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## Encouraging behavioural change

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Encouraging change, whether it be in a way of life or in behaviour, is nothing new. One might even argue that the advent of the consumer society, the consequences of which today are the destruction of resources and common goods, rests entirely on the possibility of encouraging consumers to adopt the expected behaviour, i.e. *to desire* the merchandise, both in itself (technical object) and for itself (what another does not have). We might equally state that this enterprise, combining mass production, advertising, the promotion of certain individualist values, resting on a cornucopian conception of the world—that is to say an optimistic vision of the latter offering unlimited resources in order to satisfy equally unlimited needs—has, to a large extent, succeeded... to the detriment of the sustainability of the said resources and the economic system that gave rise to it.

There is then a great temptation to turn to social even behavioural psychology in order to build an empirical and simplistic approach to the problem, which most often takes the form of delivering communication messages of a more or less educational and sometimes even childish nature to set citizens on the path to 'best practices'. But this behaviourist and mechanistic—and therefore reductionist—approach has its limits, as sociology has been able to measure in the field of risk management, for example. If, in the majority of cases, these incentive policies do not work at all or to only a limited degree, it is not so much because the populations concerned haven't understood the challenges and *cannot* change but that they *do not want to*. Numerous examples make this clear. They include the difficulty of fighting AIDS in Africa in the face of deeply rooted cultural practices or policies for the prevention of industrial risks at work, from the farmer who refuses to wear protective clothing when spraying pesticides in order to save face in front of his neighbours to the worker who handles dangerous products without gloves in the belief that the skin offers sufficient protection (he will wear gloves once it is damaged). The externalization of many determinisms underlying actions such as the nature of social relations and institutions that transcend the individual, challenges of a symbolic nature or even the existence of social constructs (such as that of productivism) in most cases overwhelm sector policies that aim to produce changes in behaviour, such as the action of using fewer resources (water, energy). Especially in the case of sustainable development, changing practices means that one must not simply question oneself on what is at stake in terms of benefits to be gained but also about what an individual or group of individuals is ready to renounce, or not! This question only

makes sense if it is addressed in a *story* (and elements of this story that could positively or negatively influence the possibility of a given population choosing the change or otherwise) and integrated into its collective dimension (taking into account the forms and social stratifications, the interactions between individuals and groups of individuals...).

The idea of producing changes in behaviour and therefore the effects on the environment through consumption and/or the market, poses the same problem. As Michèle Dobré, a sociologist who studies ways of life, has identified, there are at least three types of environmental mismatches when it comes to consumption. Firstly, products said to be 'environmentally sustainable' are either not available or only available to a limited degree in a market that continues to feature planned obsolescence and waste (this was the case with solar panels in the 80s and 90s) or they are not competitive economically (the products or organic farming); secondly, there are significant personal contradictions associated with a consumerist hedonism, itself linked to income, that drives us to consume well beyond our vital needs and, above all, the environmental balance (if humanity lived as an American then eight Earths would be needed to satisfy its needs and four if it lived as a European); finally, a third type of constraint and one that is more difficult to overcome is the *interdependence of practices*, which in turn leads on to the social, to the being-whole, where complex mechanisms are at play and where systemic factors come together and mutually reinforce each other. As a result, the unconsidered neglect by public policies of conditions and ways of living collides with what, as the following examples show, appears—perhaps wrongly—to be a passive resistance to change.

### **Why change? The example of restoring living conditions after Chernobyl.**

If Chernobyl is seen as providing a foretaste of the catastrophic situation of tomorrow resulting from the creation of a lasting and irreversible state of environmental crisis, then lessons need to be learned (*The Silence of Chernobyl*). Following the accident on 26<sup>th</sup> April 1986, a policy of large-scale rehousing was ordered by the authorities in order to protect the worst affected population and then later, during the 90s, numerous 'pilot' programmes were launched in order to encourage the inhabitants of the contaminated zones to change their eating habits. Neither the one nor the other led to the expected results and all these measures came, more or less violently, up against a resistance to change to which we will give a heuristic value. In short, a high proportion of the inhabitants of the contaminated zones chose to remain living in their home neighbourhoods, preserving their habits to a greater or lesser degree, and, if possible, their ways of life, whilst a portion of those who left have returned to live where they lived before the accident (as at Fukushima today). Furthermore, the health education policies encouraging the inhabitants to change their food habits came up against the same resistance. What have both the one and the other forgotten? Precisely the fact that the question of rehousing is not just a spatial question (simply moving the population) but of territorial roots

ramifying into every dimension of existence. So much so that for the inhabitants of Chernobyl the problem was not the contamination but the rehousing itself. In the same way, the pilot 'educational' programmes encouraging changes in behaviour overlooked the fact that in a subsistence economy food is linked to traditional practices (fishing, hunting, foraging, garden cultivation), which form the group culture in the ethnological sense. Ultimately, what Chernobyl teaches us is that, besides the confidence placed in the institution promoting the change, one cannot contemplate asking a population to *give up* its habits and practices without putting forward an acceptable substitute. In this case, the post-accident management policy restricted itself to producing a set of negative proscriptions holding out no prospect of a better everyday life. The choice was quickly made by the inhabitants, who maintained their way of life... at the price of denying the health threats. These questions will arise again on a large scale given the prospect of the displacement of populations linked to climate change. The first projections were made by the Pentagon back in the early 90s and there is good reason to think that the question of 'climate refugees' will be one of the major geopolitical questions of the century to come.

### **Can fear serve as an engine for social change?**

The belief that the environment question requires a rethink of territorial development policies is shared by numerous researchers, analysts and development agencies around the world. Nevertheless, one might take the view that for the moment the extensive changes required in order to maintain human life on earth have yet to feed into major public and private sector development policies, as well as into the ways of life in the richest countries. It must be said that despite the catastrophism of our time—we cannot say that we don't *know* when the mass of indicators (and warnings) circulating around us is such that they form a sort of *ambient environment*—we encounter two major difficulties when it comes to the possibility of us actually grasping the situation and transforming it into a collective effort for social structure. The first is tied up with the fact that many of the dangers (and/or the potential risks) in the form, of pollution, the degradation of nature, the exhaustion of energy resources and other raw materials, as well as all the substances that have an unseen effect on human health and on the balance of ecosystems by threatening biodiversity (endocrine disruptors), are not perceptible and operate at 'low volume'. These weak signals, which, Günther Anders terms *infraliminary*, escape our senses and so limit our ability to react, to make rational choices enlightened by experience. When the individual or collective ill emerges it is already too late. If one adds to this that certain consequences, such as the expansion of deserts or the rise in temperature at the poles, are geographically distant, or delayed in time, such as the end of 'peak oil', after which oil production will decline, and, finally, are indeterminate, such as the systemic effects of human activity on living organisms and biodiversity, it is no longer possible to believe that a change in behaviour could be solely based on the empirical fact of the existence of contradictions that would lead to an immediate awareness, which would result, in its turn, in action. The *infraliminary nature* of environmental problems, which constitutes the most powerful engine for the denial of reality, forces us to question the hope expressed by Hans Jonas about

the role of fear in the foundation of an ethic for techno-scientific societies—a fear that would become a ‘good counsellor’. How can one have a fear of what one cannot sense, of something that one knows almost nothing about?

The question becomes still more pertinent, and our hopes take flight, when considers, again with G. Anders, that the environmental phenomena triggered by man—and above all by modern western man—also evade our awareness because of their *supraliminary* character, that is to say by the fact that they are ‘too large’. Climate change belongs to this kind of event, like the threat of total nuclear war and the emerging threat of mass extinction, in that they literally exceed the capacity of our imagination through the extent and time scale of their consequences. “*We are in the process of bringing the interlude of stable climate that we have known since the end of the last glaciation, over 10,000 years ago, to a close without knowing if it will ever return*” argue Dominique Bourg and Kerry Witheside, before adding that “*the losses of biodiversity that we are causing will take millions of years to make good*”. It is therefore the *hubris*, the excessiveness of the processes that we have triggered—rather than the risks that we would have produced and that we would be called on to master—that impairs our ability to understand (*verstehen*) what we do (*herstellen*) and consequently awareness of the moral evil to be found in our most ordinary daily activities (G. Anders, *The Obsolescence of Humankind*).

### **Catastrophism or democratic renewal?**

Two authors have attempted to answer the question of ‘what to do’, once we have faced up to our difficulty in envisaging the worst. For the philosopher Dominique Bourg, re-establishing our responsibility—that is to say having one day or another to *render accounts* to future generations—involves a renewal of democratic institutions. Our wait and see attitude in the face of catastrophe is then seen as being linked to the fact that our democratic institutions are not suited to the nature of contemporary environment problems. According to him, it is only by regaining our sense of the common good that we will be able to hope for a complete change in politics, in the sense of the government of individual behaviours, by enlarging the existing representative process so as to redefine the rights and duties of each person (with regards to future generations, for example), from that of the national level to that of world governance. For his part, the philosopher Jean-Pierre Dupuy (*For an enlightened catastrophism*) believes that we can no longer content ourselves with envisaging the worst as a ‘simple possibility’ if we are effectively to prevent it. The idea of ‘risk’ as possibility and its corollary, ‘precaution’ are no longer sufficient in a situation where we are continuing to decide for the present in the face of uncertainty over future consequences. We need to adopt a new temporal perspective in order to envisage the apocalyptic destiny of humanity, that is to say the catastrophe of our self-destruction, as a certainty. By drawing on the example of nuclear deterrence, Jean-Pierre Dupuy proposes a fundamental consideration of the change in attitude towards the future that we would need to adopt if we do not want to be swallowed up by the real catastrophe. *Enlightened*

*catastrophism*, a proposition for a new metaphysics for our time, aims to remove our blindness towards the possibility of the catastrophe occurring by depicting it as certain ... in order the better to avoid it. Ultimately, we might consider whether the conditions required for a complete change of direction in policies and individual practices might be met that if the philosophical proposition of J.-P. Dupuy found expression in the political one of D. Bourg.

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