

EDGAR MORIN

LIFE, WORK, AND IMPACT

Edgar Morin is probably one of the most important thinkers of our time. He is a sociologist, anthropologist and philosopher who transcends the boundaries of scientific disciplines and has set a new direction for science and research with his philosophy of complexity; at the same time, he is a disputatious intellectual who is not afraid to make proposals for a humane planetary politics that could lead us out of the current polycrisis.

The Early Years

Edgar Morin was born as Edgar Nahoum in Paris in 1921. He is the only son of a family of Sephardic Jews who immigrated from Thessaloniki. When he is ten years old, his mother dies - an event that shakes him and will leave a deep mark on him. It is certainly no coincidence that one of his first academic works deals with *L'Homme et la Mort* [Man and Death] (1951). In 1938, after the Munich Agreement, he joined the *Etudiants Frontistes* (a pacifist-antifascist group). When Hitler invades France, he flees to Vichy zone to resist. In 1941 he joins the Communist Party (CPF), and the following year he joins the Resistance. He took the code name Manin, which became Morin through a misunderstanding. He would keep this name as *nom de plume* after the war.

Scientific and Political Engagement after 1945

In 1945, he enters France with the First French Army and becomes head of the propaganda department of the French military government. He publishes his first book, a study of the mentality of the defeated Germans, *L'An zéro de l'Allemagne* [Germany's Year Zero]. From 1949 onwards, he became increasingly alienated from the Stalinist course of the CPF, and in 1951 he was expelled. He dealt with this experience in his book *Autocritique* [Self-Criticism] (1959). He continued to be politically active and was friends, for example, with the circle around Cornelius Castoriadis (*Socialisme ou Barbarie* [Socialism or Barbarism] group and magazine). In 1955, he became a co-founder of the *Comité contre la guerre d'Algérie*, which advocated a negotiated solution to the conflict.

He studied history, geography and law. In 1950, with the support of important scientists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Vladimir Jankélévitch, he obtained a position as a sociologist at the *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique* (CNRS), one of the most important research institutions in the country. He dealt with topics that many of his colleagues at the time still considered too inferior for research: Film, television, chansons, popular culture, mass media. To this end, he participated in the founding of the journals *Arguments* (1956) and *Communications* (1961, together with Georges Friedmann and Roland Barthes). During this period, he wrote the studies *L'Esprit du temps* [The Spirit of the Times] (1960) and *La Rumeur d'Orléans* [The Rumour of Orléans] (1969). He led a research project on the Breton community of Plozévet, one of the first ethnological studies on France (*La Métamorphose de Plodémet* [The Metamorphosis of Plodémet], 1967).

In 1977, he became Research Director at the CNRS, a position he held until his retirement in 1993. From 1983 to 1990, together with Claude Lefort, he was also director of CETSAP (Centre d'Études Transdisciplinaires. Sociologie, Anthropologie, Politique) at the École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS).

Theorists of Complexity

Decisive for Morin's further intellectual development were his stays abroad in the 1960s. From 1960 to 1962 he taught in South America. In 1969, he received an invitation for a one-year stay at the *Salk Institute for Biological Studies* (Jolla near San Diego, California), where his compatriot, the Nobel Prize winner Jacques Monod, also worked. Influenced by ecological movements of the time and Monod's transdisciplinary work on human evolution (*Hasard et nécessité*, 1970), Morin developed his anthropology of human as a bio-cultural being (*Le Paradigme perdu : la nature humaine*, 1972). This study, which emerged from a lecture at a colloquium he organised with Jacques Monod and Massimo Piatelli-Palmarini, became the basis for many of his later writings.

His main philosophical works are the six volumes *La méthode* [Engl: *The Method*] (1977-2004). In it he develops many impulses he received thanks to the "Californian revolution" (as he once called this period), namely systems theory, information theory and cybernetics. This encyclopaedic work deals with nature, biology, knowledge and ideas, anthropology, and finally ethics and politics. Specific is his postulate of the complexity of all areas of nature and life, which is why he speaks of the *principle of complexity*, the *auto-eco-organisation* of all systems. He opposes the (not only) reductionism of the natural sciences and the strict separation of scientific disciplines from each other and demands thinking all areas of knowledge together. Morin thus proposes a general philosophy of complexity that starts from the ontologically conceived complexity of reality.

Planetary Thinking - Anthropolitics

In a series of further books, Edgar Morin developed his philosophy into a theory of planetary politics. His works *Terre-Patrie* (1993, together with Anne-Brigitte Kern, Engl: *Homeland Earth* 1999), *Une politique de civilisation* (1997, with Sami Naïr [A Politics of Civilisation]) and *La Voie* (2011, Engl: *The Way* 2012) are decisive for this. The manifesto *Terre-Patrie* stands out as the main programmatic text. Here, Morin systematically, comprehensively and with historical depth outlines ways out of the dangers of a globalised world that is on the verge of destroying itself. On the other hand, it is necessary to develop the consciousness of the togetherness of all people among themselves and of all people with the nature that surrounds them on our planet, the common Homeland Earth.

In numerous books, Morin has also thought about the pedagogical implementation of a planetary policy and philosophy. Most notable are *Les sept savoirs nécessaires à l'éducation du futur* (1999, Engl. *The Seven Foundations of Knowledge for an Education of the Future*, 2001), *Éduquer pour l'ère planétaire* [Education for the Planetary Era] (2003) and *Enseigner à vivre. Manifeste pour changer l'éducation* [Teaching life. Manifesto for a change in education] (2014).

Another characteristic of Edgar Morin is that he is always ready for dialogue, both with friends and with those who think differently. This has also resulted in numerous publications, for example with Jean

Baudrillard, Cornelius Castoriadis, Nicolas Hulot, Alfredo Pena-Vega, Claude Lefort, Stéphane Hessel, Mauro Cerruti or Tariq Ramadan.

Meaning

This brief overview could only focus on a few works and the most important aspects of Morin's oeuvre. His ground-breaking thinking, which is highly relevant not only to science but also to politics, civil society and pedagogy, has long resonated widely in different parts of the world. Works of his have been translated into 27 languages in 42 countries, he has received honours and awards in several countries, and is an honorary doctor of at least 14 universities around the world. There are study centres dedicated to researching and teaching his theories in France, Brazil, Mexico and Denmark. Despite his advanced age, Edgar Morin still intervenes in current affairs in newspaper interviews, the social media, essays and books, and works tirelessly on the project of civilising *civilisation*. It is probably the joy of life, existence and active participation in the fate of our *Homeland Earth* that keeps him so young.

Sources

This compilation is based on the evaluation of numerous puzzle pieces in many of Morin's own works and several internet sources, including:

<https://www.linternaute.fr/actualite/biographie/1776654-edgar-morin-biographie-courte-dates-citations/> (Short biography)

<https://www.franceculture.fr/personne/edgar-morin> (four autobiographical interviews with Morin)

<http://jipepak.fr/edgarmorin/biogr.html> (short biography in tabular form)

<https://edgarmorin.sescsp.org.br/vida> (Biography in comic form in Portuguese)