

# What place does Corsica have in your life and thought?

**AC: What place does Corsica have in your life and thought?**

**JTD:** It's where I was born, where my father, my grandfather, my great-grandfather and my ancestors were born. It's where my roots are. My profession, my vocation as a philosopher, came to me early, around the age of 19. It was in Corsica that I started to read philosophy. Did feeling these origins steer me towards certain areas of philosophy? I could talk about the insularity of being both shut in and open to the world. Yet, the sea surrounding us is also our highway.

A highway which opens and closes creates a problem. On the one hand, you must take it to know your country; on the other, it's your way out. Both coming and going. That's the dilemma of philosophy: engaging in the world one lives in with all its familiar bits and pieces that create the sense of place, giving it form and image, while trying to understand the links to another world which is always there. The more you try to leave, the more your heritage stays with you. Insularity makes you think about your roots and links.

**Have you yourself lived through islander dilemmas?**

When I left for college in Marseille my mother told me "Vai inde un paese christianu!" "You're going to a Christian country, you won't be in a foreign land". She was really saying that I would be

amongst like minds. Indeed! I found my like minds. Some were Corsican, others not. But all were rooted in their sense of place. They also had problems in regard to their surroundings. They also had to make sense of the world they lived in. It was a process which we all shared. I made friendships in Marseille lasting a lifetime.

**How have your feelings about insularity developed?**

The truth about being an islander is that even when one has left the island one is still there. I don't say that with regret or with feelings of being exiled. You are there because you carry the island with you. When you're in Corsica you're elsewhere; elsewhere, you're in Corsica. Your body has a sort of double life. It can be very dangerous, leading to depths of depression, but it can also be very rewarding. It means learning to accept the islander's dual existence.

**Can you live this insularity away from an island?**

The skin encompassing our flesh and blood is our own island, our own private insularity. We can't escape from it: it follows us everywhere. We're all islanders in the strict sense. We show our feelings on our skins and read others from theirs. We're all caught between our inner and our outer beings. Frontiers aren't straight lines – they're a moveable feast.

**For generations Corsica lived by traditional values. Today, Corsicans are joining the consumer society. What's going on and what are the risks involved?**

Corsicans have embraced the common lot of contemporary man. We live in a society which engraves its mark on a global scale. It's no longer every person or even every community for itself. But we must make the most of it. We can't turn the clock back 120 years hoping that Corsica will regain its rural integrity. Society has changed. This new order obliterates traditional values. But such values are hidden, not lost. They more or less survive in this or that individual, in a common humanity. We can't resuscitate them as such. They have to be revived via the arts. Art, culture, theatre, music and song open the communal memory. Every one participates and passes on what they can.

**Corsicans have, for the past 30 years, been assaulted by triviality while trying to revive a sense of their own purpose. Don't all societies at the millennium face the same challenge?**

Of course. Particularly since so many universal utopias have been laid to rest. I'm not saying that they've been failures.

They survive in the imagination and in books. They can be revived. Some are part-realised but run contrary to reality. That's the lesson of Communist regimes. They built societies which destroyed themselves from within because they were unmanageable. But whether we're talking about capitalism or today's socialism, as massive historical structures melt away, does that mean that human communities are destroyed with them? Absolutely not. None of their histories, their religions or their languages vanish. All of these reappear, find new roots, body and strength in *joie de vivre*, conflict or even violence. The real question is to understand which variety of universal sense allows people to live together in harmony while pursuing their own ends.

**What is the significance of violence in such a process of change?**

There are many kinds of violence. Legitimate self-defence, for instance, but also deliberate violence intended to harm others. I'm afraid that violence in Corsica has had the opposite effect to what it should have had. The use of violence is only justified if life itself is threatened. When it is used in anger or to sort out bad feelings it can lead to the worst catastrophes.

**When violence originates in situations that are impossible for individuals or communities to control is it a form of expression in which the unconscious plays a large role?**

Violence is not a good means of expression. Violence against an enemy who threatens the life of a community is, of course, necessary violence. We've all practised that at one time or another. But the kind of violence which says "see what I'm capable of" is wrong, because it leads to counter-violence.

Historically, the political or even ethical use of violence is abhorrent because it provokes a spiral of attack and counter-attack. It amounts to gratuitous violence motivated only by its own impact.

**Violence is traditionally at the heart of Corsican society. The vendetta has its place in the folklore of the island. You yourself refer to the "need for violence" in one of your philosophic essays. What does that mean?**

One day back in July 1942 I experienced the desire to kill. It was the day of the rounding up of the Jews of Vel d'Hiv. I left home very early that morning and found myself in front of the Pantheon at about six am. There I saw some Jewish kids sitting on suitcases watched by armed cops. Instinctively I put my hand to my belt to draw my revolver, forgetting that I'd got rid of it some time before. Suddenly I felt as if my hand was lacking something.

I had a hand, but nothing in it. The more I felt this sense of emptiness the more I wanted to kill.

At that moment I remembered an experience which happened when I was very young – 18 in fact – on holiday in a region of Fium'Orbo. A man with only one arm lived there; he'd lost the other arm in the war. He was a man who commanded a lot of respect in the village, where he was also feared a little. We'd become friends – we met at the bar, drank happily together and occasionally played cards. Then one day he said to me:

"How old are you?"

"I'm 18"

"So you're old enough to carry a weapon?"

"Yes"

"So where do you carry it?"

"I wear it there, in the pit of my back, with a shoulder holster.

"That's good", he replied. "Where do you think I wear mine?"

"You've only got one arm so you must keep it in the little pocket of your jacket, there, since you're missing your left arm"

"That's very clever" he said, "and I'm pleased you know where to look, *cusi, si po franca a a morte*" (that's the way to escape death).

Then suddenly he became sad.

"You can't know when hand guns like the 6.35 like this little one, will be useful. And it's better that you never know".

He continued: "During the war there was a sergeant in my company, a Corsican. That sergeant wasn't from this canton. He was as bad as they come. He had something I couldn't bear. When he spoke he never looked you in the face. He spoke to you with eyes down watching his feet. On the spur of the moment I started to think how I could kill him. The idea took me over. Well, one day I did it. These things happen in wartime. He really didn't deserve to live, that man. He was a bad lot."

That's what I mean by obsession with murder. My friend couldn't rest until the day he killed this scoundrel. But I always wondered whether he really did do it. I believe he dreamed it up.

He wanted so strongly to kill this sergeant, he'd repeated the story so often, that he ended up thinking he had done so. Maybe he had. I really don't know. In any case he was capable of the murder.

All this to explain my state of mind when I found myself without a gun in my hand. That's what I mean by the desire to kill.

**Is the resurgence of Corsican nationalism a backwards step given the uncertainties of our time, or is it the confused search for another way of life and other values?**

I'd say it was indeed the search for another way of life. But there is no way to national rebirth without relearning how to be good citizens. Belonging to a nation doesn't just mean signing up to the past, it's not simply being able to speak the language or sharing ancestral values and culture, it also means building together a communal life. Affirming one's citizenship means not just accepting the rules of the game but helping create new ones more applicable to changed circumstances. We must learn how to make the new rules, otherwise the nation won't exist.

**Just what is it that makes a nation?**

A nation is a community whose people speak one language, with a shared past, its own way of working and making things work, its own way of explaining why it works. Over and above this, a nation conceives, effects and promotes legitimate plans for the community and its future – that's to say it makes laws. It's what Pascal Paoli wanted for Corsica: that it make its own laws.

**Is there a risk of excluding those who don't share the past?**

Every viable community must work with others. When a stranger arrived in Ancient Greece he was asked: "Who are your gods? Where do you come from? In what house do you live?" After that introductory process the stranger was welcomed for all his differences. If he wanted to stay in the city he was given the status of guest, *xenos*. He had rights. He wasn't a citizen. He couldn't vote. But he had rights. In Athens citizenship was awarded to those who were thought to have deserved it. Never in Sparta.

**You, yourself, have lived on the Continent since you were 18. Let's say you live "in France". Do you make a distinction between Corsica and France?**

It's not my place to make that distinction. My language and culture is fundamentally French. I write about philosophy in French. I would be hard put to write in Corsican even though I've

spoken Corsican since my childhood and still speak it. I am Corsican by birth, Corsican in my heart, but I'm a French citizen. That's all I can say.

**If somebody asks you whether you are French or Corsican what do you reply?**

Well, that depends on who I'm talking to. If he's from Marseille I tell him "I'm Corsican". If he's an American I profess to be French. And if he then asks me where I was born I tell him I was born in Corsica. French and Corsican. It would be hard for me not to be French.



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