Listening to ordinary people

The process of civilisation that is at work leads to a hypercomplex society and new forms of governance

This article sets out the principal lines of the book by Alain de Vulpian in which he examines humanity's on-going process of civilisation[1].

Since the end of the 40s, a considerable volume of ethnological field research has been developed in the democracies of Europe and in North America. It focuses on changes in the ways people interact with the social and economic systems within which they live their everyday life. One of the fathers of this line of research is the American social scientist David Riesman[2]. Throughout my professional life, over more than fifty years, I have participated in the development of these researches. Now freed from managerial responsibility for my team, I have had time to re-analyse this mountain of data and re-examine the lines of force of the anthropo-sociological transformation that we are now living through.
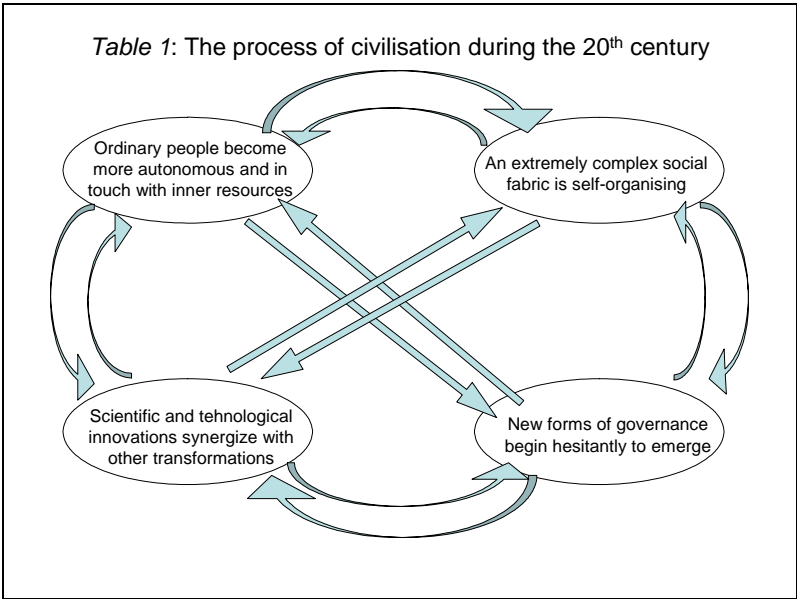
I have reached the conviction that we are in the epicentre of a developmental process of civilisation that is carrying us elsewhere, transforming western culture in depth and possibly preparing the way for a worldwide civilisation. What do I mean by a developmental process of civilisation? Norbert Elias, the great German sociologist, gave body to this concept[3] of a "chain reaction of chain reactions" that involves power holders, institutions, organisations, communications, ordinary people, manners, customs, the social fabric, technologies that are emerging or becoming established, and so on. It transforms a civilisation and gives life to a new society. No-one has designed, desired or piloted this chain reaction of chain reactions. It has occurred spontaneously, it is continuing and is now spreading to other regions of the planet.

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1 Alain de Vulpian, *A l'écoute des gens ordinaires. Comment ils transforment le monde*. Paris Dunod 2003

[2] David Riesman, *The lonely Crowd, a study in the changing American character,* New Haven, Yale University Press, 1950 and *Faces in the Crowd, individual studies in character and politics*, New Haven, Yale University Press. 1952

[3] Norbert Elias. *Über den prozess der zivilisation*, 1939.

This process is extremely complex. It affects all levels of our social life, from the extreme micro (for example the lives of couples and families, networks of friends) to the macro and the mega (for example, the birth of new organisations, the lives of companies and states, or worldwide regulatory bodies). Simplifying things to the utmost, one could say that an explosion of personal autonomy is feeding into and enriching the social fabric, producing extreme levels of complex interaction through which several technical and technological progresses are selected; and these selections themselves reinforce the levels of individual autonomy and social complexity. These interdependences are bringing to life a new form of society which selects and is selected by new forms of governance (see table 1).

Table 1: The process of civilisation during the 20th century

Ordinary people become more autonomous and in touch with inner resources

An extremely complex social fabric is self-organising

Scientific and tehnological innovations synergize with other transformations

New forms of governance begin hesitantly to emerge

But we shall see that governance is having difficulty in keeping up with the levels of complexity of today's socio-technological fabric. This results in distorsions, turbulences, blockages and loss of vitality.

Ordinary people are changing profoundly

Year after year, millions and then tens and hundreds of millions of people "modernise" themselves. This transformation starts with the struggle to emancipate oneself, from enforced patterns of activity and existence, from habits, traditions, conventions, authorities, opening out rapidly into a learning process that envelopes the self and the life it experiences. This double movement makes people increasingly independent and autonomous, far more capable than their predecessors of piloting their own lives in their own ways. This change is very profound, affecting far more than values and customs. It concerns the people themselves, the economy of the individual, and quite probably the organization and the mode of functioning of their brains.

1. The movement towards emancipation

This movement has far distant roots, and has seen a variety of incarnations at different epochs and in different milieus.

Since the Renaissance and later the Reform, and most evidently since the Enlightenment and the American and French revolutions, a powerful dynamic has been at work. In the West Mankind began specifically to seek personal emancipation and individual happiness. Among the inhabitants of Europe, people undertook to free themselves from habits, traditions, authorities and taboos. They affirmed their right to exercise the rationality of their own minds, independently from reigning dogmas.

One aspect of this phenomenon has been a massive dechristianisation. This began in the course the 18th century in certain regions of France, Italy and Spain, spreading across the continent in successive waves, and affecting churches of protestant persuasion as much as the catholic church. The phenomenon incorporated the disintegration of the notion of sin, sexual liberation and a spectacular drop in the birth-rate.

This combat for personal liberty is a struggle against the constraints imposed by society, but it is also a struggle with oneself insofar as these constraints have been interiorised. One seeks to disencumber oneself from adherence to the past, from the feelings of guilt and remorse. Interviews in the field during the 50s and 60s show that we manage well enough in this respect. A new type of freer and more flexible personality replaces an the earlier pattern.

For some, emancipation does not only mean liberating oneself from earlier social and moral constraints; it also means escaping from one's social condition. Beginning in the last decades of the 19th century, this motivation encouraged social change: it fed the collective struggle of the proletarian class, and then more and more clearly encouraged the personal engagement of workers in the race for modernity and consumption. During the first two-thirds of the 20th century, hundreds of millions of Europeans and North Americans were to change their daily habits to rise in the hierarchy of modernity and social standing.
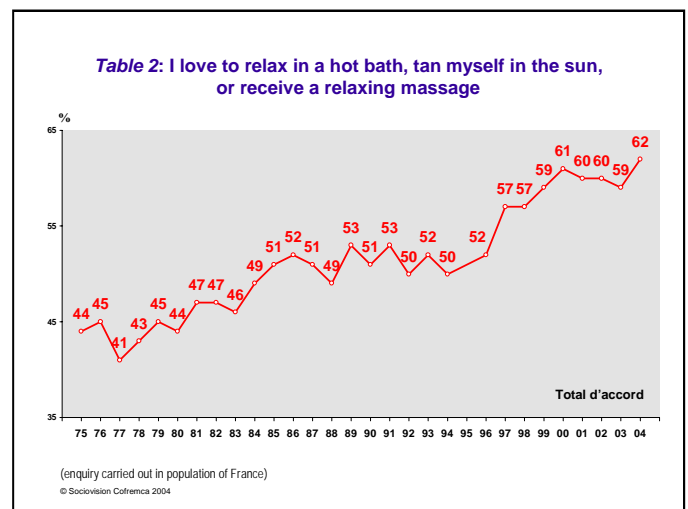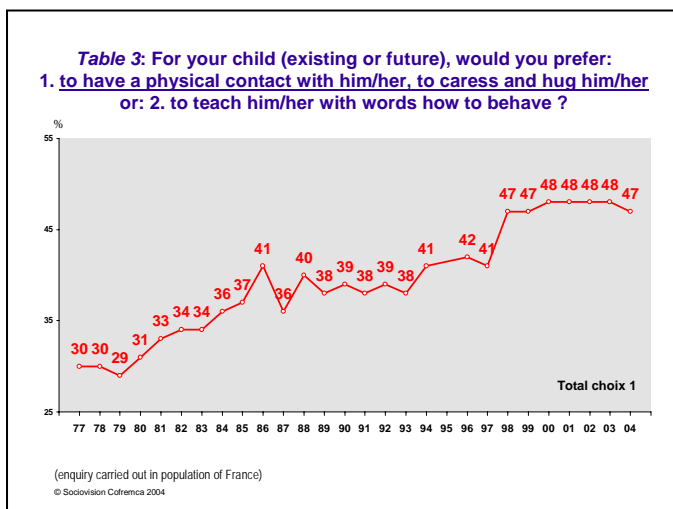
In the 60s and 70s we find the developmplicity. In the most extreme version of the underlying myth, which flourished most particularly in the USA,[4] the individual was convinced of the possession of a unique personality that had at all costs to be freed from its socially imposed shackles and affirmed in spite of all resistances.

2. Openness to one's sensations and emotions.

Western culture had turned attention away from sensations and emotions to concentrate on clarity of thought. In the education of its children it emphasised the visual at the expense of other senses that were often deprecated as close to animality and sources of sin. It wrote music. Western culture placed the accent on clarity of representation, on the intellectualised, the rational.

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[4] Daniel Yankelovich, *New Rules, Searching for Self-fulfilment in a World Turned Upside Down,* New York, Random House, 1981.

But by 1952 in Sweden, and by 1954 in France we were able to observe the first fissures appearing in this once useful but now repressive edifice. People – in particular young people who felt themselves to be "modern" – were discovering tactile, olfactory, proprioceptive and auditory sensations, and were living polysensual experiences with astonishment and pleasure. They perceived, more or less clearly, that certain of their emotions had their initial expression in sensations, before they were presented for communication in words and concepts, for example in hairs that stood up, a stomach that knotted, a face which blushed… They took pleasure in these experiences and began to seek them out and intensify them. And there we have one of the points of departure of an immense socio-cultural current, the polysensualism which since then has spread more and more widely through western populations. Table 2 shows the evolution of answers in the French population to one of the tests used to evaluate the incidence of polysensualism. Table 3 shows the existence of a positive feed-back that amplifies the development of this current: we can see that the education which parents give their children becomes increasingly polysensual and is likely to breed more polysensual young people. The media, which have picked up on this movement, assist in this exploration.

Table 3: For your child (existing or future), would you prefer:
1. to have a physical contact with him/her, to caress and hug him/her or: 2. to teach him/her with words how to behave ?

(enquiry carried out in population of France)
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Table 2: I love to relax in a hot bath, tan myself in the sun, or receive a relaxing massage

(enquiry carried out in population of France)
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In this way, ordinary people, in ever-increasing numbers, year after year, become more and more aware, with finer and finer perceptions, with fewer and fewer filters, of their sensations and their emotions. And they make discoveries. Here are some of the most frequent and most significant:

-   The crucial importance of affection and love. Nothing is more important for the majority of our contemporaries than the capacity to maintain the affections, loves and intimate relationships (parents, children, sexual partners, friends etc.) which warm the heart.

-   Micro-happinesses. From the 30s to the 60s everyone sought the one great love, the wonderful banquet, the Great Revolution… Today we feel more and more that this was indeed a great illusion and that it is the accumulation of micro-happinesses, physical and mental well-being, which is really what makes for happiness.

-   Semi-ecstatic experiences. Quite a large number of people have on one occasion or another experienced a communion with nature, the cosmos, an oceanic feeling of oneness, and fulfilment. They seek to repeat this kind of experience, to cultivate it. During the 90s and the first decade of the new millennium, the majority of Europeans live this as a natural phenomenon, something immanent, whereas many Americans see it as the presence of God.

- The Others as persons. Others appear more and more in the image of oneself, as creatures of flesh and blood, shot through with sensations and feelings. In contact with one's own inner self, one can more accurately feel that of others, one can more easily put oneself in their place, feel them as it were from the inside. From the moment that one perceives the other as a person - and not as a category or an abstraction - one feels one's own relationship with them and is ready to empathise.

- Vitality. During our research in the field, those people who had close or intense contact with their own sensations, emotions and impulses seemed to us to overflow with a calm vitality. They love to live, to feel the blood circulate in their arteries, "to feel they can hack it" as the popular phrase has it, that is to say to have the feeling that they can cope with any situation, they feel that they and their environment are fully interlocking. An increasing number of our contemporaries feel that they are full of life and feel comfortable in environments that are themselves full of life and working in an interlocking manner.

3. Wisely guiding one's life

Concentration on sensations and emotions during the 60s and 70s encouraged a lot of westerners to reject rationality. For example, during the 80s it became fashionable to try to reinforce the use of the right "creative, spatial" side of the brain at the expense of the "linear" left hemisphere. Fashions come and go; but a less visible and deeper change was happening. An increasing number of people had secondary or higher education. Faced with their sensations and emotions, many of them had to resolve new and complex problems that would be of vital importance for them. They were thus introduced to a sort of apprenticeship in living, which encouraged them to perfect their powers of self-observation and reasoning. The really new event is that they made increasing use of their improved levels of observation and reasoning, not to reflect on ideas, concepts, books and ideologies, but to reflect on their own concrete life experiences, on themselves and their lives.

During the 70s, 80s and 90s a very large number of Europeans and Americans worked on their disappointments. Why didn't I succeed in my aims? Why is my couple breaking down? Why would my children rather do anything except stay in the house? Why did this purchase or that change in lifestyle that was supposed to bring me happiness result in nothing but disappointment? Where did I go wrong in how I thought this or that friend would react? In this way they were trying to understand society and their own function in that society. They were able to see, for example, that copying people above them (in rank, riches or anything else) or obeying the injunctions of hierarchical figures is not necessarily the best thing to do; they started to question, and thus to weaken, their own tendency to obey.

Their discoveries led them to adjust their behaviour. They began to integrate reason and emotion. During our field researches people replied more and more often, "reason and emotion, body and soul, shouldn't be opposed, they're all a part of me". This road leads everyone, step by step, to become a little more understanding of his own situation, a little more capable of guiding his life so as to obtain a surplus of happiness, so as to maintain the affective relations they value, avoiding tensions, stress and conflicts…

Similarly, beginning in the 80s, the proportion increases of those who question the meaning of their lives. In their daily life, at work, in the family or at leisure, they get impressions of sense and meaninglessness, and think about it. Examining their life experience with a little perspective they wonder whether this job has any meaning? Or that way of taking a holiday? And those arguments with one's partner? They are trying to understand what is really important for me, for us, for humanity. In this manner they build up a personal morality which is not handed down from on high, but which is built up from the independent assessments made by each person as they reflect on their own experiences.

Today the dominant motivation, which has the wind behind it and is already generalised in many social milieus, is simply to shape one's life in one's own way. A life that is really suitable, that is to say, including the affections, micro-happinesses and feelings of well-being, the moments of fulfilment and the elements of meaning that are vital needs for the majority of people. Earlier motivations that once took priority, such as duty, the fatherland, religion, the revolution, the career, social standing, consumption, are absent or relegated to the back of the queue.

The way in which such people guide their lives is very particular. We were able to describe it for the first time in France in 1984, while we were exploring attitudes in course of development among young moderns. We gave it the name of "strategic opportunism", also known as "adaptive navigation" to our English and American colleagues. In the succeeding twenty years, this life strategy has become very widespread in our various populations. Steering of this kind does not determinedly pursue a previously fixed objective; it makes the most of opportunities as they occur, and re-evaluates their objective according to the resistances and difficulties encountered. It is more "muddling through" than a planned development. Everyone has their own ideas about the future, but each one discovers their path as they go forward. Our contemporaries sense arising opportunities and threats, and try to take advantage of the former while avoiding or transforming the latter. They feel neither subject to fate nor all-powerful. They cultivate their autonomy but do not consider themselves sovereign individuals, or actors external to their environment and acting on it to transform it; they see themselves rather as links in their environment, which transforms them and which they transform. Progressive exploration of their "right path" results just as much from their personal impulses as from the reactions of the environment.

For such explorers, the inclinations of the majority of those around them are more or less perceptible. They are better at perceiving or sensing the latencies and dynamics of the sociosystems in which they swim. They are better at feeling what they can do and what they should not do in order to approach what they consider to be desirable and possible. They are accustomed to the hypercomplexity of society (which we shall understand better in a few more pages). For them, steering their life is learned almost by osmosis, and without conscious application on their part; they learn from events that teach them how be part of a systemic rationality. In twenty years, many have made immense progress in this art of finely piloting the course of events, based on an intimate knowledge, an intuitive perception of the underlying processes.

Auto-organisation of a new social fabric

As they change, people feed the auto-organisation of a new social fabric which reinforces their transformation. We have thus passed in less than a half-century from a monolithic, hierarchical society of massive blocks to a society that is a complex of interweavings, a living, self-structuring entity. This opposition could be roughly sketched by saying that formerly people arrived in a pre-formed society which slotted them into place and shaped them, whereas today they arrive in a flexible and permissive society that they themselves contribute to shaping.

We can outline the principal aspects of this transformation.

1. Tip-toeing away…

People, while modernizing, find themselves ill at ease in a mass society of hierarchies and imposed restrictions. Starting in the middle of the 60s, people in the process of modernisation dropped out of pre-established society, sometimes with a great deal of sound and fury, like the youthful explosions of 1968, but more often discreetly tiptoeing away from it. And these discrete exits devitalised conventions, taboos, rites, rituals, authorities, formal families, classes, churches, parties and dogmas. Society became permissive rather than normative. It became increasingly easy not to respecter rules and to modify established structures.

At the beginning of the 70s, observers of socio-cultural change in Europe and North America who had formed the custom of meeting once a year, were seriously concerned to find out whether we were entering a phase of generalised anomie, a sort of non-society, or whether a new social fabric was in the process of emerging? It rapidly appeared that the second hypothesis was the right one.

2. Swarms of connections, avoidances and interdependences

Modernizing people were not fleeing society to seek solitude. They had a vital need for affection, relationships and participation. They continuously made, weakened or broke connections linking people, linking people and groups or linking groups of all shapes and sizes among themselves.

Hundreds of millions of connections and avoidances gave life to new social patterns that weave together into a fractal society. Fractal means that what exists on the smallest scale also exists in larger and mega scales. This society is extremely complex, with multiple forms of interaction. These forms include the biodegradable erotico-affective households, the little families united by love and affection, essential for daily happiness, that one hopes will endure but which reorganize when affection is lacking; the waves and halos of emotion that animate restricted groups or the entire planet; the networks of people who connect with others who connect with yet others, forming chains or nets of affection or shared interests, such as the *philea*, groups with which one feels positive resonances; movements, groups of people with whom one acts; isolates, the people with whom one takes up a defensive position, etc.

These widely different social formats nevertheless have several characteristics in common.

Links of all sizes. Emotional vibrations are among the principal architects in the construction of linkages. Emotional exchange encourages the development of very small links (my close friends and relatives) and also of very large ones (humankind, people in need…). A new flowering of very large links encourages the planetary spread of civil society.

Floppy links and fluctuations. These social formats do not need to have a juridical definition; they are living; they tend to be unstable; their frontiers and their intensity vary according to fluctuating emotions and interests; many of them are in a state of permanent re-organisation.

Interwoven links. Links of all kinds tend to become interwoven because of the diversity and criss-crossing of people's attachments and relationships. Effectively, everyone chooses their own friends, their own centres of interest and so forth. Individuals A and B may have a number of completely opposed attachments, but they may also have a number of other attachments that they share and which bring them together. This creates a structure, a bridge, and when such structures are multiplied, we find inclusions and interweavings that bring together groupings that could otherwise come into conflict. This process is today a dominant phenomenon, held in check locally through the constitution of isolates, closed communities or ghettos.

Functioning sociosystems. As we observe the lives of people and the ways in which their homes, their networks and *philea* operate, we come to understand better the living processes which are now making the society of people so complex. If people maintain connections between themselves, they adjust to each other. They also adjust to the groups with which they wish to keep contact, and groups adapt to newcomers if they do not reject them. Groups linked by bridges and communications channels either adapt to each other, or they cut the bridges. The result is a generalisation of interdependences ensuring that each of these groupings and the larger group of which they are part become(s) a system and form(s) a society that is fractally interwoven at all levels, echoing itself from the smallest to the largest scale. Not only are such groups self-structuring, they also have innate coherences, inertias, and dynamics, ensuring their own self-regulation through positive and negative feed-backs.

3. A single-story society

We are in the process of moving from a pyramidal, hierarchical society to a single-story society where heterarchical relationships dominate.

Some 40 or 50 years ago we were still living in a society in which hierarchical ranks still existed, and were for the most part plainly visible. It was a society in which the hierarchical tropism functioned fully: the majority of people automatically respected injunctions from those above them in the hierarchy, and modelled themselves on them. It was a society in which the majority of organisations and sociosystems were managed by command and control from the top.

Today people have become more autonomous and are better able to become the wise pilots of their own lives; as a result the tendency is to conform only if one feels like it. People take their models from anywhere, in particular from among those who resemble them (those they feel close to). But this does not mean that there is no authority anywhere. On the contrary, in certain specific situations, authority is still effective. Leaders appear in a context with which they find themselves in phase, and exercise a determining influence on others, steering them towards a particular outcome. But this leadership is not fixed; it circulates as circumstances change, one leader replacing another. In such a heterarchical society, what determines a leader is not so much institutional rank or status (varieties of social recognition or standing), but temperament, recognition by the others, farsightedness and finally his or her capacity to adapt to the characteristics of a situation. An effective leadership is in particular linked to an ability to sense and understand the latencies and natural dynamics of the surrounding sociosystem and to catalyse them positively.

What has happened to the family, the pivotal unit around which our society is still built, is a good illustration of this silent revolution. The family has undergone a prodigious transformation during the past 150 years.

In a society organised by traditions and economic situations with classes, circles, milieus and statuses, marriages were arranged by families or moral authorities. The family was headed by the father and was the main channel of transmission of norms of behaviour and patterns of thought to the children.

During the 30s, 40s and 50s, marriage for love acquired its generalised acceptance. Partners chose themselves more independently, but still committed themselves for life.

Today the majority of households are biodegradable erotico-affective centres. Their cement consists of love, erotism, affection and tenderness. They are for the majority the principal source and focus of happiness and emotional equilibrium. People hope they will prove durable and make great efforts to maintain them, but they do not endure unless tenderness remains alive within them. In the absence of this essential element, new households form. Such households are not so much transmitters of norms and patterns of thought as melting pots wherein the personalities of the parents and children are formed and transformed.

In western countries the proportion of those who think that the father of a family should be the boss in the home has been in steady decline over the past thirty years. In France, for example, 60% thought this in 1974 and 41% in 1984; only 29% thought this in 1999. Quite apart from opinions and values, this phenomenon affects the reality of families' functioning and behaviour. A study carried out by Sociovision Cofremca has shown that in France in 1995, hierarchic families only represented 15 to 20% of the total. Half of these were patriarchal, and half matriarchal. This evolution has continued to move in the same direction everywhere, but by 2000 the index of attachment to a hierarchical structure varied considerably from country to country: 10% of Swedes thought that the father of a family should be the boss, 20% of Germans, and around 30% of the British, French and Italians. These figures rise to 40% in Spain, 45% in the USA and 74% in Brazil.

If it becomes fully stabilised, this passage from hierarchy to heterarchy will mark a major anthropo-sociological turning point. A comparison of our habits with those of our nearest cousins, the monkeys, helps us see the significance of this change. Ethologists have shown us that there exist species of monkey which are fundamentally hierarchic: each animal has its eyes on those above it, the chiefs, copying them and seeking approval, and the males dominate the females. But there also exist species among which the group functions heterarchically [5]. The human species probably has the possibility of functioning in either of these ways in its genetic heritage. It seems that we are in the process of passing from the first to the second, unless we are in the act of inventing a new balance between the two.

4. A spontaneous society

To create for oneself a life which really is what one needs, that is to say which provides all the affections, the well-being, the fulfilment and the meaning that one seeks, people have to transform the society around them, and also transform themselves. They learn to know themselves and work on themselves and their motivations. At the same time they work on society, above all society close to them, with which they are in daily contact. Such people, not feeling themselves passively obedient to received convention, nor unthinkingly subject to authority, nor blindly obedient to regulations, nevertheless take these social waymarks into account. They regard them as having optional rather than absolute value, as constraints to be evaluated, to be by-passed or ignored if convenient, or as signposts that may help them steer their course, or even as handholds or supports that they can re-interpret in accordance with their sense of how to live life, and the sense they feel life has for them.

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[5] Michael R.A.Chance et al, *Social Fabrics of the Mind*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1988.

Society today is sufficiently soft and malleable to be able to accept some of their initiatives easily; such initiatives transform their surrounding social fabric, at least locally. But society as a whole is also sufficiently resistant to force these modern people to question their own attitudes, and transform themselves. They change, even as they change society. People and society are thus interdependent and mutually selective. This mutual selection and this reciprocal learning situation often results in lives that are on the whole satisfying, and that also contribute powerfully to orienting the evolution of society. The mechanism confers a particularly spontaneous character on present day society, as if society itself was choosing its course, far removed from the clear but rigid lines laid down by fixed authority, and free from the obligations of habit and custom.

The earlier social order, regulated by conventions, authorities, shared ideologies, formal organisations and segmentation into clearly defined masses of people, was structurally relatively simple. And the principle of simple classification worked efficiently; the social order was apparent and understood. But the society in which our respondents participate is infinitely more complex. It is a web of interdependences which are self-organising and self-regulating. The outcome is chains of chains of relationship, involving the actions, reactions and innovations of people, social systems and organisations. They may result either in stable situations that maintain their equilibrium for long periods, or in shaping trends that carry people, technology and society in a certain direction, or again in fluctuations which grow into bifurcations in the path of society's evolution.

5. A new socio-economy is born that is tending to penetrate the entire economic world

New types of organism are developing, with one foot in economic world and the other in societal one. Innovating firms, neo-enterprises, networks of actors, associations which, when they achieve global spread, become NGOs. People at the heart of these activities, baptised "entreprenauts" at Sociovision, are simultaneously entrepreneurs and skilful navigators in a web of multiple networks (the internet being one of their most useful tools).

Enquiries show that these entreprenauts and their organisations have numerous traits in common. Here are a few of them:

- Their primary motive is not to make money, but to procure a life that they enjoy and which gives them a sense of meaning. And if there's money in it as well, so much the better!

- The resulting organisms swim, fish-like, in a complex and self-regulating society through a sea of new information and communication technologies, on which they depend and whose development is encouraged by their presence.

- Because they do not fit into the categories used by organized economies and the finance industry, nor even into the arthritic institutions of representative democracy, these organisms are not whole-heartedly welcomed by existing socio-economic structures. Some of these new organisms die of "tissue rejection". Many of them, however, succeed in winning a place in the sun.

- In this socio-economy, durable vitality and success come from synergistic meetings and interdependences, from the capacity to participate in interacting networks. These networks may be inspired by geography (clusters) or result from contacts in the local/global telecommunications networks.

The great industrial and business enterprises and powerful bureaucracies are themselves invaded by networks of shared sympathies or interests that develop spontaneously in the crevices of their structures and organigrams. Other networks also develop spontaneously in the interfaces between businesses and their environments or their markets. Internal and external networks are sometimes in synergy with the development and vitality of the organism; for example, contributing to adjustment with the clientele, or opening the way to managerial innovation, or simply by attenuating staff frustrations. But sometimes there is total antipathy; the chains of chains of influence may contribute to a large proportion of the personnel dragging their feet, or preventing new organisational layouts from really taking root in the life of the enterprise; perhaps a societal crisis will be triggered that destroys the image of the organisation or prevents the sale of its products. We have reached the point at which major companies, champions in the economic and financial dimensions of life, can no longer neglect the societal dimensions of their strategies, for new societal dimensions are now interacting with them at every level.

6. A living society, and therefore subject to ailments

Like any living creature, our society, or some of its cells, may be well or ill, full of energy or dangerously anaemic. The social fabric may be caught on some snag, self-regulations may malfunction and allow pathological processes to become durably installed. Businesses, associations, parties, regions, nations, cultures are mortal. The current evolutionary process of civilisation may not lead to a viable social organism.

There are various forms of social pathology. For personality reasons; some people don't manage to fit into the sort of close affective environment they find essential for their own contentment and relatively harmonious social life. Death of close relatives and deteriorating circumstances leave elderly people completely isolated. Unwanted pregnancies ruin lives. Single mothers with very small incomes live in slavery. Unemployment from father to son, long-term unemployment among young people, lead to total social alienation. Ill-adapted educational experiences produce inflexible, poorly relating, or asocial personalities. In numerous countries, there is a growing proportion of people who feel that they have been rejected by the dominant form of society…

For example, work is a problem. What is one to do with one's life? Many make great efforts to find themselves jobs with which they interact harmoniously, that contribute to giving their life a meaning, or which at least don't interfere too much with their personal lives. Many are successful in this respect, sometimes through leaving a big company or public service. But for those who don't succeed in finding a job that suits them, life can become execrable and, ultimately, give rise to destructive or revolutionary attitudes. In various areas, our present society needs to reshape the way it offers employment and the kinds of employment it offers.

Another kind of example: intolerable geographical constraints can impose daily coexistence on populations that can't stand each other. Instead of developing understanding, they strengthen their sense of opposition. Clans, isolates, ghettos and hostile communities form, finishing by transforming modern, more or less pacific personalities into frustrated combatants.

In certain countries, the hyper-protection of the welfare state is making people incapable of taking responsibility for themselves.

People shocked by the state of the world or their personal situation have always fallen back on belief in saviour-gods. Today this tendency to seek help from the unknown when the known appears useless or even hostile is encouraging the resurgence of fundamentalist attitudes or charismatic sects (Evangelistic, Jewish, Islamist), a tendency that could induce a bifurcation in the current process of development.

However, the society that is now gestating seems to be developing its own immune and repair systems, through an auto-organisation initiated by the people of which it is composed. A large proportion of modern populations is animated by a visceral desire to care for people – or at least people they fell close to – and to repair the damage caused by pathologies in society. This new way of being a citizen opens into a bouquet of helping associations and networks. Care of couples: from the perceptive child who helps its parents recover their tenderness to the therapeutic interventions of professionals, not forgetting family planning. Computerised systems to help resist solitude or facilitate dating. Help for persons in difficulty: Alcoholics Anonymous, Weight Watchers, networks to help delinquents and ex-prisoners get back into society, assistance in resisting homophobia or racism, associations for the rights of the individual, for the protection of children, etc. Protection of nature. Socio-political think-tanks. And many others.

Nevertheless, numerous states and a great many big traditional businesses are insufficiently aware of the potentially therapeutic dimension of their activities and inadequately prepared for the learning process involved. The interface between any organisation and its environment is a fertile source of either positive or negative experiences, for both parties.

Technical progresses synergize with changes in people and the social fabric

Scientific and technical progress manifestly occupy an important place among the factors contributing to the orientation of the on-going processes in our civilisation.

In the current phase, over the past half-century, scientific and technical progress have played a particularly important role as they came into synergy with transformations of people and/or the social fabric, and/or systems of governance. They constitute what Sociovision calls **socio-technological attractors** because they act as a sort of air current, encouraging a host of innovations and sweeping them forward together.

These synergistic interdependences between personal and social changes and technical advances usually take the following form in western countries:
- transformation of people and/or the social fabric begins and gains ground,
- when it reaches a critical size, it attracts/stimulates/gathers in technological developments that feed its growth,
- positive feed back is established between the socio-human and technological factors, amplifying the phenomenon and confirming the orientation of a major trend; innovations are induced that may concern people's personalities, or their customs and habits, or the social fabric, or ways of doing things, or systems of governance or all of the above.

These attractors of innovations are numerous, but some have played **major roles** during the past fifty years, and have contributed forcefully to the orientation of the current developments. I will briefly outline four of them.

Synergy between sensations/emotions and progress in music-making techniques.

More direct contact by each person with their sensations and emotions and their increasingly deliberate culture (polysensualism) has opened the way to a growing demand for music, in particular among the young, and to very innovative forms of music and the multiplication of technical facilities for the production, reproduction and diffusion of music.

From the earliest disks (78, 45, 33 rpm) and HiFi, to transistors, electronic music, massive amplification (which saturates the auditory nerves, inducing muscular reactions and activating the solar plexus so that enormous crowds can be affected), and on to CDs, the Walkman, digital music swapping over the internet, and the iPod... Distribution of these advances in the production and availability of music reaches many populations whose sensations and emotions are thereby nourished. This attractor became powerfully installed during the 60s and today still continues to be the vector of innovations. First the younger generation, now an increasing proportion of the whole population live with music or other sounds constantly in their ears. Our civilisation is becoming less visual/intellectual and more musical/sensorial-emotional. Musical tribes have formed and reformed and continue to do so, contributing to the transformation of the social fabric.

Synergy between taking independence and progress in computerisation.

This attractor emerged and developed its full power during the 80s. At that time it was the requirements of increasingly autonomous employees and managers that imposed the passage to desktop computing, in spite of the preferences of Senior Managements, IT services and IBM. The next step was to be the home computer. Use of the desktop computer and its connection to databanks was to enable users to make increasing use of their own powers of choice and decision, furthering the growth of autonomy and opening the way to a society in which patterns of behaviour and the socio-systems resulting from increasingly personal and well-informed choices were preponderant. We have thus evolved towards a level-playing field society in which authorities are transient agreed place-holders, and in which self-organisation and self-regulation are progressively coming to dominate the scene.

Synergies between emotion activated by a distant person and progress in long distance communications.

The capacity of the moderns to empathise with what happens to other people whom they do not know, even if they live on the other side of the world, hold a different religion or are of another colour, has come to synergise with the progress in intercontinental transport, television and telecommunications, and with the desire of the governing classes to encourage financial globalisation. This synergy is feeding into the globalisation of the world's economy and the extension of the civil society.

Synergy between the search for selected connections and technical progress in micro-communication.

Improvements in the telephone, fax, networked desktop computers, internet, mobile phones, etc. Since the end of the 80s the two groups of phenomena, a thirst for selected connections and the development of a networked social fabric, on the one hand, and progress in the techniques of micro-communication, on the other, are interdependent and feed into each other at an explosive rate. Real and virtual networks are multiplying and extending, becoming more and more intense and alive. For example: family and friendly networks call the portable phone number and are in immediate receipt of rich real-time interconnection. E-business, like non-commercial exchanges on the Internet, is in a stage of explosive development. The "blogosphere" already involves millions of people in many countries.

Today, outside the West, the intervention of new technologies in the process of modernisation can assume a different shape. All these technical systems are penetrating populations that may still be subject to conventions or authorities or organised in masses, and are powerfully contributing to making them change.

New forms of governance begin hesitantly to emerge

By governance I mean the effective capacity to influence the course of events in the short and/or long term in a chosen direction.

A good governance is one which contributes to positioning the organism on a road in its environment that is both durably comfortable and energising.

A new governance that can adapt to the levels of complexity existing in society, that can have effective influence on the course of events and that can improve the comfort and vitality of the social organism begin hesitantly to emerge.

Forms of governance and the processes of civilisation are and have always been interdependent.

Let us rough in the outlines.

In the society that is coming into being, the practices of governance and socio-technological forms are mutually selective.

- Authoritarian governance from above, whether based on the hierarchical tropisms (desire for power combined with a tendency to obey) on the application of force, as well as short-sighted voluntarism, function less well in a hypercomplex society peopled by relatively autonomous persons. Powerful seniors who consider themselves still to be in positions of power and think they know the right answers (whether for technocratic or for ideological reasons), hang on tight to their hard power and systematically make use of unilateral authority or force. In this manner they create turbulences, conflicts and perverse effects. In the medium or long term, they cannot achieve their goals. The developmental process therefore tends to select them out. It nevertheless remains true that such types accentuate the pre-chaotic character of any systems within which they are active, increasing the probability that these systems will switch abruptly from a chaotic state to a new order that could just as well be far outside the line of development of the civilisation process as within it.

- Others, whether powerful seniors or newly influential arrivals, invent better informed and more subtle forms of governance, adapted to an on-going development process. They know that their power is both limited and shared. They act by relying on a knowledge or intuition of latencies and auto-organising and self-regulating systems, intimate processes that underlie the course of events. They effectively contribute to influencing it and producing harmony and vitality. They contribute to reinforce the civilisation process which feeds their increasing influence, thus selecting them in a positive manner.

Passage from a hierarchic, simplified society to one that is heterarchic and hypercomplex tends to modify the distribution of influentials (those who exercise de facto influence in real governance). The capacity for influence of those who were weak grows, while the influence of those who occupy positions of hierarchic power diminishes, until they learn to exercise influence in a governance adapted to the situation. Governance that works, that orients the socio-systems concerned in an effective manner, becomes a cooperative activity involving a diversity of actors; among which ordinary people do not occupy minor positions.

Everyone who feels a responsibility for exercising influence on the course of events is, whether they know it or not, going through an apprenticeship for a new world, casting around to find new forms of governance that feel suitable. This concerns the traditionally powerful such as fathers of families, directors of businesses or governments, as well as the new power-carriers that are emerging. Real progress has been made, but unevenly. Great strides have been made in families and in the emerging socio-economy, but much less progress has been made in states and their structures and in established "big business". For the present, we're still far from the necessary critical mass.

1. Families

Families have changed profoundly. We have seen that in France, in 1995, nearly 2/3 of them were clearly heterarchic. The father no longer lays down the law, everyone discusses and acts in their own way, and according to circumstances the influence of one or another is preponderant. And France is far from being one of the countries in Europe where transformation of the family is most advanced.

Around 1930, a well-governed family was headed by a father whose authority was sufficiently recognised (or by mutual agreement between husband and wife, the latter occupying a more or less subaltern position). This family transmitted the reigning social norms to well-mannered children who were relatively respectful and obedient.

In 1995, in France members of the 7% of families that were still hierarchically governed by an authoritarian father were proportionally by far the most numerous to say that quarrels were practically continuous and that they were not happy. And it is likely that many from these families were not psychologically best adapted to live in the complexities of modern society.

In 2005, a well-governed family is one which governs itself well. The leadership circulates in a flexible and efficient manner; decisions pass from one to another according to situations and abilities. Authority is only rarely exercised, and then advisedly. Its members develop their personalities in mutual affection and are relatively happy. Crises are resolved easily enough. If relations become strained, if children start to behave too erratically, such a family will tend to have recourse to therapy rather than authority. Since the 80s, Robert Bellah has pointed out[6] that in American families the therapeutic approach has tended to replace the authoritarian one. This therapy is sometimes professional and sometimes spontaneous; it is not unusual, for example, to find that it was a perceptive child that succeeded in reconciling parents who were growing away from each other.

In such a self-governing family, while the father may no longer have authority, if he is sufficiently perceptive and adroit he may still exercise a major influence. To do so he has to learn to read the backs of the cards, the latencies, dynamics, and auto-organisations that are germinating, and take opportunity of them at the right moment. He is able top perceive what is possible and what is not at a given moment. These are all capacities that we have seen are developed naturally by people decided to create themselves a life that feed them. In such circumstances, through active perception of what is actually in place rather than reliance on theoretical or dogmatic diagrams, family governance adapted to the situation develops spontaneously.

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[6] Robert N. Bellah et al, *Habits of the Heart. Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, University of California Press, 1985.

2. Nation states and governments.

Broadly speaking, there are four intersecting phenomena today which tend to destabilise nation states and most governments. Firstly, ordinary people becoming increasingly autonomous and well-informed pilots of their own lives are no longer satisfied by a representative democracy that installs a power from which they then feel increasingly distant, and which they consider too controlling. In parallel, top-down governance is losing its efficacy in a social fabric that is increasingly hypercomplex and transversal. The advanced globalisation of the economy and the more timid globalisation of civil society diminish the importance of the national unit, which is where states exercise their power. Finally, the collapse of the Soviet block put an end to the cold war and has made worldwide geopolitical game more fluid.

More or less democratic as the case may be, states and their governments were sovereign within their own territories. This sovereignty could be reduced to two descriptive characteristics: 1) they were the legal monopolists of violence within their frontiers and could therefore constrain their citizens, who for the most part tended towards obedience; 2) their relationships with other states were based on economic and military power, with or without the use of violence, leading in extreme situations to wars, annexations and oppressions. This system is slowly breaking up, and could be in the process of transformation into a system in which local, national and global governance become a matter for concerted action, open to the participation of a multiplicity of actors, from public authorities to ordinary people. But we are still a long way from anything of this nature.

Towards a political governance that is better adapted to autonomous citizens and a hypercomplex and transversal society.

Today, even in the most democratic countries, democracy is very inadequately applicable for autonomous people anxious to participate in the course of events that concern them. The citizens elect their representatives and benefit from a certain degree of protection of the individual, but the governments govern from the top down, in an authoritarian manner inspired by technocratic or ideologically partisan rationalisations, and the law of the majority is imposed on minorities. However, by various ways, ordinary people, who constitute the civil society, are gaining in importance and influence with regard to governments and the way states function. These latter are tending to make adjustments; here are some examples.

- Everywhere during the past quarter of a century associations and NGOs that have sprung more or less directly from the ordinary people have multiplied and gained considerable influence. National and regional public authorities turn more and more often to associations to carry out complex missions that they themselves are ill-prepared to handle; but it remains difficult for formally constituted authorities to abandon the notion that their formal structure gives them a position of superiority over the organisations they wish to make use of. The international organisations are penetrated to the core by NGOs. We have seen cases in which the network of NGOs and ordinary people linked by internet have been able to force multinationals, states and even the network of states to give ground.

- Technical developments in armaments enable specific networks around the world to present serious threats to states, which are now on the defensive.

- The rights of the individual are becoming stronger in the face of state power, which was formerly completely dominant. International courts make it possible for citizens to bring suits and have their states condemned. The question of humanitarian intervention has been raised. Former dictators are hauled before the courts.

- During the past two decades a number of authoritarian regimes have been overthrown without bloodshed.

- Public authorities have been trying with more or less success to reconcile the demand for increased areas of individual freedom and improved protection for minorities (e.g. liberalisation of abortion, of soft drug use, of euthanasia and assisted suicide, social acceptance of homosexuality, affirmative action to assist minorities), which are paradoxally paralleled by a demand for increased order and safety measures (e.g. a ban on smoking, greater discipline for car drivers, surveillance of paedophiles, activist militants and terrorists, etc.).

- The majority of western countries are trying to organise public debates that are not too heavily manipulated from the top and move a few steps towards participative democracy. These attempts are timid and often clumsy. But their generalisation is significant.

- Certain governments are stepping back from traditional technocratic and partisan practices and are adopting a therapeutic approach more often than in the past. They are trying to treat social pathologies as effectively as possible so that they do not reduce the vitality of their society or deteriorate personal happiness.

It nevertheless remains a fact that the majority of governments in the most modern countries have not yet found how to imagine, design and install an administration which will be at ease with modernity and which will establish symbiotic relations with the society of ordinary people. And many of them have lost a great part of their ability to govern. For example, the American government proclaims that it wants to make the USA the leader of the world; its efforts have only deteriorated the country's image and shredded its sympathy capital. Similarly, French governments on left and right have been repeating for decades that they will do everything required to reduce unemployment; unemployment is long-term and persistent, and shows no signs of abating. It is likely that in these countries, those people who make their careers in government and administration have not yet understood how to go about governing a modern society. They have neither the glasses to see with and understand nor the knowledge of how to act. Theirs is a problem of creativity and apprenticeship.

The balance of power and violence between states could evolve towards a more civilised system

The current process of civilisation has given weight to new actors, as we have just illustrated in a number of aspects. It has also reduced the effective action and the legitimacy of violence. Thereafter, during the 90s the system inherited from the treaties of Westphalia (1648) which maintained a balance of power between sovereign states in Europe crumbled away in the face of the concerted influences of a wide variety of relatively peaceful actors.

- Local and regional powers. During the 90s, the local regional scene began to gain in importance against the national one. Nationalist ideologies fading away, this smaller scene concerns people most directly and it is at this level that the majority of newly formed links emerge in the increasing complexity of society. It is at this level too that the greatest contribution is made to social and economic vitality. Institutionalised governance adjusts and everywhere decentralisation gains ground.

- International enterprises. In the current context of globalisation, states locked inside their own national territories loose some of their powers of constraint over multinational business.

- Globalised civil society. Associations, charitable networks, and waves of emotions, diasporas and religious or political movements (islamist, fundamentalist, pro israelian, pacific, oneworlders etc.) have globalised, exert pressure, circulate money and ideas, organise demonstrations and crowds, and even terrorist attacks.

- Networking among states. A complex network of states in complicity and in conflict is permanently reforming and changing, tending to become a system in its own right. It replaces the fixed blocks of the cold war. Flexible and interactive supra-national groups form. Each state is thus caught in an interplay of constraints, opportunities and threats which devalues simple power in favour of skilful manœuvre. Some states try to resist this trend. Among these is the most powerful of the lot, the USA. However, as Joseph Nye has very clearly shown[7], even the most economically and militarily powerful state on the planet is not omnipotent. The mishaps of the Bush administration in Iraq illustrate this very well.

- For more than half a century now, Europe has been organising its own existence. This is a process that no single person or group of people is steering, but which many actors are influencing. It advances and retreats, bifurcates but still continues its process. At one time many thought the process would result in the creation of a United States of Europe with supra-national powers (another empire). It now appears more likely that it will end in the creation of an original system of pacific, post-state and post-national governance, whose orientations will emerge from a complex confrontation of influentials with very different natures.

In this dawn of the 21st century, humanity is confronted with an accumulation of vital threats. For example, the unequal distribution of wealth, climatic warming, the return of warring religions, terrorism, epidemics that are building up, etc. Such challenges can only be met by a planet-wide system of concerted governance. The process of civilisation is pushing us towards it, but we have a long way to go. Maybe we won't get there in time.

3. Early forms of Big Business

The source of strength of most big business in the 19th and 20th centuries – the chain of command, top-down control and organisation, standardisation, repetition, bureaucracy, forecasting and planning, division of labour, mass marketing, empire-building, mechanical thinking, predatory attitudes –… has become a handicap. Businesses today, big or small, are faced with a redoubtable challenge, even (especially?) when they don't realise it clearly. This is the challenge of inventing or discovering their own form of adjustment to people, to the changing social fabric and to new technologies that open up new domains of thought and action. The process of modernisation is transforming them, whether they know it or not; and they have to re-interpret capitalism.

Since the 70s and during the decade that followed, businesses more or less consciously sought to find out how to synergise with modernity. But the effort was been piece-meal, fragmentary and has usually encountered enormous resistance from within the companies concerned. So much so that towards 1990 most companies still did not know how to make the most of the potentials offered by the new modernity. Globalisation and intensifying competition led many of them to tighten up everywhere they could in a frantic effort to increase profitability. They merely deepened the gulf that was already separating them from the society of people.

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[7] Joseph Nye. *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone*. Oxford University Press, 2002.

The 70s and 80s: brilliant intuitions and sporadic application

A few companies were out in front. They had an intuitive understanding of the change in progress and partial responses to it. I shall speak only of three cases that I had the good fortune to witness from close to.

Right at the start of the 70s, under the impulsion of André Bénard and Pierre Wack, Royal Dutch Shell developed a system of strategic planning by scenarios. Pierre Wack had perceived that in a world that was growing more complex, traditional forecasts lost their relevance and should be replaced by multi-dimensional scenarios. And he laid out his scenarios with an extremely original perspective; instead of trying to imagine different futures, starting from a rational analysis of possibilities, he sought to use his networks of contacts to locate the processes of transformation that were already under way and to envisage the ways in which real life could combine them. He had opened the door to a completely systemic perspective. He thought that responsible senior managers, confronted with scenarios that rang true, would change their mental maps of the world.

Pierre Wack's innovative lessons only made slow progress in the business community.

At the same period, propelled by its young president, Per Gyllenhammar, Volvo became aware that Swedish workers were becoming more autonomous and that it would soon not be possible to get them to work on assembly lines. So in 1974 creative imagination at Volvo led to the automobile industry's first great rupture with traditional assembly line production, which was replaced by autonomous teams.

This was also the period when François Dalle, the President of L'Oréal, began to investigate what he called "parallel hierarchies". He had seen that a business was a living organism, and that in the interstices of the management and trades union hierarchies living networks were developing spontaneously and producing their own leaders. He realised that senior management could tap into these networks and make use of them.

Throughout the 70s and 80s in many businesses initiatives began to be taken designed to meet the process of civilisation that were clearly part of the flow induced by the process of civilisation. Managements began to talk of **human resources** rather than "personnel", making allusion to inner resources that were probably under-utilised, and which it might be possible to mobilise, to the benefit of both the people and the business. Management by objectives became current practice, quality groups were introduced and multiplied, attempts to reduce the drag of hierarchised bureaucracy and to provide increased room for responsibility and initiative. Over the same period, more of less spontaneous developments in micro-telecommunications technology began to transform the pyramid of top-down internal communication into interactive conversation.

But there were for the most part only partial and sketchy responses to what was and is a global challenge. Employees were modernising at least as fast as their companies, usually faster. By the end of the 80s it became evident that the gap between them had not been substantially reduced: no general advance had been made in making good use of human resources latent in the personnel. In 1975, a majority of employees in France dreamed of self fulfilment in their job. In 1985, many of them wanted a job that would leave them time to fulfil themselves elsewhere.

Marketing modernised without radically transforming itself. During the 70s and 80s, it was not unusual to find heads of companies or marketing directors who dreamed of putting their enterprise in total synergy with the diversity of its consumers and the developments in their sensitivities. In their attempts to achieve this goal, some business leaders distanced themselves from massive abstract categories such as "my market", "the consumer" or "the housewife under 50" and drew closer to the realities of living, complex people. Some broke away from the idea of influencing and manipulating potential customers in favour of interactive adjustment through dialogue. Market research tools that were both quantitative and pertinent on the sociological and psychological levels became widespread. Business started identifying favourable latent philea or on-going social developments they could use without drowning in complexity. Some companies learned to seize the crucial moment of a reversal in sensitivities for their product launches.

This was progress, of a sort. But it has to be admitted that by the end of the 80s a truly dialoguing micro-marketing, one which would really participate and benefit from movements in the process of civilisation, had not yet been discovered or invented. The majority of businesses were not in fact symbiotic with their consumers. Observatories described "consumer fatigue", which marketing tried to overcome by stepping up advertising pressure or conducting price wars. As consumption became blocked or satiated in the more modern countries, advertisers looked for business development in countries newly open to consumer-oriented competition, where numerous potential client segments were still easy to conquer by well-worn mass-marketing techniques.

The majority of senior managements in all the western countries saw at the end of the 80s that **people's expectations with regard to businesses had changed**. From being principally financial and transactional, they were increasingly becoming relational, societal, moral and ecological. Nevertheless, the vast majority of businesses were unable to respond to this demand other than by one or two transformations and a large volume of opportunistic communications.

Divorce between traditional Big Business and the society of ordinary people

Later, by the end of the 80s and the beginning of the 90s, the rapid globalisation of the economy and an explosion in communications networks intensified competition. Simultaneously, a conjunction of factors reduced the importance of managers in favour of the shareholders. A new and somewhat caricatural version of capitalism appeared, leading a number of publicly quoted companies into competition centred on shareholder value. The businesses concerned were (and are) valued and judge themselves by the quarterly or even daily movement of their share price; which of course makes them the slaves of short-term hopes and fears linked to media announcements and anticipations of profits.

Some companies began to explore modernity and invested in the authentic learning processes required by it. The majority, as usual, under pressure to produce urgent results and without the know-how that would enable them to make best use of the potentials of modern employees and consumers, turned away to better known territory. They gambled on mechanical improvements and rationalisations in their organisations or strategies, at the price of degrading their internal climates and their relations with their own social ecosystems.

They devised more effective organisations, tightened up everything, required faster and more efficient work, often through the use of new technologies. Such rationalisations and general toughening up of management practices without taking account of local human conditions have often greatly increased stress. They also encouraged the development of short-term employment. Because this enabled similar levels of production with fewer employees, it led to massive lay-offs. The flexible working hours desired by employees, in particular by women, were transformed into flexibility imposed and controlled from above. Increasingly adept in the use of computers, they used them not to increase freedom and interdependences among the personnel but to discipline and accelerate. They introduced computer-driven systems for managing clients relations, and computerized telephone systems that rigidify and dehumanise vocal communication.

During the 90s, surgical operations multiplied. Companies sought economies of scale and rationalised their perimeters. Bits were cut off here, or added on there. Complex living business entities were chopped up. Recombinations took no heed of the existing cultures of forcibly merged teams. Enormous enterprises were created having no underlying social, cultural or human realities. Casual negligence of history, of experience, of accumulated knowledge, of collective intelligence.
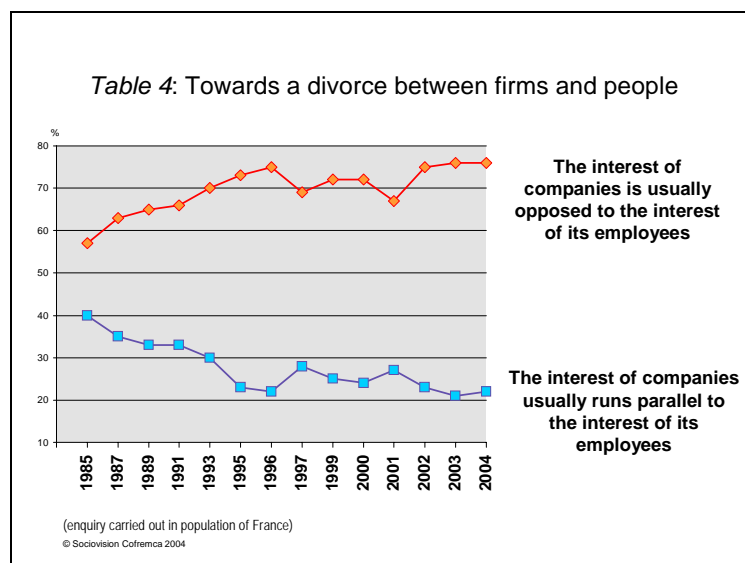
Such efforts bore fruit: profits of quoted companies were multiplied by four between 1982 and 2000. But there was a price to pay. Competition centred on shareholder value locked a considerable proportion of large companies into a closed financial universe, segregated from the surrounding social and human realities, and sometimes even from economic reality. Priority given to short term profit was exactly out of step with the processes of modernisation, which place the emphasis on human fulfilment, durable vitality, protection of the environment and meaning in life.

This divorce between big business and the society of ordinary people has had very serious consequences. The divide between companies and their personnel grows wider. The deterioration in the moral status of large companies increases the degree of confrontation. And finally, their ability to be self-guiding and to survive becomes diminished.

By the end of the 90s, all the observatories of change in the most modern countries noted an increase in levels of stress and frustration linked to work and the practices of large companies and administrations. The number of people who felt themselves subject to unreasonable degrees of constraint and whose work appeared meaningless rose steadily. We could see among them the development, quite apart from the general relativisation of work, of behaviours that were dangerous for the company: complicities for mutual protection and to work as little as possible, resistance to any change in organisation imposed from above and affecting personal life conditions, the brain drain of young or skilled staff away from large companies and public administration, dreams of early retirement "to be able to do develop an independent and interesting work".

In several European countries a growing majority of employees thought that their own interests and those their company were divergent. This feeling grew among junior and middle management, and here we see the outlines of a dangerous opposition between shareholders and business leaders one side, and the living company entity on the other.

The public image of large organisations deteriorated during the last decade of the century. Early in the past, this image had in fact improved, when leading companies benefited from the discredit that bureaucratic administration had brought upon itself, when business was associated with the hope of a freer and more human world. This honeymoon did not last, and the image of big business deteriorated sharply, while public sentiment remained very positive where small businesses were concerned. This loss of moral stature has been observed in all countries at the cutting edge of modernity; particularly clearly in the United States, and in a more benign form in Germany. In all the western countries, more than half, and sometimes three-quarters of the population think that large organisations do not serve the public interest.

Table 4: Towards a divorce between firms and people

(enquiry carried out in population of France)
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Public opinion everywhere has been aware of the growing discord of traditional big business and its employees. In France, for example, the proportion of those who consider that the interests of business is usually opposed to the interests of the employees has grown continuously since 1985.

There are numerous grounds for complaint. The majority of people find no meaning in business that spends its time in financial games, that sells off a bit here or grabs a bit there, that sacks a chunk of its work force, that apparently has no interest in internal social harmony, nor in the quality of life of its employees. Big business is criticised for making children work in developing countries, for experimenting on animals, for pollution, for poisoning our food, for sacking people even while it is making profits, of not caring at all about the harmony or the development of their surrounding urban or country communities, of despising consumers and of disregarding the quality of their products or services. The efforts made by companies to convince their personnel and their environment to the contrary, by means of proclaimed support for certain values and deontological charters, have frequently been perceived as artificial pretence and attempts at manipulation. Polls have shown that some of these efforts had more negative than positive effects, except perhaps on shareholders. During the last decade of the century increasingly numerous cases of more or less criminal collusion between powerful businesses and political leaders have only widened the gap.

The anti-business lobby is usually young. They know how to whip up emotion and catalyse waves of discontent. From among them charismatic leaders emerge from time to time, and their instinctive knowledge of how to use the media and micro-communications makes them all the more redoubtable, surfing as they do on a current of public sympathy that supports the small against the powerful, the local against the general, the social against the financial.

The survival ability of a whole section of traditional businesses is in question. Cut off both from the people who are changing and from the social fabric that is becoming more complex, these businesses are not developing the piloting skills or the understanding of governance that the situation requires. Their directors and managers can see the gradual erosion of their ability to order, to organise from above and influence the course of events. They exhaust themselves in establishing chains of command that don't work, in exercising their authority on people who want to be self-determining and to participate, in trying to manipulate men and women who will only do as they think fit. Their inopportune orders trigger perverse or at best unexpected results. Consumers escape their grasp, or become increasingly expensive to win over.

While the directors of big companies and the financial and economic establishments remain insensitive to this unease and the resulting confrontations, or if they do not soon succeed in finding appropriate responses, protests may become envenomed and the widening gap between business and ordinary people will risk being polarised into a destructive divorce. Stress and confrontations will flourish. While large companies make cuts in their workforce, a new socio-economy, based on individual initiatives and informal processes, will develop and undermine their domain. The ordinary reactions of ordinary people will cause increasingly destructive developments in traditionally managed businesses through internal dysfunctions and increasingly serious societal crises. It is not impossible that such social disturbances could last for decades.

The example of earlier centuries merits consideration. The development of industrial enterprise during the 19th century gave rise to the development of a revolutionary proletariat. This became the political basis for a virulent attack on free market enterprise, encouraging the development of aggressive trade unions and violent strikes. In some countries this gave rise to dictatorship with a centralised command economy. It took a century for moderate unions, Fordism and a triumphant race for consumption to reintegrate the proletariat into a new dominant form of society. There is no reason to suppose that history cannot repeat itself and take other turnings.

Get new glasses

From our observations, very many senior managers have relatively blocked mental attitudes and maps of the world. They are the fruits of their own education and their previous professional experiences. We need a sufficient proportion of managers to get new glasses so that big business can participate in the process of discovery and apprenticeship. This will allow it to come to terms with the know-how it lacks, and will enable major companies to govern wisely in the modern socio-economy [8].

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[8] Arie de Geus, *The Living Company. Habits for survival in a turbulent business environment.* Harvard Business School Press, Boston, 1997.

Examples of old and new paradigms

OLD	NEW
Feel powerful, sovereign, at the centre of the world, be able to impose one's will	Feel an element in an ecosystem whose future one can (perhaps) influence, be on the look-out for windows of opportunity, accompany the processes of surrounding life
Governors are there to govern	Fovernors are there to ensure that the enterprise is effectively self-governing
See the world as a mechanic, a technician, an expert, a legal advisor	See the world through the eyes of a gardener or a therapeutic specialist, as a living system with which one interacts
Study, know, decide, plan	Listen, be on the lookout for adjustments, synergies and dialogues. Feel one's way
Effective action is what is decided by the director who knows where he wants to go	Rffective action is what is inspired by an intimate knowledge of the living processes that underlie the course of events
Show others that what they do is meaningful	Give others the opportunity to discover the meaning of what they do
Look for generally applicable recipes that have proved their worth	Know that one is always facing a particular case that requires specific diagnosis and treatment
A narrow strategic field (industrial, economic, financial)	A broader strategic field (including social, societal and ecological dimensions)
Etc.	Etc

4. The actors in the new socio-economy

In France and New York we have been able to observe leaders and employees of neo-enterprises, start-ups, associations and networks who launched their activities during the 90s. We have been able to observe them sufficiently early after their launches when they had not yet been deformed by the pressures of the financial, economic, institutional and political environment in which they had to operate. Their manner of being and self-governance had a number of characteristics in common which attracted our attention to the forms of entrepreneurial life which were developing spontaneously at the end of the20th century in societies at the cutting edge of modernity. Major companies with an awareness of biomimetism could find a source of inspiration here.

The people behind each of the business adventures we observed have a very evident entrepreneurial spirit.

However, unlike the classic image of the entrepreneur, they plunged into their activity not to make money, but to procure a life that really suits them, which gives them a sense of meaning and an outlet for their vitality; and if there's money in it as well, so much the better.

Many started out with a radical innovation that with hindsight appears to have filled a gap.

Having found an activity that had meaning for them, this activity also had meaning for people like them, who became collaborators or clients. In this manner, the latent energies of all concerned are put to use, and they become "activists for the cause", "spreaders of the gospel". In the milieu of such people, added meaning is a primordial source of added value.

In these organisms, hierarchies are not clearly defined. Initiatives are taken and leaderships improvised on all levels. But one or more leaders with a certain amount of charisma rather than a reliance on structured hierarchy exercise a strong influence on the whole and tend to be seen as the incarnation of the enterprise.

These animators of new organisms do far more than just listen to their collaborators and clients inside a bottom up organisation. When we interviewed them we saw that they didn't feel like the masters of a situation bending down to listen, but rather as actors among others in a complex system where they were trying to find the most advantageous interactions. They had an attitude of dialogue and interactive adjustment. They found it all the easier to feel others, both personnel and clients, because they often resembled each other in their shared their modernity of outlook. These people tune in to the living fabric of society, deriving inspiration or support from it. They spontaneously make use of micro-communication technologies in this spirit of creative adjustment rather than managing through the establishment of control with a corresponding reduction in liberties and freedom of action.

The resulting organisms seem well adapted to a changing world. The diversity of people in their teams is often striking. This prepares everyone to react to a wide variety of events and to find positive interactions. In spite of their differences, team members have a feeling of being together in a unifying entity. This combination of unity and diversity increases their chances of performing well in a mutating environment.

The collective intelligence of these organisms is often very developed. The long-term visions of the future are shared by all the personnel. It is more or less the entire team that is on the lookout for jump-cuts in the streaming environment that surrounds them, and which look for the right adjustment. A collective understanding of adjustments and de-synchronisations in progress is encouraged, to such a degree that an observer sometimes has the impression of a spontaneously functioning system of strategic adjustment between the organism and its environment.

Other actors operating on the same market or in the same universe are not systematically perceived as enemies, not even as competitors, but rather as partners.

Are we engaged in a new stage in the evolution of Man and Society?

The human species wavers between liberal and authoritarian forms of organisation. Our hunter-gatherer ancestors were organised in small, relatively egalitarian groups for some 100.000 years, with little difference in power and status between the members. The leadership circulated according to circumstances without need for formal appointment to a position of authority. Then, some ten or twelve thousand years ago, the groups became more numerous, and with the development of agriculture and cattle raising, they became sedentarised. Authority was strengthened, locally centralised and stabilised. Kingships were instituted.

Humanity has invented the state more than once; the oldest attempts we know of were only five or six thousand years ago. Norbert Elias has shown how, after the end of the Middle Ages, the centuries-old process of development of civilisation in the West gave rise to the state as the sovereign monopolist of violence within its territory. From this western initiative the world began to divide into nations, each governed by a state machinery. During the 20th century some of these nation-states sought to exercise command and control over every aspect of life.

However, another dynamic was also at work; we have examined its most recent phase. Since the Renaissance and the Reformation, above al since the 18th century (the Illumination) and the American and French revolutions, westerners have been in search of individual emancipation and personal happiness. They undertook to free themselves from rigid authority and inflexible taboos. Progressively, a certain amount of democracy crept into our political regimes and our social life. I say "a certain amount", because democratically elected governments and heads of economic activities continued to govern on the basis of appointed authority.

Today things are not quite the same. With the growth in peoples autonomy, the social fabric has become more interactive, and centralised authority has lost its efficacy. Perhaps today we are in the process of taking a decisive step in the direction of a deeper, post-national and post-state form of democracy and/or social structure. The society that we can only glimpse at present would be heterarchic, to a great extent self-organised and self-regulated, and the margin for personal initiatives would be greatly enlarged. Sovereign states may give way to a variety of public powers at various levels, with partnerships between them and with a multitude of non-state, non-governmental organisms. Because of the extreme rapidity of technical progress in micro-communication, the development of efficient, planet-wide as well as local self-regulation[9] has become imaginable, possibly achievable.

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[9] Thomas Malone, *The Future of Work. How the new order of business will shape your organisation, your management style and your life.*
Harvard Business School Press – Boston 2004

There is an opportunity for human progress whose birth we can try to facilitate. But it is very clear that nothing is yet decisively acquired. Our hypercomplex and living society is also, like all living things, the seat of pathological processes. The therapeutic procedures, regulators or immune systems that are spontaneously developing are not yet properly effective, in particular because many governments and old-fashioned but still powerful enterprises are not playing the game of a living society. They display ideologically partisan, hierarchic or predatory attitudes, rather than therapeutic, interactive ones, and accumulate mistakes and maladaptations that encourage the appearance of perverse effects. Instead of participating in concerted, adaptive regulation, they throw oil on the fire and accentuate the turbulences. Beyond a hypothetical (because unmeasured) threshold of turbulence, the entire anthropo-sociological process could bifurcate into disastrous directions.

Alain de Vulpian, founder of Cofremca, Chairman of Sociovision, July 2005.

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