

EDGAR MORIN:
A PARTIAL INTRODUCTION
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In over 50 years of work, Edgar Morin has developed an astounding, diverse, and rich body of work. He is widely recognized as one of the most important French and indeed European thinkers to emerge in the 20th century. Numerous books have been written about his work—in French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, and English, and the extent of his influence in diverse and even remote fields exceeds perhaps even Gregory Bateson's. Emeritus Director of Research at the CNRS (the French National Research Center), Morin has received honorary doctorates (appropriately in subjects ranging from political science to psychology to sociology) from the universities of Messina, Geneva, Odense, Perugia, Palermo, Brussels, Valencia, and the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte (Brazil), among others, and holds an itinerant UNESCO chair in Complex Thought. Morin's imprint is to be found in fields ranging from media studies to visual anthropology to cinema verité to philosophy to action research to sociology to systems theory to ecology to education, and recently with increasing frequency in the hard sciences.

Morin's books address such a variety of issues that it's necessary to first of all catalog some of them at least, a small selection out of the 60 or so books he has published, in order to get an idea of the scope of his work. In the process, we can begin to see the "path laid down in walking," and begin to recognize the threads that tie much of Morin's work together.

Morin's first book was *L'An Zero de l'Allemagne* [Germany Year Zero], written right after the end of World War 2 when he was in Germany with the French Army. Central to the book is Morin's unwillingness to reduce Germany and Germans to "sale boches" (filthy Germans), and to assess the horror of the situation in a broad context and with an unusual depth of feeling. Here already we find a cornerstone of what Morin, the Jew and resistance fighter who lived in mortal danger for the war years, would later called complex thought—thought that does not reduce and polarize and is aware of and informed by, rather than dismissive of, the power of emotion. Morin assesses the fate of Germany and its people in the larger context of its historical, political, psychological, and sociological complexity. He does not want to reduce Germany and its people to the actions of the Nazis, which in the immediate aftermath of the war was all too easily done.

It should be pointed out that nowhere in Morin's work do we find a saccharine New Age version of "compassion," but rather a mature compassion that comes from having "tasted bitter" as they say in China, a more truly Buddhist approach that comes from having seen the extent of our human capacity for love and hate, our intelligence and our stupidity. It

comes from having looked within deeply enough to find that nothing human is alien to him, and from a deep understanding of humanity's history, a grasp of the extremes humans are capable of, from the genocidal to the sublime.

It is easy to misread Morin's culminating work on Method and Complex Thought as being focused exclusively on the cognitive domain. The term "complex thought" might be misleading here, because it is clear throughout Morin's work that his scope is far broader, as his first work indicates. Indeed, Morin's broader vision of complexity and of thought explicitly connects reason and emotion, wisdom and compassion, idealism and realism, and the other oppositions that have been created and are representatives of what he calls "simple thought." The fact that the introductory chapter to the first volume of Method is called The Spirit of the Valley, drawing explicitly on the Taoist tradition, is significant in many ways, pointing to what Morin calls the dialogical (not dialectical because there is no guaranteed resolution) relationship between traditional polarities, and to a deep, underlying spiritual thread running throughout Morin's work. It reminds us that the spiritual is always present in his work, but in a far subtler way than has become the norm these days.

It should further be noted in reference to Morin's first book that it was the inspiration for the classic Neo-Realist movie *Germany Year Zero* (*Germania Anno Zero*) by Roberto Rossellini. I mention this because it is an indication of Morin's ongoing relationship of mutual influence with the arts and artists, another aspect of his work that makes him so unique in the often dreary and secluded world of the social sciences. (In this context I

should mention also Morin's delightful reflections about *New York*, a collaboration with Dutch visual artist Karel Appel.)

Morin's next work was *L'Homme et la Mort* (Humanity and Death), and in this work we find, in typically Morinian fashion, a sustained meditation on death that is both deeply personal and planetary. Personal, because Morin lost his mother at an early age, an event that affected him profoundly, and planetary because Morin explores death cross-culturally in the great religions and spiritual traditions and throughout human history and finds the shared experience among the plurality of interpretive frameworks. Morin's work has always had this "holographic" quality, in which the part and the whole are always interconnected, and one finds the part in the whole and the whole in the part. Indeed, Morin's approach has always been both planetary and personal. Morin's early work on death shows his willingness to grapple with profound existential issues so often obliterated in the sterile discourse of social science, and this existential aliveness, this grounding in the lived experience of the realities of existence is present in Morin's work whether he is discussing cybernetics, self-organization, ecology, or education. Morin's work does not come from an attempt to escape life, or to control it, but from an effort to immerse himself in it more deeply, and to provide the sciences with adequate tools to account more adequately for the lived complexity of life, and indeed to assist us in that process of immersion. Morin characterizes his later work on complex thought as an attempt to develop a method that does not "mutilate," that does not fragment and abstract—that does not do violence to life, by giving us a unidimensional, anemic, antiseptic, homogenized *pars pro toto*.

After the second world war, the influence of the left and of the communist party was enormous in European thought. There were very clear boundaries with which to assess what was considered to be outside the party line. Morin's independent thought was clearly transgressive, and in *Autocritique* Morin documents his expulsion from the party, exploring phenomena we would now categorize as self-deception, groupthink, and authoritarian/totalitarian thinking and behavior. A fierce independence of judgment has always characterized his life and work. It has often made him unpopular with those who would find shelter in the warm embrace of "in-group" conformity. Morin never "belonged" in the sense of relinquishing his own independence so as to gain the considerable favors offered by those who were "connected" and "belonged," whether in the form of publishing contracts, or, ironically, notoriety in the US, for instance. Morin's *Autocritique* is a remarkable document from an "engaged" intellectual and a model of honesty and self-reflection: it provides us a rare degree of transparency into the life and thought of a man in the thick of the events that were shaping European and indeed planetary culture at that time.

At the same time that Morin was exploring such a weighty subject as death and engaging in a "self-critique" of his own self-deception and the way this, hologrammatically, applied to the larger issues of the role of ideologies and totalitarianism and participation in larger planetary culture, he was also beginning to write a series of books on what might be thought of as "lighter fare," namely movies, the star system, and popular culture. Interestingly, several of these books, originally published from the mid 50s to the

early 60s are being published in the US by the University of Minnesota, precisely because Morin's innovative work in this area has been recognized as crucially important—both prescient and still vitally relevant in a discussion that has often drowned in vapid and sensationalist scholarship. Morin was one of the first academics to really take pop culture seriously. Morin's psychoanalytically influenced discussion of interiority, subjectivity, dreams, and creativity acknowledged the importance of understanding popular cultural phenomena that had an enormous impact on people's lives. Among other things, he studied the seemingly trivial fan letters written to movie stars in popular magazines, identified the mechanisms of projection and identification in the adulation of "stars", and sensed and articulate the prospect of a "planetary culture" in the early 60s.

In 1961, Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin made the documentary *Chronicle of a Summer*, which was set in Paris in the aftermath of the Algerian war and just before the explosion of riots that played such a role in the 60s, culminating the events of 1968. This documentary holds the distinction of being recognized as the first Cinema Verité film, and breaks down the barrier between camera and the subject, in a precursor to a far more participative approach to inquiry and documenting events.

Morin's next two works, written in the mid-sixties, followed somewhat naturally from this documentary, and focused on innovative, participatory approaches to social research, what he called a "sociology of the present." Both of these works were translated into English. *The Red and the White*, a study of modernization in a French village, utilized

Morin's "phenomenographic" approach, a precursor to the recent boom in qualitative research methodologies, at a time when most if not all sociological research was quantitative. *Rumor in Orleans* is the amazing account of a rumor about alleged white slave trade conducted by Jews in the city of Orleans, and the way that Morin's research managed to unravel the web and actually laid the rumor to rest. Again we see Morin at the leading edge of thought with what would be called "action research" today, breaking down the assumptions that research should be quantitative, and should place the researcher as "the expert," "objectively" studying his "subject." For Morin, this research is also a critique of universalism, and a valorization of what he called "the event," the unique, the unrepeatable, the destabilizing moment, the crisis as an opportunity for inquiry, a subject he was later to explore in his work on "crisiology."

From his work on popular culture to cinema verité to his participatory research approach, we find Morin challenging assumptions about high and low culture, about the objectivity and distance of the researcher and the camera, and a critique of expertism that instead favors immersion and participation in the everyday, and draws on the knowledge of non-specialized participants. This is part of Morin's larger thrust to bring the discourse of social science in much closer relationship to the lived realities of human experience, the contingencies, the seeming trivialities, the emotions, subjectivities, and uniqueness of life in all its manifestations.

In the early Sixties Morin began publishing his journals, very personal reflections and explorations that chronicled his experiences from the very mundane to the dramatic, from

the profound philosophical and psychological reflections of *Le Vif du Sujet* to the account of his voyage to China in the 1990s. For Morin's readers these documents showed the thinker grappling with issues in the moment, and with his own responses to the crises he was facing. Particularly fascinating is the *California Journal*, soon to be published in English, an account of Morin's year in California during the height of the sixties, a remarkable year spent at the Salk Institute in San Diego, immersing himself in cybernetics and systems theories, and reflecting on the social changes he was witnessing. They provided a broad picture of a complex man whose Mediterranean sensibility pervades his life and work.

Many of his closest colleagues and collaborators have considered the journals to be some of Morin's deepest and most significant contributions. The author's voice, already so vivid in his scholarly works, becomes even more alive in these pages, as we go behind the scenes during the writing of a book, during a television appearance, apartment-hunting in Paris, or at a conference. Ironically, some of Morin's journals have been attacked by critics who have found them lacking in the "seriousness" one should find in an academic. Apparently the serious academic is not entitled to eat and drink, watch late night television, enjoy sports, or reflect on his own personal experience of them, for that matter. Oddly enough the intellectual can write weighty tomes about popular culture (now that Morin has contributed to making it an acceptable subject of study), but cannot admit to enjoying it.

The laughable pretense of glacial and imperturbable intellectualism has never been something Morin has aspired to, particularly because he has also been aware that this academic front has all too often acted as a cover for immature emotionality. Morin breaks away forcefully from the reductive image of the intellectual as a disembodied brain and opens himself up to us in his work and in his actions, for scrutiny, exploration, and appreciation, showing himself to us in the full range of his life experiences. Humberto Maturana reminds us that everything that is said is said by *somebody*. In traditional academic discourse and inquiry, the focus was on the elimination of that somebody in search of the “God’s eye view from Nowhere.” Morin shows us who the somebody is, and provides us with an example of “embodied” inquiry and personal reflection.

The personal exploration of his journals have, at times, led us deeply into Morin’s psyche in ways that would be inconceivable for a traditional social scientist. Indeed, what is perhaps overlooked is that most social scientists, particularly those who express themselves only in the confines of the professional journal, are simply unable to give voice to the whole of their life and experience. It is not part of the education of social scientists, of researchers, to understand him or herself, to be able to explore his or her own personal involvement in the research, to document that process and reflect on it, to explore the extent to which the “subjective” and the “objective” co-create each other. Autobiography is an awkward endeavor in social science, one that is looked upon with both awe and suspicion. In his journals, Morin is modeling a process of self-inquiry that is also always holographic because it always occurs within a planetary context—and one

might paraphrase Morin by saying that he lives in a planetary culture, and the planetary culture lives inside him.

Along with the deeply personal, Morin also dived into the profoundly public, through his closely followed public pronouncements on a variety of issues, and through a series of major conferences, most notably the conference documented in the three volume *L'Unité de l'homme* (Human Unity), a multidisciplinary dialogue among primatologists, biologists, neuroscientists, anthropologists, cyberneticists, sociologists, and a variety of other natural and social scientists. This extremely rich series of dialogues, orchestrated by Morin and Massimo Piattelli-Palmarini, and represents an important step towards Morin's transdisciplinary approach, which goes beyond interdisciplinarity to draw on multiple disciplines while actually challenging the disciplinary organization of knowledge, and the reductive/disjunctive way of thinking that make up what Morin, in *Method*, was to call the "paradigm of simplicity."

Le Paradigme Perdu (Paradigm Lost) represents the first step towards the integration that was later to culminate in the multi-volume "method." For Morin, healing the broken connection between the natural and social sciences is an essential move. In the social sciences there was either the quantitative approach found in sociology (what Sorokin called "quantophrenia"), generally anemic attempts to copy the method of physics, or the more philosophically inclined tendency to reject anything remotely associated with the natural sciences as reductive, as "scientism" or "biologism." In natural science the almost complete absence of reflection on the role of the inquirer created massive blind spots

science itself was unable to address in its most rigid configuration. First in *Le Paradigme Perdu*, then in the massive *Method*, Morin tackles this “en-cyclo-pedic” task by literally circulating knowledge between the disciplines and opening up a new way of approaching inquiry and knowledge.

The 5 volume *Method* is perhaps Morin’s culminating work, a remarkable and seemingly inexhaustible treasure trove of insights, reflection, and a real manual for those who are interested in broadening the nature of human inquiry. Drawing on cybernetics, information theory, systems theory, but also integrating all the work he has done before, from the work on imagination in his research on movies to his profound reflections on death, *Method* integrates Morin’s journey and provides the reader with an alternative to the traditional assumptions and method of inquiry of our time.

Morin’s method outlines a way of approaching inquiry that does not reduce or separate, and does justice to the complexity of life and experience. In his socio-political works, such as his prescient studies on the USSR and totalitarianism, on the nature and concept of Europe, and his beautiful 21st century manifesto *Homeland Earth*, Morin applied this method to the planetary crisis in this “planetary iron age.”

Most recently, Morin has produced, in some cases at the request of UNESCO and the French government, a series of books and conferences addressing the application of complex thought in educational contexts. This is part of his ongoing challenge of the paradigm of simplicity that governs most of our thinking, invisible precisely because it

does not form the content of our thoughts as much as actively structure our thinking through, for instance, a disjunctive logic that creates binary oppositions. Rather than focus exclusively on challenging binary oppositions, Morin digs deep to excavate the underlying paradigm that generates those oppositions, and articulates a generative paradigm of complexity that offers a different point of departure.

In over 50 years of writings and passionate participation in French, European, and planetary culture, has shown us the way towards a richer, deeper appreciation of and participation in life. Our present way of thinking, feeling, and being, Morin illustrates, is deeply influenced by the paradigm of simplicity, which reduces and opposes. Nowhere is this more blatantly apparent than in scapegoating fueled by prejudice: “the present (social/political/economic) problems can be blamed on group X; they must, therefore, be eliminated; we are good, they are bad.” Morin points us beyond the paradigm of simplicity, and towards a paradigm of complexity: towards a way of thinking and being that does not mutilate life, but allows us to live it more fully by being more present to the complexities, the paradoxes, the tragedies, the joys, failures, successes. He points us towards a way of thinking that is not simply disembodied and abstract, but rich in feeling, in intuition. A thought that, in many ways, is holographic but also transformative, self-eco-re-organizing, by including all of who we are and indeed stretching our understanding of who we are and pointing us towards new possibilities.

Morin’s work has gradually led to the development of a transdisciplinary approach to inquiry. Going beyond the fragmentation and hyper-specialization too often promoted in

academia, Morin has approached a variety of subjects normally confined in isolated disciplines and brought to them his own complex sensibility, while at the same time, in the process of immersing himself in his inquiry, he has been able to draw from the subjects a further stimulus and impetus for his own conception of transdisciplinary inquiry. It is this kind of generative loop that is one of the trademarks of Morin's complex thought, and of his complex practice of inquiry.

This brief review of Morin's work is inevitably partial: I have omitted to mention and discuss many of his works, and many of the important events in his life in an attempt to provide the English-speaking reader with an overview that can usefully contextualize his contribution. For a useful introduction to Morin in English, the reader is referred to Myron Kofman's *Edgar Morin: From Big Brother to Fraternity*, in the Pluto Press Modern European Thinkers series. Morin's *Homeland Earth* offers an accessible introduction to his socio-political and moral thought.

The essays in this Special Issue offer a taste of a very small number of the subjects Morin has addressed in his remarkable career. The essays here show how his work has been interpreted by scholars from Russia, China, Canada, Italy, and the United States, addressing subjects from ecology to the application of complex thought to nursing, from the reflection of a geophysicist on Gaia theory to a philosopher's view of the connections between Morin and Godel. The international flavor of this issue is an indication of the way Morin's planetary thought has spread across the globe: his work has now been translated into every European language, and also Japanese, Russian (where the whole of

his massive method is being translated), Korean, and Chinese. Morin's influence in Francophone Africa is also considerable. And yet ironically we find that two of the places where his work is most popular, France, and Latin America, are not even represented for reasons of space. This will be remedied by numerous other works presently being planned outlining Morin's impact throughout the world. Hampton Press is in the process of systematically presenting a selection some of Morin's key books. In the meantime, this collection of thoughtful and provocative articles provides a taste of some of the ways Morin's work is being interpreted and applied by scholars on several continents and in a variety of disciplines.