momentum institut
l'anthropocène et ses issues

The Politics of Catastrophe

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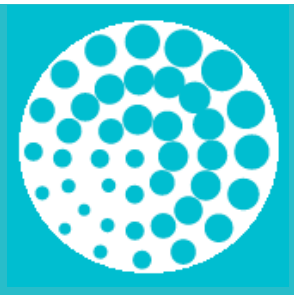

Translated by Alexandre Edwardes

During the 2000's decade, two social movements, the degrowth movement in France and Transition Towns in the United- Kingdom, have contributed, both in parallel, to a renewal of the green political landscape. The catastrophist dimension of these two movements, understood as a form of political thought based on the anticipation of major ecological shifts (peak oil, climate change, ecosystems collapse, etc.) that would put an end to the modern version of the democratic project, gives rise to experimental deliberative practices that put into question the hypothesis of continuity that generally pervades theories of democracy.

Since the 1990s, several political science research projects have studied the institutionalization of ecologist movements, mainly by analysing the evolution of green parties and environmental NGOs. By institutionalization, we generally imply the increase in human and financial means, the professionalization and the building of hierarchies within organizations, their integration within decision-making processes and their evolution towards more consulting and lobbying activities, etc.[1] This process of institutionalization is often accompanied by an analysis underlining the slow but certain integration of ecological issues within modern societies[2].

However during the years 2000, several new phenomena invited us to reconsider this process of institutionalization. Firstly, there was a growing interdisciplinary reflection on the risks of *catastrophic* ecological disruptions – not in the sense of a total ecological apocalypse, but in the sense of a global irreversible shift from one state of the world to another: these are the scientific scenarios of runaway climate change, energy depletion, ecosystem collapse, etc. Secondly, there was the simultaneous emergence of two ecologist movements, whose political engagements were founded upon their conviction of a possibly imminent ecological discontinuity: these were the "degrowth" movement initiated in France around 2002 and the *Transition Tow*n movement seen in the UK around 2005, that were both strongly preoccupied by the perspective of peaking resources. Finally and thirdly, there has been the development of "*green political theory*" within Anglophone political sciences that has started an epistemological reflection on the vulnerability of modern political systems to ecological breakdown.

The PhD thesis *Activism in the shadow of catastrophes*, aimed to put these three phenomena in relation with each other, in order to demonstrate that the notion of catastrophism was not only an adequate key to understanding certain contemporary environmental movements, but also an interesting tool to think about the precarious material conditions of modern political systems[3]. Without going over the whole of the concept, this paper wishes to return over a few elements that explain why the use of catastrophism can reveal to be helpful in understanding the evolution of certain recent ideas and practices in environmental politics.

Degrowth, transition and the politicization of peak oil

The degrowth movement emerged in France around 2002, whilst the Transition Towns movement developed in the UK around 2005. They were initiated independently from one another, and yet they have both developed strongly comparable political thoughts. They are both based on the conviction that peak oil will soon put an end to global economic growth, thus precipitating modern societies into an era of fossil fuel depletion.

To explain the almost simultaneous emergence of two similar movements, political sociology puts forward the notion of *political opportunity structures*. It essentially aims to explain what contextual evolution allows for the thriving of certain movements or new political ideas. In the case of degrowth and transition movements, many factors seem to have been in play: in 2001, the election of George W. Bush announced the withdrawal of the United States from the Kyoto Protocol, considerably reducing its chances of success at the moment when a new IPCC report confirmed the amplitude of the problem; in 2002, the Earth Summit of Johannesburg is perceived by ecologists as a failure as they believed that sustainable development had been "abducted" by multinationals. This global context can help explain why certain environmental activists were then ready to separate themselves from sustainable development, in order to get nearer to more radical ideas and practices that became known as degrowth and transition.

But above all, it's the establishment of the ASPO in 2000 (Association for the Study of Peak Oil and Gas) that was the decisive event in the success of these emerging movements. Over the years, ASPO produced and diffused technical data warning of the imminent peak in global conventional oil production. This technical data was used almost immediately, from the very first writings about degrowth in France (in the "Casseurs de Pub" revue for example) and by the transition movement in the UK. Hence, it's through the activist spheres of both degrowth and transition that the *politicization* of peak oil took place. In

1 Niel Carter, *The Politics of the Environment: Ideas, Activism, Policy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 135-141.

2 Michael Bess, *La France vert clair : Ecologie et modernité technologique 1960-2000*, Seyssel, Champ Vallon, 2011.

3 Luc Semal, *Militer à l'ombre des catastrophes. Contributions à une théorie politique environnementale au prisme des mobilisations de la décroissance et de la transition* (*Activism in the shadow of catastrophes: a contribution for a green political theory through the cases of degrowth and transition movements*), Thèse de doctorat en Science politique, Université Lille II, 2012.

other words, peak oil was rephrased from a purely technical issue to a suitably political one. This politicization also operated through conferences given by author-speakers, now specialists on the topic such as Yves Cochet, Colin Campbell, Richard Heinberg, Rob Hopkins, etc. It embodies the regained interest from a section of environmental movements for the limits to growth issue, here perceived as primarily induced by energetic constraints.

Ecologist ideology reconnecting with the idea of limits

According to the British political scientist Andrew Dobson, ecologism deserves to be considered as an ideology in itself (and not a simple ecological offshoot of socialism, conservatism, etc.[4]) He identifies three distinct characteristics of ecologism that are not found in any other modern ideology. The first is the conviction that there are *limits to growth,* as there cannot be infinite expansion within a finite world. The second is an *ecocentric* vision of the world, whereby natural entities are recognized as having an intrinsic value and cannot be reduced to simple resources for human disposal. The third is a *decentralized* vision, namely a bioregional vision of the world, in which the drastic reduction of material and energy flows is required as much for democratic as for material reasons.

However, according to Dobson the 1990s and the early 2000s have seen a form of *mainstreaming of ecologism* in parallel to the institutionalization process referred to previously. This mainstreaming is characterized by the euphemizing and relativizing of the three points that rendered ecologism an ideology of its own within the intellectual landscape of modern politics: ecologist discourses have thus distanced themselves from the limits to growth argument, to the benefit of a green growth rhetoric; they have privileged the deployment of instrumentalist arguments for environmental conservation with for example, the notion of "ecosystem services"; they have better accepted the idea that nation states are the decisive actors in making modern societies more ecological, mainly through taxation and regulation measures.

The thriving of degrowth and transition movements introduces some inconsistency in the story of ecologist mainstreaming, because by starting from the peak oil argument, they clearly reconnect themselves with at least two original characteristics of this ideology: that material limits to growth exist, the first of which is peak oil; that substantial relocations will take place because of the higher prices of fossil fuels. As such, we can consider the thriving of degrowth and transition movements like a second wave of ecologism, one that is reconnected to its original preoccupations. However, if the politicization of peak oil has driven ecologism to reconnect with certain of its historical characteristics, it also modifies the ways of conceiving the role played by global catastrophes in the transition towards more ecological societies.

From 1970s survivalism to the catastrophism of the years 2000

A political ideology is generally characterized by at least three factors: firstly a critical outlook on the current state of the world, followed by an ideal for a desirable society and finally a political vision for the transition from the current state to the desirable state. Environmental thought has inspired an abundant set of literature dedicated to the first two points, by on the one hand formulating a critique of modern overconsumption, and on the other a utopic vision of what an ecological society would look like, using less energy and matter. However, Andrew Dobson emitted a hypothesis in which environmental movements have been far less preoccupied by the third point, assuming that the scale of the threat – a kind of apocalypse – would be enough to trigger awareness throughout society.

This argument of "awareness raising" emerged during the 1970s environmental movement that John Dryzek qualified as "survivalist". It was joined by a number of emblematic authors who already considered the environmental crisis as a threat to the survival of humanity: Garrett Hardin, Paul Ehrlich, Dennis and Donella Meadows, etc.[5] According to Dryzek, this environmental survivalism that took place in the 1970s played a major role in the intellectual development of environmental politics. Indeed, it can be argued that the apocalyptic vision of environmentalism stems from the survivalist movement. The survivalist argument consisted in warning against the *long-term* threat of an ecological apocalypse, which must be avoided at all costs. In this scheme, enlightened elites played a major role as scientists were generally supposed to inform political decision makers whilst inviting them to consider long-term, general interest (and not the immediate interests of present generations). Indeed today, politics still handle global warming in such a way as in the name of future generations, climatologists are supposed to convince decision makers to adopt the necessary measures that could prevent the most dramatic disturbances caused by long term climate change. In this case, the coming catastrophe acts as a moral imperative that *should* force the greening of societies.

But over the years 2000, the politicization of peak oil came and disturbed this long-term rhetoric by introducing a new hypothesis to environmental thought: the *imminent* disruption in the material conditions for economic growth and material abundance. In the case of both degrowth and transition movements, the incitation to reduce flows of matter and energy should not only stem from global warming but also from peak oil, whose material constraints *will coerce* us into doing so. Thus, environmental thought is introduced to the idea of a *catastrophic shift that is already in motion*, irreversibly precipitating us from a world of growth to a world of degrowth. This political notion of global material disruption is not an idea stemming from survivalism, as the survival of humanity is not exactly put into question. On the other hand, it is clearly a form of catastrophist political thought, in the sense that it proposes to return the environmental project to a context where the world is involuntarily shifting into an era of resource depletion.

Defined in this way, catastrophism cannot be reduced to some sort of pathological fascination for catastrophe. Quite the contrary, it represents an interesting entry point for thinking about the vulnerability of modern societies to major environmental disruptions, being energetic, climatic, eco-systemic or otherwise. The catastrophe in question cannot be given a fatal date and even less a prophesied one: it rather acts as a *process* that can last for years, if not decades, with the interactions of many phenomena that could each embody their own

4 Andrew Dobson, *Green Political Thought*, London, Routledge, 2007.

5 John Dryzek, *The Politics of the Earth: Environmental Discources*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.

disruption thresholds – global warming, biodiversity loss, deforestation, resource depletion, nuclear proliferation, soil degradation, etc. Catastrophist political thought is based on the hypothesis that the accumulation of these material *tipping points* will necessarily trigger economic and social tipping points, that will in turn materially hamper the continuity of our current political systems that are founded on the illusions of growth and infinite development.

Since the survivalism of the 1970s, the dominant hypothesis seems to have been that catastrophist thought was radically incompatible with democratic principles. Indeed it was thought that the fear of catastrophe could justify all sorts of violations to the guarantee of the rule of law and replacing it with a permanent state of emergency. And yet, the observation of existing catastrophist movements have, to the contrary, revealed a constant search to reconcile catastrophism and democracy, namely through local experiments of deliberative democracy – the most emblematic example being the collective writing of a local plan for energetic descent, in the small British town of Totnes[6]. This experiment has shown in rather counter-intuitive ways, that a catastrophist approach to energy issues can actually strengthen public participation in the formulation of a local post-growth project to implement at the time of peak oil. By acting upon the finite character of available resources, it has become possible to collectively question the legitimacy of their various uses and to think about their redistribution in a perspective of local resilience. Catastrophism does not exclude democracy, but proposes to re-think about a democratic project decoupled from material and energetic abundance.

Thus, as the perspective to institutionally manage the most severe tendencies of the global ecological crisis dissipates (global warming, dependence on fossil fuels, biodiversity loss, etc.), catastrophism has become a decisive factor of understanding in the world of political thought. It allows putting a name on the recent evolution of environmental political ideas and practices that are trying to adapt their democratic projects to the perspective of inevitable resource depletion. But it can also be a key concept in studying the impacts that major environmental disruptions would have on our contemporary political order: as such, it represents a powerful theoretical leverage to interrogate the vulnerable material conditions of the present democratic project, that is founded on the idea of abundance and perpetual growth. An interesting research project for green political theory in the years to come, would be to identify the conditions by which modern democratic theory could be decoupled from these ideas of abundance.

6 Luc Semal, "Politiques locales de décroissance", in Agnès Sinaï (dir.), *Penser la décroissance. Politiques de l'Anthropocène*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2013.

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Change of Era

The Momentum Institute met for the first time on the 10th of March 2011, the day before an earthquake struck Japan and unleashed the nuclear catastrophe we know as Fukushima.

The starting point of the Momentum Institute is based on the awareness that today we are living at the end of the period marked by the greatest material wealth human history has ever known – a wealth that is founded on cheap, concentrated, temporary energy sources that made everything else possible. Just as the most important sources of energy for this material wealth are entering irreversible and inevitable decline, we are embarking on a period of generalised economic contraction.

The Momentum Institute is dedicated to responding to the challenges of our era: how can we organise the transition to a post-growth, post-fossil fuel, climate-altered world? How can we understand and act on the issues of the Anthropocene? What are the emergency exits? What will resilient societies look like in the time of the triple crisis: energetic, economic, and ecological?

The post petrol, post-nuclear, post-coal transition means completely redesigning and rethinking the infrastructures of society and alongside this, working to achieve a new social imaginary by envisaging a near future without petrol and without non-renewable energy. The objective of our approach is to establish a community of contributors made up of citizens engaged in the major areas of transition.

The contributors to the Momentum Institute intervene in their area of expertise, in relation with the thinking on transition. They produce diagnostics, analyses, scenarios, and original proposals regarding strategies of transition and resilience. The Momentum Institute is there to encourage them and to make them known, to individuals, to businesses, to local and national governments. We are also concerned with providing visibility to emerging solutions that are already put into practice by towns in transition, such as energy cooperatives, AMAPs (organic local produce cooperatives), non-profit businesses, social employment, and eco-districts.

If we manage to disseminate them, the initiatives and contributions for imagining and creating the post-petrol world will spread – both locally and globally. They will come to represent the status quo and the efforts that we go to today will not be unusual tomorrow. In the meantime, we have a chance, and it is perhaps our last chance, to step back from the precipice. A challenge, a singular moment, a window of opportunity: Momentum.