

TOWARDS A GEOPOLITICAL SOLUTION FOR THE COMBRAILLES

A SHORT SYNTHESIS OF AN IN-DEPTH STUDY

Introduction.

The Combrailles, situated at the farthest edge of the metropolitan area of Clermont-Ferrand, is classed as « hyper-rural »¹. Being both remote and typical of the French countryside, the Combrailles is often viewed as merely subject to multiple disadvantages which are deemed to remove from the territory any prospect of development. But is this approach still entirely appropriate today ?

In fact, a new world is appearing, different from that which we have known up till now. New realities have emerged simultaneously and at all levels : local, national, international and biospherical. The Combrailles is not alone in wondering whether it would be well-advised to reject this new order, to adapt to it, perhaps to adopt it or even to wholeheartedly embrace it.

Other regions, considered to be burdened with disadvantages far exceeding their assets (reduced to the level of a consolation prize), have completely reversed their situation. Such examples are multiplying pretty much everywhere on the planet.

Five points which briefly summarise the state of play.

Given the tangled maze of uncertainties and changes we are undergoing, many of us struggle to understand the phenomena at work. Let us attempt a synthesis by highlighting the convergence of five key determinants.

1. Climate

Climatic and environmental change is modifying physical, human and economic geography at an increasing rate ; as much at the level of the biosphere as at that of local regions, with these two being interdependent. To give an example : the drying up of the mediterranean basin, which is now well documented, places the Combrailles at the northernmost limit of those zones which will experience water stress within the next few years.

2. Natural resources

Depletion of stocks of natural resources is no longer on the horizon but is here and now. According to those in the industry, the peak in conventional oil production was reached between 2000 and 2005. In any case, it is well behind us. The president of Total has announced that non-conventional oil production will peak around 2060. Production of minerals and other natural resources are equally due to peak between 2020 and 2080, according to their type. Reductions in the production of phosphates, copper and other resources create problems for agriculture.

3. The economy and society

The irreversible diminution of petrol stocks is leading to the contraction of the world economy, thereby engendering two major consequences.

- Less petrol means fewer machines in operation and therefore fewer functioning industries ; it follows that there is a general reduction in the production of goods and services. GDPs are flatlining.
- Less petrol means lower production throughout worldwide industry. The social benefits acquired during the 19th and 20th centuries were made possible by the immense productivity gains resulting from cheap and plentiful energy. As of now the situation is in retreat.

¹ Cf. the report « *Hyper-rurality* » by senator Alain Bertrand submitted to the government on 30 July 2014 Available on the website « la Documentation française » : <http://documentationfrancaise.fr/var/storage/rapports-publics/14400475.pdf>

Flatlining national GDPs and reduced productivity - these two factors automatically bring in their wake economic contraction at a planetary level.

Since 2006, the USA and Europe no longer import as much petrol as they would like. This is translated in various ways : the exit of capital from the real economy and the crisis of 2008, the replacement of permanent employment contracts with fixed term contracts and the gig economy, the rush to robotise factories, the unpicking of workers' and civil solidarity which resulted from post-war social reforms. The muted indications of the decline of the middle classes which followed the first oil crisis are now fully apparent.

4. Institutions and the rule of law

At present institutions are not just criticised but are explicitly attacked. Countries are engaged in armed conflicts which ignore UN agreements ; the USA no longer contributes to UNESCO and has withdrawn from international treaties and conventions ; the Visegrád² group of countries is destabilising European Union politics ; a resurgent « Hanseatic League » is exerting a rising influence in the bosom of the European Union³ ; Turkey is creating turmoil within NATO ; numerous countries spurn the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights ; the concept of the nation-state arising from the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) is being eroded ; NGOs and charitable organisations are being disgraced ; believers are turning their backs on historic religious institutions ; the institution of the family is in flux.

To challenge institutions is to take against the rule of law because it is the judicial corpus which lends first of all justification, then legitimacy and ultimately power, to institutions. Private arbitration has opened the way to circumventing international and national rights. At the end of the line, it is the rule of law and democracy which are in trouble.

Jean-Pierre Vernant (1914 – 2007) summarised this situation when he declared in a single phrase the de-westernisation of the world : « *the white man's thought is no longer THE thought* ».

5. Technology

Since 1916, the US Senate has recognised the need to promote the cultural industries to spearhead the United-States' soft power. Some decades later, by capturing audience attention at the same time on the same subject, every country used television as a tool to select the important topics and thereby as a means to standardise the pre-occupations of society by short-circuiting autonomy and diversity of thought. Consequently, television has acquired an inordinate importance in the development of collective memory. Collective memory plays a determining role in the creation of collaborative projects. The result is the impoverishment of social projects, with individualism, exacerbated by widespread commercialisation, leading to isolation.

Currently, emerging technologies are creating a wave of disruption to our way of life. For example, nano- and bio-technology challenge received views on the limits to life, forcing us to reconsider fundamental ethical questions.

The original vision of the internet has been subverted by the application by the web giants of their ultra-libertarian plans. Through the use of data capture, they dispossess each of us of our professional expertise and of our social and lexical competences ; in brief, of the autonomy of discernment which is the basis of free will and thus of dignity.

² You may remember that in 1335, the leaders of Bohemia, Poland and Hungary met at Visegrád, the capital of Hungary, and formed a coalition against the Habsburgs. Today, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary have re-formed this informal alliance to give themselves more weight within NATO and to challenge EU policies from within..

³ Cf. Le Monde of 17 October 2018 : *En Europe, la discrète influence de la " ligue hanséatique "*

The problem :

In the Combrailles, to cushion the convergence of the various blows, climatic, technological and energy depletion, so as to prevent democracy from becoming fenced in.

At this time, when climate change is leading to incalculable consequences, world leadership is distancing itself from the cradle of graeco-roman civilisation ; enterprises are losing productivity ; algorithms anticipate our desires even before we become conscious of them and standardise our behaviours based on high-performance computing (HPC) . We all find ourselves increasingly defenceless in the face of contemporary deadlock.

A paradox emerges along these lines : while public opinion is tending to harden, pushing governments to play safe in an attempt salvage what they can from the burning house, rather than have the courage to do the right thing, the way is opened up for the development of initiative and innovation.

Although algorithmic governance⁴ subjects us to behavioural impulses which short-circuit individual reflection and directly endanger concord, civil society and local elected representatives have the power to short-circuit in their turn this algorithmic madness and the various consequences arising from the depletion of stocks of resources. Short-circuiting does not mean an attempt to match the speed of algorithms which calculate at 220 000 km/second, but to create a branch line to bypass and soften the blows of the on-going changes.

How can we branch out in the Combrailles ?

A) Several routes exist.

- First of all, we should agree to put forward information worthy of the name on the contemporary situation, aimed at the different levels mentioned above, in order to facilitate a proper understanding of the issues facing the territory. This is indispensable in helping everyone individually and collectively to find their bearings amid the changes in progress.
- Stimulate innovation in the agricultural sector in order to bring up to date the economic model for agriculture in the Combrailles and thus break out of the *New agricultural capitalism, from the farm to the firm*⁵. Inspirational success stories from France and other countries can provide a starting point.
- Foster the installation of young artificial intelligence (AI) developers in the Combrailles. There are young graduates from schools of engineering who would like to exercise their AI skills in an unspoiled living environment and to offer their children an upbringing where state of the art technology interfaces with a life surrounded by nature.
- Energise the agricultural sector and upgrade technology in the territory to stimulate locally induced activities and boost both the youth service sector job market and opportunities for older people to bring the benefit of their experience and know-how to budding young, innovative enterprises. In addition, many Europeans have settled in the Combrailles who are capable of contributing to local economic and social dynamism.

To summarise 1) support the agricultural sector 2) upgrade the level of technology in the territory 3) induce a diversified and decent job market 4) create bridges between the world of agriculture and AI developers, in order to add value to the territory and stimulate a contributive and collaborative economy.

This type of qualitative focus is not new :

Recent studies demonstrate that ever since the Neolithic revolution those societies which were more technologically advanced coped better with the climatic hazards which marked that distant epoch. They adapted better to changes in life style and fared more favourably under climatic constraints than those waves of populations who migrated from one zone to another.

⁴ This term was developed by Antoinette Rouvroy in conference speech available at the following address : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUEkEsB6FJA>

⁵ *Nouveau capitalisme agricole, de la ferme à la firme*, François Purseigle and Geneviève Nguyen. Presses de SciencePo 2017.

- B) initial support is available to us.
- French and European collectives and territories who are already involved in energy, economic, social and ecological transition can share their experience of mistakes to avoid during the process of acclimatising to the 21st century.
 - A French university department is ready to provide research time should a transition project be adopted in the Combrailles.
 - Discussions are on-going with other external means of support.

First actions :

1. The launch of a « nomadic academy ». A small team of people with skills in diverse domains have proposed to organise locally based meetings for inhabitants to share information and ideas on key points for the future of the territory, based on real contemporary issues such as : the post-petrol situation ; requirements for energy transition ; the de-westernisation of the world ; requirements for the development of local democracy; etc.
2. A review of real-life success stories from local collectives and/or territories undertaking energy, social, economic, ecological and democratic transition. Contacts exist to put together a network of territories in transitional co-construction in order to devise a contributive and mutually supportive socio-economic system for the 21st century, respecting each local culture.
3. The establishment of a monitoring unit. Scientific, technological and societal developments are accelerating. During a process of global transition it is essential to keep a watching brief on the principal innovations and their various manifestations.
4. The transformation of local contradictions into innovation. Those wishing to alter the operation of an organisation (territorial, industrial, other...) may find themselves confronted by often insurmountable barriers of contradictions. If so wished, the territory could benefit, by way of a feasibility test, from a session exploring the transformation of a major contradiction into local innovation.
5. Communication aimed at young engineers : a downloadable booklet promoting the Combrailles, discovery weekends in the Combrailles with industrialists, etc.
6. The establishment of a mediation unit responsible for the ethics of territorial transition, the ethics of change management and the nurturing of the informal talents and skills of the local inhabitants.

To conclude

To enter fully into the 21st century we must make use of the power of the high-performance computing of modern machines to dedicate human energy to the pursuit of agricultural, economic, social, ecological and democratic innovation.

This enables us to move towards the end of employment and revert to skilled trades, that is to say the implementation of individual know-how which fosters social dignity. This also supports the move away from individualism in favour of individuation, which offers everyone the possibility of developing his/her own capabilities and so participate in stimulating the territory through the gradual establishment of a contributive economy. (cf. Amartya Sen –Nobel prize for economics 2008).

Edmund Burke (1729 - 1797) wrote : « *The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing*».

The long course of history in the Combrailles demonstrates that its good men care about it.

Michel Aguilar 4 février 2019.

- Former director of SMEs
- Visiting lecturer, Compiègne Technological University : Ethics and business, a fertile oxymoron.
- Former president of the Commission for Human Rights of the Conference of INGOs of the European Council.
- President of the international, intercultural and interconvictional group G3i.