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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”.

4th stage: Ecocentrism

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"
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

To learn more about stuff like that:

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