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Around 1914

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Excerpts from the paper delivered by Prof. Serge HAROCHE

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- 1 The Collège de France's approach differs from those of other events devoted to the first global conflict. The causes and consequences of the Great War have been analysed in countless studies by historians over the past hundred years. The year of the centenary saw these analyses multiply without the subject ever being exhausted, so great is the complexity of the events and so many are the interpretations and reflections that they call for. One of the reasons for the fascination with this subject is that the period of a few years surrounding 1914 appears to have been a a breaking point – a geopolitical and historical breaking point, of course, but also one in the ways of understanding, seeing and conceiving of the world. Understanding the world is within the remit of science, and at that critical time, science underwent a profound revolution, both in its concepts and in its practices. Seeing the world is the prerogative of the artists who represent it through the prism of their sensitivity, and around 1914 the different forms of art (painting, music, cinema and literature) changed profoundly. Understanding the world means asking questions on the human condition, on the relationship to oneself and to others, and in this respect as well, the Great War was a time of far-reaching transformation in the fields of psychiatry, psychoanalysis, sociology, and anthropology.
- 2 This symposium was not set within the geopolitical and historical field. We did not seek directly to discuss the events that led to this war or that followed it. We endeavoured to analyse the major transformations that accompanied it in all the above-mentioned domains. These had led Stefan Zweig to refer nostalgically to the time before 1914 as “yesterday's world”, where things were experienced, understood and felt differently. Of course, the context of the war cannot be ignored; it had a strong influence on certain

scientists and creators, either by inspiring the theme of their work (I am thinking of painters and writers), or by guiding their work (I have in mind the developments of traumatology or psychiatry, or yet the chemists involved in the development of poison gases, the first weapons of mass destruction). But this direct context cannot explain most of the transformations that took place at the time. The revolution in physics (relativity and quantum physics) began before the war, and continued during and after the war, without relating directly to the events, even though they greatly influenced the conditions in which discoveries were made and spread. Likewise, the major transformations in art (I am thinking about Cubism and German Expressionism) started before 1914. However the emergence of the new forms of art during the early twentieth century can be seen as the expression of a form of premonitory concern about the events that were to shatter Europe.

- The event was organized with the support of the Hugot Foundation of the Collège de France.

AUTHOR

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Quantum Physics