

***On being more 'living' in time of pandemic: the lived experience of being fragile***

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**The Role of Micro-phenomenology research and practice  
in the urgent ecological questions that our society is meeting**

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*Introduction*

Thank you to all three, through this workshop, for giving me, for giving us the opportunity to return to some experiences of the time lived during these last three months between the end of February and May 2020, qualified by many around us and in the Press from “amazing”, “strange”, “bewildering”. Indeed, this period has been so new and “surprising” I would say that it has paradoxically not given us much opportunity to “metabolize”, in other words, to assimilate and verbalize it... Personally, apart from a few newspaper-articles relating to the inconsistency in the management of this health crisis by the Macron french government, I could not, nor did I want to, write anything about something that was still in the process of unfolding.

This Ecomicrophenomenology workshop provides me with the perfect opportunity, and it is I must say a blessing, because I am not sure that I, without this external constraint, would have started writing anything. Therefore a huge thank you for taking this initiative!

In this contribution, I would like to offer you two short moments of reflection. First of all, how the lockdown period (*confinement*) self-generated a different relation to time, and second, how and why this “regained” time (so Marcel Proust) was not for me a “liturgical” time (meditating or praying) but rather imposed itself on me as a sense of “fragility”, and the response to this weakening (*fragilisation*) that emerged. At each stage, I will offer you a small microphenomenological self-explicitation vignette where I have sought to anchor these intuitions by returning to a few source-moments I experienced during this time.

A word concerning the term which is the signature of our workshop and which specifies here the micro-phenomenological approach, ecology. I take it here in its primary sense, which is well identified with the prefix “eco”. In Greek (tracing back to Aristotle in his *Politics*),<sup>1</sup> “οἶκος” designates “the house” in the sense of the home, the center, the nourishing living place, where one is oneself and “entre soi” (between ourselves), unexposed to the eyes of others, in short, where one “lives”: inhabits (οἰκέω). Concretely, in confinement at home, I (we) experienced this “regained” place of the house, of “οἶκος”. It is this matrix sense of political ecology, more and before its contemporary sense of committed discourse for the environment and nature, that I will have in mind in what follows. Even if, of course, the lived rediscovered experience of my inner-house is the prime lever of a rediscovery of the environment, of nature, of other living beings and of a heightened awareness of the climate emergency and the probable apocalypse of our world (so Michaël Foessel in his *Critique de la Raison Apocalyptique*<sup>2</sup>).

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, Penguin, 2000 (in french; *Les politiques*, Paris, Flammarion, 2015), I, 2, 5-8, 1252b 12-14.

<sup>2</sup> Michaël Foessel, *Après la fin du monde. Critique de la raison apocalyptique*, Paris, Seuil, 2012.

## **I. Time Regained: a time without schedule / downtime / an intermission**

As containment imposed itself on us through the experience of time, a number of my friends told me how it really did not change much for them. How it was even an opportunity to refocus more on themselves, to get in touch with themselves, even to no longer endure the gaze of others or be exposed to their judgment.

After the initial moments of bewilderment and realisation that the lockdown was going to cause severe change, many of us have indeed rediscovered a different time, experienced another quality of time, a more “loose” time, unstructured, a time “regained” in a certain way in the proustian sense, a time without time, that is to say without appointments, with no commitments save those I propose to myself. For me, at some point, this time received a name. It called itself “Jouvernex”. Jouvernex is the village in the Alps near Lemman lake where I go each summer, my family and ancestral place, a place where I have spent every summer and winter holiday since I was a child, a place where I “find” myself again, which makes me “enter” into myself anew each time I visit, a place where I “make solitude”, a place which is deeply evoked by the beautiful word “vacation”, which echoes the words “emptiness” or “void”.

### **Jouvernex**

So here is a first micro-sequence of self-interview which I offer to you and I invite you to go into this moment with me. More precisely my gentle instruction to you would be to check, while you are listening to my narration, whether you “resonate” with what I lived or observe in you different feelings, bodily experiences...

*At one particular point during this time, the word “Jouvernex” crystallized the intense emotional flavor of time regained. The*

*condition for the emergence of this word in my consciousness was undoubtedly my immersion into a leisurely time without deadlines. There was the taste of an atmosphere different from those my Paris apartment usually evokes. But there was more: the constraint to no longer move, to stop going outside, this is also what I experience each summer at Jouvernex, my perimeter being limited by having use only of a bicycle. These were the conditions of emergence of the word in my consciousness.*

*I will evoke now the very moment of its appearance. I'm sitting at the window in the living room, the only place in the apartment where the sun shines through the window. It is early in the afternoon. I am surrounded by my "interior garden": an olive tree, aromatic plants and flowers. We had lunch with my daughter. I hold a coffee cup in my left hand. Without doubt I have recreated without knowing it the concrete conditions (the afternoon, the sun, the seat, a small garden) of "Jouvernex", but I don't know it at this moment. I hold in my right hand Simone de Beauvoir's book *La Vieillesse*, which she wrote in 1970, and I feel I am literally "tasting" this moment. Little noise in the street, voices in the distance. No cars, the street is extraordinarily empty. I take a few sips of hot coffee. I feel the heat of the sun on my skin. I feel myself breathing more deeply, opening my rib cage, as if to fill me with air, my chest broadens, I get inside the atmosphere of this moment. There is **then** the diffuse taste of a familiar atmosphere: I close my eyes and I visualize the stairs of my house in Jouvernex, the warmth of the stone, the cherry tree opposite in the garden, the sounds of magpies and sparrows in the tree, and I hear myself saying internally: "Jouvernex". Later I will write a text to a friend: "You see, I can't go to Jouvernex, so Jouvernex came to me." With the arrival of this word in my consciousness, my whole bodily and emotional "archaic" anchorage, that was lived implicitly, becomes conscious.*

Like many of us, I experienced this slowing down of time deeply, to the point of telling myself every day, as the fateful de-containment date of 11th May approached, that I

would carry it on and make an inner choice of this previously external constraint. “Stay at home” would become the inner barometer of my daily life, and in this way, I would get rid of the hustle and bustle that makes up our urbanized lives.

However, despite many incentives, both from a small voice within myself and from friends who regularly invited me to participate in meditation, yoga, prayer sessions via audio or video, I didn’t “take advantage” of this new “regained” time to meditate or pray more or better. I even experienced a desert, a void, a kind of meditative and liturgical poverty. Did I become unspiritual?

There is a curious paradox here: at the moment when time is offered to us a hundredfold, the taste for meditation vanishes: while praying or meditating are often neglected on the grounds that “I don't have time”; now, when there is plenty of time, the desire for what is essential for me recedes. During a phone call with a friend, I even formulated this as a need for an “liturgical asceticism”.

If I try, as I tried then, to make sense of this feeling bordering on the absurd, what I sense is the emergence of an inner movement of weakening (*fragilisation*), which I will try to unfold a little bit.

## **II. The experience of fragility/frailty<sup>3</sup>**

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<sup>3</sup> This theme is scarcely broached in philosophy or in social sciences. Some few thinkers thematized it though, like Paul Ricœur in *Finitude et culpabilité*, in the volume 2 of his *La philosophie de la volonté*, Paris, Seuil, 1960, 2009, Book I, chapter 4, « La fragilité affective », pp. 124-184 (english edition : *Fallible Man : Philosophy of the Will*, Fordham University Press, 1987) : « the heart would be the fragile moment *per se* », p. 125, and Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness. Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (1986), Cambridge University Press, 2001.

So first, this feeling of futility responds to the absolute distress of the situation we are living now, which we know has no reason not to last.

That is what generated in me this diffuse feeling of an unprecedented fragility. This has been written a lot in the media: this unknown virus confronts us with the essential fragility of our humanity. In moments of mourning, violent death, loss of a loved one, we are confronted with an intense feeling of the total weakening of our being. Each time it is a fleeting or even a lasting ordeal, which settles for a time within me, before receding into the background of my consciousness, soon occupied again by everyday life and interests.

With the arising of this unknown virus, this weakening of my being was increased tenfold, except that it applied to myself directly, and not to a fragility of my being experienced by “proxy” in connection with the loss of others. Thinking about it, this feeling of embrittlement took place in a social, political and existential context with at least three dimensions: first, the social and collective time of the first two weeks of lockdown (in France from mid to end of March) reverberated within me in a prevailing existential mood of dull anguish, of being contaminated without knowing it and of life suspended, waiting each morning for the emergence of possible symptoms.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, this basic anxiety, reactivated each morning with the phrase: “pew, no fever”, was intensified by the feeling of insecurity caused by the incoherent political management of the health crisis by the French government.<sup>5</sup> It triggered a feeling of

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<sup>4</sup> S. Freud, *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (1920) (Engl. Trans. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle. Complete psychological works*, vol. 18, Vintage, 2001), where the initial distinction between *Angst* (anguish-angoisse) *Furcht* (fear-peur) and *Schreck* (terror-effroi) is proposed; see also M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (1927) (Engl. Trans. *Being and Time*, State University of New York Press, Revised ed., 2010) for the more famous yet later distinction between *Angst* et *Furcht*.

<sup>5</sup> N. Depraz, « Science et pouvoir. Quand un aveugle guide un aveugle », article published in the french Newspaper *Libération*, 15th of April 2020 ([https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2020/04/14/science-et-pouvoir-quand-un-aveugle-guide-un-aveugle\\_1785198](https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2020/04/14/science-et-pouvoir-quand-un-aveugle-guide-un-aveugle_1785198)). See also earlier in *Le Monde*, « Le macronisme et le spectre de l'épistocratie » (18/10/2017) ; N. Depraz, « La peur, c'est la paix », *Agence*

not being at all reassured or supported by a clear State discourse and strategy : a feeling of abandonment, of increased instability; thirdly, there was the ambivalence of my relationship to death, both confrontation and denial, and this ambivalent feeling was intensified during the health crisis by the obscene combination of counting the deaths every evening in the media with political refusal of any support for the dying and their relatives.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, this existential feeling of extreme fragility that I described on the basis of its social political context is anchored in a specific moment to which I would like to come back now thanks to a small moment of self-interview.

### **Waking up/Awakening**

I named this moment waking up or awakening because it is both a bodily waking up and an inner awakening. So here is the second sequence of self-interview I would like to share with you and which I invite to experience with me, while checking, like during the first moment, to what extent you resonate with it.

*It is Monday morning. It is the first Monday of March. We are not in lockdown yet. I wake up and feel something different inside me. For the last week I have been buried in my bed, high fever, exhausting dry cough, feeling of difficulty in breathing. Every morning I watch for the worsening respiratory signal that means: “go to the hospital now”; or for a feeling of improvement, a sign of remission. But, every morning, I make the same self-diagnosis: same feverish state, same respiratory congestion. I feel it could be coronavirus, however I deny it and*

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*internationale de Presse Pressenza*, 20/05/2020  
<https://www.pressenza.com/fr/2020/05/la-peur-cest-la-paix/>. In italian translation:  
<https://www.pressenza.com/it/2020/05/la-guerra-e-pace-anzi-no-la-paura-e-pace/>

<sup>6</sup> N. Depraz, “Mourir en temps de pandémie”, *Agence internationale de Presse Pressenza*, 28/05/2020 : <https://www.pressenza.com/fr/2020/05/mourir-en-temps-de-pandemie-la-liturgie-sabsente-la-mascarade-sinvite/>

*I wait, watching for signs ... My body is fighting it, I feel it. Rising fever as the day progresses, collapse in the evening. But as I woke up in the morning of March 2, something has changed in my body. I get up, I inspect myself innerly, and suddenly I understand: the fever has subsided. I walk in the apartment, I check my internal state: my head is lighter, my forehead cleared, I feel my eyes more open and, also, suddenly, I feel my rib cage which opens, a childish pleasure of playing at inhale-exhale, an ease and a jubilation simply to breathe. I feel, quite simply, “more alive”, whilst at the same time, infinitely more fragile. The tension of the struggle in body and mind against what has rightly been called “the invisible enemy” now meets a relaxation which results in emotional relief and a huge need to breathe, literally to exhale, as after a shock, to fill your lungs to the bottom to experience the breath there; inhale, exhale, check that you are still alive.*

This feeling of amplified breathing, where the lungs swell and empty, the french writer Maurice Blanchot vividly bears witness to at the end of his small book-testimony in 1944, *L'instant de ma mort*, which magnificently echoes this infinite opening of life in death, here, of death in life (it's all one):

“The one the Germans were already targeting, waiting only for the final order, then felt an extraordinary feeling of lightness, a kind of bliss (nothing happy though), - sovereign joy? The meeting of death and death? [...] Henceforth, he was linked to death, by a surreptitious friendship. [...] Then undoubtedly began for the young man the torment of injustice [...]. However, at the time when the shooting was just waiting, there remained the feeling of lightness that I could not translate: freed from life? The infinite that opens? Neither happiness nor misfortune. Neither the absence of fear and perhaps already the step beyond. I know, I imagine that this ineffable feeling changed what remained from existence. As if death outside of him could now only collide with death within him. ‘I'm alive. No, you're dead.’”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *L'Instant de ma mort* (1994), Paris, Gallimard, 2016, pp. 11, 14-15. (My translation. Engl. Trans. *The Instant of My Death*, Stanford University Press, 2000.)



I will speak here of fragility. You may have other words to name this feeling of absolute distress, of immersion in a situation where the unpredictable disorients all control. You may prefer to speak of “vulnerability”, “precariousness”, or even “submission”. In all these terms resonates something of our passivity, of our being-affected, of a form of undergoing. I prefer the term “fragility” because it reflects the fundamentally friable nature of my being. *Fragilis* in Latin is that which can be broken, one who is “fallible” as the philosopher Paul Ricœur also says, who has also become aware of one’s own weak spot, whereby there is an active resumption of this passive inclination. I prefer to speak of fragility because this experience seems to me more universal, at least in comparison with the contemporary use of other terms which name this fundamental passivity but designate social or political categories of people: “vulnerable” people, in Levinas’s case, widows, orphans,<sup>8</sup> today the elderly or people with chronic illnesses<sup>9</sup>; “precarious” people are, in Hans Jonas’ words the living beings exposed to the risk of death, namely plants and animals,<sup>10</sup> people who live below the poverty line, or whose occupation exposes them to hunger; “submissive” people are typically slaves... or women.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, in this context of absolute weakening/embrittlement of being, even the usually operative supports of meditation or prayer became meaningless for me. As if they were too much “artefacts”, formatted windows of time

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<sup>8</sup> E. Levinas, *Autrement qu’être ou au delà de l’essence* (1974), Paris, Le livre de poche, 1990. (Engl. Trans. *Otherwise than being. Or beyond essence*, Duquesne University Press, 1998.)

<sup>9</sup> Marie Garrau, *Politiques de la vulnérabilité*, Paris, CNRS Editions, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> H. Jonas, *The phenomenon of life. Towards a philosophical biology* (1966), Phoenix Editions, 1982 ; French Trans.: *Le phénomène de la vie*, Bruxelles, De Boeck Editions, 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe* (1949), Paris, Folio, 1976 (Engl. Trans. *The Second Sex*, Vintage Classics, 1997 ; Manon Garcia, *On ne naît pas soumise, on le devient*, Paris, Flammarion, 2018.

dedicated to finding myself, predetermined for my well-being, as the sociologist Frédéric Lordon analyzes the ambiguous goal of meditation sessions offered to employees in companies.<sup>12</sup> A pre-formatted time, supposedly of return to oneself, ultimately intended to make productivity at work even more profitable. Isn't this new so-called "cognitive" capitalism even more manipulative (more insidiously) than the one Karl Marx denounced in the 19th century?

In short, the current pandemic situation generates distress such that it renders dedicated moments for meditation or prayer, abstractly cut off from a continuous daily rhythm suffused with dull anxiety, worry, insecurity and instability, ineffectual (obscene?). These moments cut off from the real real, separated from the real real, even framed into a "pre-meditation", a "post-meditation"<sup>13</sup> do they not paradoxically reproduce the abstraction, the disconnection which haunts our lives always on the brink of dissociation, of schizophrenia?

Hence this acute feeling of absurdity with regard to these "tools", insufficiently powerful here to bring about any genuine reconnection, any true embodiment of my distressed self. What is left then? Maybe only the emergency of an "asceticism" as I said, of this pre-formatted liturgy, this technique offered to our biotech minds, or, to put it another way, the emergency of a deeper "époque" (a suspension, a break of our superimposed preconceptions). The answer comes from a deeper place: freeing oneself from predetermined "formats", "appointed" moments, *a*

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<sup>12</sup> Frédéric Lordon, *Capitalisme, désir et servitude*, Paris, La Fabrique Editions, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Ch. Trungpa, *Meditation in action* (1970), Shambhala Editions, 2010, where the author stresses the inner link between meditation and postmeditation, and where he criticizes a still *fabricated* way of meditating ; K. Gamber, *Die Reform der römischen Liturgie*, Preface J. Ratzinger, Regensburg, F. Pustet, 1981 (Engl. Trans. *The Reform of the Roman Liturgy: its Problems and Background*, Una Voce Press & The Foundation for Catholic Reform, 1993), where the latter questions the collapse of liturgy into a *show*. He writes : "It is not possible to 'fabricate' a liturgical movement – as less as you can 'fabricate' a living being – but you may be part of its development while becoming one with the spirit of the liturgy."

*fortiori*, from their caricature: digital sessions of guided meditation, liturgies via zoom, etc. The answer that comes is the face to face encounter between my distressed self and the absurdity of our situation and, as the Russian Orthodox Saint Silouane says magnificently: “hold your spirit in hell and do not despair.”<sup>14</sup>

What makes me “more alive” in this hellish, apocalyptic situation? More “living” as I chose to formulate it in the title of this presentation, rather than more “alive” as we commonly say. “Living”: this present participle indicates a process, the process of living, not a state or a being, as “alive” does: to be alive is to survive. How can we not be mere “survivors” who anxiously await the signs of our imminent possible death, separated from ourselves, external to ourselves, separated from our beloved in case we are at the hospital, isolated and lonely ? How can we be “living”: from within?

These micro-moments that I named “Jouvernex” and “Waking up/Awakening” and that I self-interviewed a little bit earlier, express the uncontrolled influx of life into me and emanating from me through respiratory dynamics, which unceasingly connect and regenerate the internal and the external.

This feeling of becoming more “living”, I experienced it more viscerally, in cardiac rhythms and emotionally, — “cardially”<sup>15</sup> if I can allow myself this neologism which refers to the lived fold of the heart and the affective — in these micro-moments when my rib cage suddenly took the air fully into my lungs, swelled spontaneously with the influx of air (internal-external; passive-active: receptive?<sup>16</sup>). When I felt the increased

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<sup>14</sup> Archimandrite Sophrony, *Saint Silouane l’Athonite (1866-1938). Vie, doctrine, écrits*, Paris, Cerf, Abbaye de Belle Fontaine, First Part, chapter XI, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> N. Depraz, *La surprise du sujet : un sujet cardial*, Bucarest, Zeta books, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> About the notion of « receptivity » (*Rezeptivität*), see E. Husserl, *Erfahrung und Urteil. Untersuchungen zur Genealogie der Logik*. redigiert und herausgegeben von Ludwig Landgrebe (1939), Hamburg, Meiner, 1976, first section, « The structures de

inflow of air into my lungs, breathe in, breathe out... Involuntary breathing.<sup>17</sup>

By opening myself to the air flowing in me, I expose myself, I risk my life. Because, concretely, I could also at any moment inhale the virus (these famous droplets, which remain in the air ...). But by risking my life, I win it back. I pass from the status of survivor to that of living. I am more alive at the heart of the risk I choose to take. Simone de Beauvoir magnificently expresses this tension with the example of the Stendhal's heroines, who live by opening up to the unpredictable, the unforeseeable, the "surprising" dimension of reality:

"[It challenges] the very meaning of life, that of each and everyone. (...) A passionate and profound woman constantly revises the established values; she knows the constant tension of freedom without support; in this way, she constantly feels in danger: she can at any moment win everything, or lose everything. It is this risk assumed in the anxiety that gives its history the colors of a heroic adventure. And the stake is the highest there is: the very meaning of this existence which is the

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receptivity ». (Engl. Trans. *Experience and Judgment*, Northwestern University Press, 1975.)

<sup>17</sup> About the spontaneous set into motion of the cardiac rhythm together with breathing for the newborn baby before any « neuronal emergence », see cf. M. Merleau-Ponty, *La Nature. Notes. Cours du Collège de France*, Paris, Seuil, 1995, pp. 191-192. The author speaks here of a « dynamique pré-neurale » in which the contractions of the cardiac muscle are responsible alone for the growth of the organism. See in this respect N. Depraz, T. Desmidt, « Cardiophenomenology : a refinement of neurophenomenology », *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, published online 9 august 2018 : <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-018-9590-y>, 4.3. « An Embryo-genetic argument : the heart as a key for the growth of the organism », p. 14 : « At nine and a half weeks, the principal aspects of the human electrocardiogram area present in the same way as in the adult state. Yet at this date, there is no nervous control of the heart. Gesell finds here Coghill's ideas, and speaks of a 'dynamic morphogenesis' that would envelop the facts integrated or not by the nervous system. » (Merleau-Ponty, *op. cit.*, p. 197, american translation : *Nature. Course Notes from the College de France*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003, p. 148)

possession of each one, her only possession. Mina de Vanghel's aventure may in some sense seem absurd, but it involves an ethics.”<sup>18</sup>

Thus, becoming more “living” in time of pandemic is assuming one’s fragility (ones’ inner weak and tender spot), risking, exposing one’s identity and integrity. Research from different fields, for example in immunology, psychology or politics, clearly show that “safe” normativity is fatal. By exposing yourself, you immunize yourself; by transgressing, you discover yourself; by engaging, you provoke transformations and by doing all this, you no doubt contribute to changing the world and those around you.<sup>19</sup>

translation by the author revised by Emily Hammond

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<sup>18</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe*, op. cit. vol. I (1949), p. 385. (My translation.)

<sup>19</sup> About the concept of « risk » in phenomenology, see N. Depraz, « Vie et risque. Le végétal au risque du mouvement », *Alter. Revue de phénoménologie*, n°21 « La vie », Paris, Alter, 2012, pp. 51-71 : in ligne 01 june 2019, URL:<http://journals.openedition.org/alter/795> ; DOI : 10.4000/alter.795 ; about immunity in biology, see N. M. Vaz, F. J. Varela, “Self and Non-Sense: An Organism-Centered Approach to Immunology”, *Med Hypotheses*, May-Jun 1978, 4(3), pp. 231-67. DOI: 10.1016/0306-9877(78)90005-1 ; about the danger of security policies for the living beings there is a huge literature on the subject. See for example : “Ulrich Beck et la théorie du risque”, [http://www.ffsa.fr/webffsa/risques.nsf/b724c3eb326a8defc12572290050915b/84dd4090d2263ce0c12573ec0042ec82/\\$FILE/Risques\\_50\\_0025.htm](http://www.ffsa.fr/webffsa/risques.nsf/b724c3eb326a8defc12572290050915b/84dd4090d2263ce0c12573ec0042ec82/$FILE/Risques_50_0025.htm), “Les risques de l’hypersécurité”, *Marianne*, 27 février 2015; <https://www.lemondepolitique.fr/dossiers/securite-et-liberte>. As a pioneer reference, U. Beck, *Das Risiko Gesellschaft. Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*, Berlin, Surhkamp, 1986.