Has Ecocentrism Already Won in France?

Soft Consensus On the Environmentalist Grand Narrative

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Objectives

- Environmental issues are coming to the forefront of media and politics in France.
  - Nicolas Hulot during the presidential campaign elections (2007)
  - « Grenelle of Environnement », an all out program of environmental public policies

Hypotheses

- There is a quasi-consensus about environmental values in France, and more fundamentally an environmentalist weltanschauung.

- Consequently, the old grand narrative embedded in the biblical story or in the capitalist or socialist ideologies (Lyotard) has dramatically faded in favour of a new ecological paradigm.

- In short, ecocentrism has already won the ideological battle in France.
Methodology

- Study based on the **European Value Survey (EVS)**
- This international survey was created in 1980.
- The questionnaire measures values as family, friends, jobs, politics, social capital, xenophobia,…

- The 2008 EVS included for the first time the ecological paradigm (**NEP**, Dunlap and alii).

- This paper is restricted to the case of France.
  - That makes 3071 face to face interviews.
I. The New Ecological Paradigm: the Five Stages of a Grand Narrative

- General idea:
  - Ancient biblical narrative => the subject of history is God or Providence
  - Renaissance grand narrative => the “hero” is the human being
  - Industrial grand narrative
    - …capitalist story => the captain of industry (Saint-Simon)
    - …socialist story => the proletariat (Marx)
  - And who is the subject of history for the post-industrial grand narrative?

- …Dunlap & alii suggest that it is nature.
  - There was a drastic ideological shift in the seventies:
  - Nature is no more an instrumental value in the grand narrative, but becomes an ultimate central value.
  - Transition from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism.

- Indicators of EVS to measure the importance of this grand narrative are drawn from the NEP of Dunlap & alii (2000).
The Contents of the New Ecological Paradigm (NEP)  
(Dunlap, Van Liere, Mertig & Jones, 2000)

- It includes five dimensions:
  1. The awareness of the fragility of nature’s balance;
  2. The knowledge of the limits to growth;
  3. The rejection of “exemptionalism”;
  4. The refusal of anthropocentrism;
  5. The belief in a possible major ecological crisis.

- These dimensions form five stages of the ecological grand narrative.
- There were 6 questions in the 2008 EVS reserved to measure the NEP.
1st stage (I): The Awareness of the Fragility of Nature’s Balance

"When humans interfere with nature it often produces disastrous consequences"

- 95% of French people agree => strong consensus on this idea.
1st stage (II): The Awareness of the Fragility of Nature’s Balance

"The balance of nature is strong enough to cope with the impacts of modern industrial nations"

- 81% disagree with this statement => another evidence of quasi-consensus
- …contrary to the traditional anthropocentric paradigm which considers nature as an indestructible and inexhaustible resource.
2nd stage: the Knowledge of the Limits of Growth

"We are approaching the limit of the number of people the earth can support"

- Only 46% of French people agree
- But this indicator is not relevant in France,
  - ...because of the historical obsessive fear of depopulation in this country, and the Malthusian connotation of this sentence.
3rd stage: the Human “Exemptionalism” (humans are not submitted to natural laws as animals)

- 48% of French people agree with this statement: they are still inside anthropocentric allegiance on this dimension of the grand narrative.
- This high rate is probably due to a Saint-Simonian and communist reminiscences and the resistance of the technical ideology, the “engineer culture”.

This dimension of NEP refers to the biblical grand narrative.

- 75% of French people disagree.

- This have a strong sociological signification:
  - Ecocentrism goes hand to hand with secularisation,
  - …and the fading of the structured religious discourse.

“Humans were meant to rule over the rest of nature”
5th stage: The Belief in a Possible Major Ecological Crisis

- The end of the postmodern ecological story is tragic: an environmental disaster!
- 87% of French people think it will likely happen. That is a quasi-consensus.
II. An environmentalist soft consensus?

- It is possible to synthesize the results of the 5 previous questions (6 except that about overpopulation).

- We have constructed a cumulative index of ecocentrism/anthropocentrism with 14 degrees.
80% of French people are above the average, on the side of ecocentrism => quasi-consensus?
… Rather a soft consensus

- A significant part of French population keep its ancient conceptions of the world.

- Moreover, most people do not adhere to the entire ecological grand narrative, but only to some statements among the 5 dimensions of NEP.

- This implies two consequences:
  - The scale of Dunlap & alii is not homogeneous.
  - Ecological narrative is not strongly structured as religious or industrial narratives were in the modern times.
  - There are many contradictions inside this narrative for a same person, => cognitive dissonance.
Last, but not the least, there is a gap between ecological ideas and actions…

- 47% of French people would refuse to give money for the protection of the environment.

"I would give part of my income if I were certain that the money would be used to prevent environmental pollution"
This means that the NEP does not overcome the economic necessity, and remains a poor motivation to act.

So it is a soft consensus in a time of ideology of low intensity.
Conclusion

What is the social meaning of the soft consensus on NEP?

- There was a radical shift of fundamental values since the sixties in France: ecological paradigm in place of religious, humanistic, Saint-simonian, Marxist grand narrative,…
  - …linked to the “End of ideologies”, the secularization,…

- And this was a silent revolution: no strikes, no street fights, no political debate… Why?

- …Maybe it is because, globally, values has lost their importance, and none of these really matters any longer in the post-modern world.

- “Brave new world” is a pragmatic world. The only things that matter are practical consequences, and on this point, the French society is far from consensus!
Thank you for your attention

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