nevertheless long) list offered by successive governments. Sponsors are already rushing forward: 200 million euros from LVMH and the Arnault family, 100 million from Pinault who is almost considered a small player, 100 million for Total and, the icing on the cake, Vinci offers a "patronage of competence" and suggests making an alliance of builders (Bouygues, etc.?) to work "for nothing" on the reconstruction of the cathedral. The art market and investments in wealth already benefit from a particularly advantageous tax system, but among the "calls for help" many of them were shouting for more tax exemptions" to "save" Notre-Dame and encourage donations ... In the forefront of these, the first of the servants and the symbol of consanguineous links between culture in government and gifts made to the richest: Jean-Jacques Aillagon. This person, who today asks for the classification of the cathedral as a "national treasure so that the donations benefit from a 90 per cent tax credit, was in turn Minister of Culture, director of the personal museum of Pinault then director of the Palace of Versailles ... So, a call from him was probably disinterested ...

Choices in culture and heritage are societal choices

We are obviously more than doubtful about the will and about the means that the state will release for reconstruction. On all the work on great national monuments (all the more so those of lesser posterity), the state has systematically chosen the "least expensive" solutions. And also, those that were the least ethical and respectful of original materials and constructions. We can only ask ourselves about the reconstruction to come ... "For Notre-Dame, it will be the same. We will never again find the frame and the wooden spire. It was, however, the challenge of the Second Empire to rebuild, in 1860, the spire that had been demolished just before the Revolution because it threatened to become a ruin. It was a real neo-medieval tour de force. This time I'm pessimistic". So testifies Jean-Michel Liénaud.

No mistakes about priorities

We can certainly understand the reactions of those who point out the contempt and silence of the authorities and the big companies, all of them today standing at attention, when last November in Marseille eight inhabitants died when the insanitary building they lived in collapsed, and hundreds of other tenants were evacuated without any solutions for rehousing. The present flood of donations proves that when they find it in their interest (essentially symbolic and financial) companies can find the money and unlock large sums in no time! The same goes for the government, when they decide to offer them gifts... In this balance, the life of the working classes counts only if it corresponds to a line of tax credit! These two things can clearly not be compared.

What interest is there in financing old stones?

Some people often wonder about the relevance of investing such sums of money in culture or the preservation of heritage (which leaves, moreover, less and less public money...), as sometimes can also be the case for abstract scientific research. But it would be a mistake to counterpose any social question to such investments. Money is not lacking, as long as you go to the right place. Heritage is part of an invaluable collective property. Its enhancement and its accessibility to all is an issue for the development of individuals and of our societies.

Let's write another story

Notre-Dame, like other monuments, is part of our history and our collective unconscious. It is important to refuse to give up its symbol to the nationalists of all stripes. Over time, it has certainly symbolized the power relations between the Catholic Church and state power. But it is also a dazzling symbol of the evolution of religious architecture. Lastly, it is also a secular monument of the history of Paris, and Victor Hugo through his eponymous work (*The Hunchback of Notre Dame* in English but simply *Notre Dame* in French) had thus linked it to what in Paris was teeming with life and popular. During the French Revolution, then during the Paris Commune, it was reinvented as a place of collective life and political meetings, while the Marseillaise and other revolutionary songs resounded in the pipes of the great organ. This is also an issue of cultural and collective re-appropriation by our social class.

This time, thankfully, there were no human lives directly at stake in the face of financial interests; but we have lost one of the most valuable symbols of our collective heritage ... Once again sacrificed by this government and its penny-pinching predecessors ...

16 April 2019

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[1] Macron was due to address the nation on television at 8 p.m. to draw conclusions from the “great debate” he had initiated.