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Sustainability means ethics and this is a cultural revolution

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Something is fascinating in the very idea of climate change as leading to a cultural change. Our visions of the future are disrupted, our views on science and on progress are transformed by an unexpected newcomer in this civilization of power and domination: the fear of a self-provoked collapse. But a growing suspicion insinuates that the fear is perhaps a little bit untimely. Is a deep change really necessary? And how deep? My point is about the nature of the change for sustainability, its being *ethical* and not political, economical, or institutional (Puech, 2010).

Changing... what?

Hitherto, changing and evolving was a natural property of life, a Darwinian process. Species evolved through a continuing pressure of competition to survive. Surviving is the basic and biological form of sustainability. With the Homo Sapiens, a new engine of evolution has been started, a real booster of change: culture, with two change facilitators of unknown might, language and technology. Since we talk and think, since we build artifacts and rely more and more on them, our evolution is more and more cultural, less and less natural. This supremacy of cultural evolution on natural evolution does not follow from a superiority in essence as philosophers would say. It is just a question of timing. Techno-evolution runs incredibly faster than natural evolution, the latter being the evolution of species and the evolution of the ecosphere and its balances. And here we tumble on ecological sustainability issues. Most of them are troubles caused by the accelerated pace

of change imposed by the human species. One of them is the climate change concern. Climate science tries to make people understand that the problem is not the fact that the climate is changing because of us, but that it is changing so fast that the instability is unpredictable and potentially dangerous (I hope that this moderate statement will not be construed as climate-skepticism, even if I assume a moderate epistemological skepticism on every subject, including this one).

Human responsibility for a massive ecological change is not a recent scientific finding. It is not the result of sophisticated computer simulations. It was accessible long before the 1972 “Club of Rome” report, before the revered “whistle-blowers” of the 1960s (R. Carson, L. Whyte, B. Commoner, P.R. Ehrlich, G. Hardin), and even before W. Vernadsky's foundation of global ecology (Vernadsky, 1926). A gentleman born in 1801, George Perkins Marsh, published a book in 1864 on the effect of man on nature. Its “humble pages” had no aspiration to rank as science, he wrote, but their lesson from experience and simple observations were unambiguous: “But we are, even now, breaking up the floor and wainscoting and doors and window frames of our dwelling, for fuel to warm our bodies and seethe our pottage, and the world cannot afford to wait till the slow and pure progress of exact science has taught it a better economy.” (Marsh, 1864, p. 52). Thus, from the 19th century onwards, we have known that our power to modify the natural world is essentially destructive, that no technoscience magical solution will arise, and we know that the pace of this change will lead to an ecological collapse.

We are not in the cultural phase of discovering the need of a change in our industrial behavior. We are in the very different phase of facing the consequences of unmade changes. We are facing a “revenge” of Nature because of a permanent aggression, of which we were aware, but which we decided not to consider because we were perfectly convinced that we were the strongest. When the climate crisis is construed as a “Revenge of Gaia” (Lovelock, 2006), the need for a change is not only an opportunity. It is felt as a perhaps undeserved last chance.

The challenge in sustainability is to match cultural and natural change. Science tries to understand, to model, and predict natural change. On the other side, the humanities and the relevant academic community has to think and elaborate on cultural change, but now in the new light of the sustainability change. The triggering factor is the awareness that our technoscientific culture is not sustainable (leads to its own extinction, for ecological and/or economic and social reasons).

We are challenged, but is it by the climate? Not only, for sure, and not essentially, I believe. Is it by the Earth, an abandoned Deity whose “revenge” is frightening? What we mean by this unnecessary deification of the planet is that the biological and symbolical dimensions of our culture and representation of values are upset. But one step further in awareness is required: it is an ethical

issue that we face, an assessment of our modern self in its relation to itself, to its integrity. Therefore, philosophy and not only a functional approach is needed to respond to the intellectual challenge of sustainability. It is all about a cultural change that is not a matter of official “sustainability policy” but requires a sustainability ethics. It implies not a political but a cultural revolution. This hypothesis explains what remains so difficult to understand and to accept: why sustainability politics are ill-fated, why institutional maneuvers are doomed to blame-avoiding policy and nothing else (except taxes, as sure as death in the end). A couple of years ago I felt isolated when I said so, but since the Copenhagen failure (COP 15) and the Grenelle failure (an ambitious consensus program that boiled down to nothing) in my country, France, I sense I am making new friends.

The ethical priority in sustainability is supported in this paper by two classes of argument: a negative and extrinsic argument about institutional failure, and a positive and intrinsic argument about the nature of sustainability as self-reliance.

The invisible collapse... of institutions

I start with a statement of facts. We are currently attempting a sustainability reform and it does not seem to work. When change is planned and enacted by the existing power, it is a reform. Otherwise, we are on our way toward a revolution, a change *of* governing structures and not a change *by* governing structures. I will suggest later in this paper that this revolutionary change is of a new kind. It is micro-political to the extreme. It is ethical. But for now, let us start again from the fact: sustainability change as institutional reform does not work. The logic of “small steps in the right direction” is now totally worn out, in my opinion. Here in Copenhagen there can be no better case study for this argument than Cop 15. For years, in every administration concerned with sustainability, in political studies departments too, a constant flow of elaboration and bureaucratic literature drenched the actors of sustainability, all about Cop 15. The media advertised the event or the politicians' participation in it. And the day after was a real “day after”, a sudden downsizing of expectation and communication, almost reduced to nothing, except the usual frail and unconvincing claim of “small steps in the right direction”. In the so-called governance of sustainability issues, we have invented a new paradox of change and movement: small steps that do not drive us any closer to the target. The same assessment applies to the “symbolic” change argument. It looks as if we have found a way to use symbolic change in order not to promote but to replace real change.

I take “institution” as the name for a collective entity whose power and interest

systematically predominates over those of its individual human members. Nation-states are institutions par excellence, but also the U.N., any government department or agency, a local community lead by a professional politician, large firms, a N.G.O.s. The *institutional paradigm* is applied by almost everyone, with no idea of any alternative. It says: “solutions come from institutions”. In face of any concern (health, education, moral dilemma., etc.) the question “how to cope” is spontaneously translated into “what is the institution to delegate to?” Then come sub-concerns, such as: how to improve this institution, its efficiency, how to lobby, to suggest rules and regulations, and so forth.

Instead of the possible ecological or economic collapse, our priority should be the actual institutional collapse. It deprives us of the means to cope with any other menacing crisis. Institutions will not walk the talk and they never meant to. They channel militants' energy to move the cogs that move other institutional cogs, and everything is in order as long as the energy remains in the institutional machine and does not threaten to damage its functioning. If we had a functional problem, the solution would be a functional solution, that is to say another content for our institutional machines. But the problem is a meta-problem, about our functional approach itself. Then every institutional machine is part of the problem. This may explain the uncomfortable impression we have of tossing and turning with an inexhaustible energy... while remaining locked inside the problem.

Instead of Jared Diamond's version of the collapse (Diamond, 2005), I will embrace J.A. Tainter's analysis of “the collapse of complex societies” (Tainter, 1988). From a significant list of civilization collapses through history, Tainter concludes: “The collapses of these societies cannot be understood solely by reference to their environments and subsistence practices (or to changes in these), to the pressure of outside peoples, to internal conflict, to population growth, to catastrophes, or to sociopolitical dysfunction. What affected the Romans, Mayans, and Chacoans so adversely was how one or more of these factors was related to the cost/benefit ratio of investment in complexity. When challenges and stresses caused this ratio to deteriorate excessively, or coincided with a declining marginal return, collapse became increasingly likely.” (Tainter, 1988, p. 187). Declining marginal returns of institutional sophistication is exactly what we are experiencing in sustainability. We invest in ever more institutional sophistication to achieve ever less.

This pessimistic approach is not necessarily an incentive to radicalism, marginality, or violent action. I take it as an incentive to *really renounce technocracy*. It can make sense as a cultural revolution, bottom-up, which is not an institutional revolution because it happens on a different level. It does not challenge the existing institutions but boldly ignores them. To care for nature is not to care for a bureaucratic process that cares for nature. To care for climate is not to care

for the U.N. institutions in charge of climate. Nordhaus and Shellenberg used the provoking subtitle: “Why We Can't Leave Saving the Planet to Environmentalists” (Nordhaus, Shellenberg, 2007). We must understand also: Why We Can't Leave Saving the Planet to Institutions.

But in this case, can we leave saving the planet *to whom*? That is the question. The answer from sustainability ethics is: to no one, it depends on you. Just drop the idea of “leaving it to someone,” the idea of *delegation*. Delegation politics has proved its limits in the field of sustainability more than in any other. A *re-appropriation* of sustainability as an ethical concern is at the center of the change for sustainability, I believe.

Cultivating satiety and self-reliance

This revolution is not a brutal shift of power. It is a slow and enduring bottom-up change. It is essentially an empowerment of micro-actors. Much has still to be invented, but excellent tools are available for sustainability conceived as ethics.

In *Walden* (Thoreau, 1854), Henry David Thoreau provides a pattern of self-reliance ethics that is at the same time political economy. Thoreau's entire philosophy is a pattern for change towards sustainability, an ethical change, once every hope of institutional change has been lost: “The true reform can be undertaken any morning before unbarring our doors. It calls no convention. I can do two thirds the reform of the world myself.” (Thoreau, *Journal*, quoted by R.D. Richardson, 1986, p. 106). The triple “formula” of Thoreau's ethics is far simpler than Kant's, it is: “Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!” (Thoreau, 1854, chapter “Where I Lived”).

Inspired by Thoreau's ethics of self-reform, Gandhi achieved a major political change in his own country. In Gandhi we find the paradigm of an ethical reform that causes by its own impetus a major institutional change. I believe that what the official sustainability politics intend to do is exactly the opposite: an institutional change that may bring about, by conviction or by obligation, a quasi-ethical change, a change in the *ethos*, the individual principles and ways of life. Gandhi's way is the opposite. Its roots are in the *satyagraha* attitude, the personal aspiration to truth and more than that the personal striving for authenticity. Here again, self-reliance and frugality are intimately tied. Gandhi's *swadeshi* movement was a cultural change in economy and political economy, aiming at the material independence of a community, the material sustainability of a local community, as far as possible.

The volume 5 of Arne Naess' *Selected Works* (founder of “deep ecology” and a professional philosopher) bears the title “Gandhi and Group Conflict: Explorations of Nonviolent Resistance,

Satyagraha” (Naess, 2005). Naess understood that the global challenge of our culture was to achieve a revolution through ethical self-reform. This is the meaning of “deep” in a philosophical assumable *deep ecology*. It still conveys radicalism and revolution, but not as a politically aggressive movement. The cultural form of global change is to be ethical, based on consistent self-governance and personal awareness. Historic propagandists confirm this view: “Some of the most far-reaching changes are coming from the grassroots as individuals see their lives and their relationships with nature in a new light. As a result, they are making changes in their life-styles, and are insisting on changes in public policy.” (Brown et al., 1991, p. 166).

Satiety and self-reliance are not heroic virtues, said the founder of the *voluntary simplicity* movement, R.B. Gregg, another disciple of Gandhi: “Our present 'mental climate' is not favorable either to a clear understanding of the value of simplicity or to its practice. Simplicity seems to be a foible of saints and occasional geniuses, but not something for the rest of us.” (Gregg, 1936). The ethics of sustainability is an ethic of ordinary life. It lies in micro-actions of care and awareness. These values have nothing to do with a pathological need to be famous as a virtue champion and exceptional ascetic performer. Rather, and this is the deep side of ethics, sustainability is grounded on the very sane need *to be*, just to be, not to survive through sacrifices, but to be a human person, one who assumes what he/she is. A person is built in a constant effort of self-responsibility. This conception of the sustainable self is a quest for every person, all life long, across experiences and achievements, findings and disappointments, the multitude of micro-events captured in ethical awareness. The “voluntary simplicity” movement, and D. Elgin in particular, confirm this ethical and metaphysical substance: “To live more *voluntary* is to live more deliberately, intentionally, and purposefully – in short, it is to live more consciously.” (Elgin, 1993, p. 24). Instead of global values to be revered, sustainability ethics promotes intimate values to be discovered. “The particular expression of *simplicity* is a personal matter. We each know where our lives are unnecessarily complicated.” (id.). Instead of Hans Jonas' ethical oligarchy (the power given to a “responsible” elite in order to “save” the rest of us), which is nothing else than domination-as-usual, the German philosopher Dieter Birnbacher suggests a brilliant hypothesis on the nature of a modest personal ethic of the future: responsibility for the future is not a new and not even a particular ethic. It just stresses the very nature of ethics (Birnbacher, 1994, p. 87).

Thus, the sustainability cultural revolution is a rotation movement, according to the original meaning of “revolution”. It drives us back to ethics in itself, to the simple idea of an ethical dimension in our personal life, to the consequences on community behavior of this change, and, last but not least, to its consequences on the human footprint on this planet.

Sustainability: the ethical turn

According to this micro-political and ant-institutional approach, sustainability is not “a” but “the” ethical turn. It is an ethical turn because what has to change is one's behavior: a change of *ethos*. But there is more. In the end what was unsustainable in our modern cult of growth and power was nothing but the loss of ethics in our collective and personal ethos. What is essential in the cultural change induced by sustainability is nothing but the return of ethical questions and ethical needs. For this reason, sustainable development conceived as institutional reform of the industrial society or a new political trend for rich countries brings no real change in the field, in the life of real people and in the impact of the species. It remains on the industrial and institutional track. The decision for an ethical turn originates in the feeling that current sustainability policies rely on a limited and finally erroneous understanding of the change *level*. Once we understand that nothing less than the ethical will do, we still have to accept the fact that ethical change is not “less” but “more”.

A do-it-yourself ethic for sustainability cuts the root of the double-personality syndrome: one ideal self in representation, the discourse's self, and one real and acting self. This is the ethical infra-problem, splitting representation (word) and action (deed). The infra-ethic of sustainability is self-consistence, the ethical sustainability of the self being the ground for real deeds of the human person. This first tier of ethical awareness leads very naturally to the aggregation of selves for common action, including the management of the commons: local commons, then global commons. It makes a real difference compared to the current sustainable policy, descending on us from “summits” all the way down. “There can be few greater examples of lack of vision in world ‘leaders’ than that, despite their access to the very latest scientific evidence, they have trailed far behind their peoples in recognition of the environmental crisis, which is likely to be the most important political and human issue of the 1990s. [...] Once again it has been ordinary people working through largely voluntary organizations who have acted decisively for human well-being, while the established power structures were either blind to the perils or actively promoting them.” (Ekins, 1992, p. 164-5). Paul Ekins conclusion would be pessimistic without Elinor Ostrom's Nobel prize winner theory of self-governance in “common pool resource” (CPR) local management. She asserts a fact equivalent to what I call the ethical turn, but in its second phase, the community rebuilding process: “What one can observe in the world, however, is that neither the state nor the market is uniformly successful in enabling individuals to sustain long-term, productive use of natural resource systems. Further, communities of individuals have relied on institutions resembling neither the state nor the market to govern some resource systems with reasonable degrees of success

over long periods of time.” (Ostrom, 1990, p. 1). Do-it-yourself institutions can do the job for large local commons and in the long run, provided they use the right tools: self-organization, self-governing, monitoring activities and enforcing contracts by oneself. Ostrom has observed these similarities among enduring, self-governing CPR institutions. The most important similarity of all these micro-institutions is their sustainability in itself, meaning here their institutional robustness (Ostrom, 1990, p. 89). Micro-institutional change (founding micro-institutions and managing them), as suggested by Ostrom (1990, p. 139), defines the next step after the ethical turn.

How *deep* is the change we need for a sustainable society to emerge? As deep as the change required for an ethical self to surface. A. Naess' “ecosophy” was a search for wisdom and not a science. A bottom-up ecology is “deep at the bottom”, as opposed to “heavy at the top”, which is a common aspect of bureaucratic top-down governance, walking on its head. A top-down policy to implement the conclusions of climate science or scientific ecology is an option for the Dark Side, an authoritarian and ideological change.

Sustainability is not directly a challenge to our institutions. It is a challenge to our lifestyle, firstly to our personal lifestyle, and secondly to our “social lifestyle” (institutional, economic, political). They are not “sustainable” in this complete sense of the word: they will not last and they do not meet the requirements of human dignity (ethical and ecological dignity). After trying to face the challenge using institutional reform and top-down moral patronizing, we can humbly assume it does not work. The ethical turn offers an alternative.

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