

A Transdisciplinary Chair in the Service of an Economy of Care and Meaning¹

AUTHORS

Hubert LANDIER

Ph.D. in Economy, TD Mediator, and Social Auditor Honorary doctor of the Russian Academy of Labor and Social Relations. Vice-president of the International Institute of Social Auditing (Paris). Member of the scientific committee of the Institut Psychanalyse et Management (Paris). Member of CI-RET, Paris, France.

hlandier@club-internet.fr

ORCID ID: 0009-0006-9973-7126

Eric CARREY

MBA in Economy and Management, member of the management committee of the French Red Cross

ericcarrey@yahoo.fr

<https://www.enseignants.hachette-education.com/auteurs/eric-carrey>

Abstract

The article digs the historical difficulty of envisioning future paradigms amidst periods of societal upheaval and how this mirrors modern uncertainties regarding the future of Western civilization. Drawing parallels from the fall of the Roman Empire to the current challenges posed by environmental degradation and socio-economic instability, the authors argue for a radical shift towards an "economy of care and meaning." This new economic model emphasizes sustainability, social responsibility, and empathy, advocating for a profound re-evaluation of values and priorities to ensure the survival and flourishing of both humanity and the planet. The authors propose that meaningful engagement in both professional and personal spheres can drive this transformation, highlighting the importance of a societal shift towards collective well-being and environmental stewardship.

Keywords: *economy of care, environmental sustainability, social responsibility, historical paradigm shifts, future of civilization.*

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1. Introduction

We can imagine a Roman patrician in the 6th century AD. How could he imagine the future? For him, nothing could be conceived outside the centrality of the Empire. Of course, the Empire faced difficulties of all kinds. Beyond the *limes*, the barbarians were pressing; resources were scarce; rivalries within the imperial house were running riot. Undoubtedly, some were unaware of the situation, either uninformed or with their eyes riveted on their shelves and short-term preoccupations. Others, most likely, hoped

that solutions would eventually emerge that would put an end to the present difficulties. Others, finally, might be tempted to sink into the darkest pessimism and retreat to their villa or province².

How could this patrician, beyond the Empire and the vision of the world that had always corresponded to him, and which constituted his indisputable cultural heritage, have imagined what we have, *ex post*, called the Middle Ages? Rome, the Eternal City, fallen to the point of being invaded and sacked by Alaric's Visigoths. The Empire scattered into multiple local powers. A new authority arose from the Christian sect in place of Caesar, with bishops taking the place of prefects, reorganizing space and beliefs according to principles foreign to the pantheon with which he was familiar. How could one imagine such a rupture and the advent of a new world order, albeit one founded, in a way, in the continuity of the one that was collapsing?

And how could he have imagined the future, this last little emperor of the Southern Song dynasty, or at least those who watched over his childhood, wandering on the junk that was his last refuge, from cove to cove, pursued by the Mongol fleet? Or the entourage of Montezuma, the all-powerful Aztec emperor, facing down the newcomers with their horses and firearms? And so many others, whose memories have only just reached us, who believed they were living in a world outside of which nothing could be imagined and which could only last? For them, it was almost impossible to imagine a future outside the framework of their understanding of the world. And the more this framework seemed self-evident, built for eternity, the more difficult it was for them to imagine the future, even though sometimes it was already there, discreetly developing at the very

² Joseph A. Tainter, *L'effondrement des sociétés complexes*, tr. fr., Éditions Le retour aux sources, 2013.

heart of the old order, whose obsolescence was concealed beneath the debauchery of ultimate preciosity.

And so, how can we modern Westerners, for whom economic growth, prosperity and 'progress' seemed assured until recently, imagine that things could be otherwise, and imagine a future that would not be a continuation of what we take for granted? A look back at the way in which, a century or a century and a half ago, we imagined what our time would be like, gives us a rather pleasant picture: we see giant transatlantic liners, urban airships, and so on. These are all visions, drawn from the reality of the moment, of what seemed at the time to be a trend that could only continue. Dystopias rarely come true. They are, after all, products of the imagination, and imagination can only call on the techniques and values it relies on to envisage the future.

Chemistry teaches us that when a complex system in disequilibrium moves towards its bifurcation point, its future becomes unpredictable. There can be no doubt that our thermo-industrial civilization is moving towards this bifurcation, perhaps more rapidly than was thought possible just a few years ago³. And no one can predict what the outcome will be, since it will involve a global upheaval in our beliefs and the worldview that serves as the framework for our understanding:

- our reference values will be shaken up: what we thought was important may no longer be so important; the paradigm described by economic science may belong to a bygone era;

- certain phenomena currently considered negligible, or at best described as 'weak signals', are likely to become a central concern for our descendants;

- the knowledge and skills deemed important will no longer necessarily be those that are important to us today, because they are useful in our current environment;

- economic, social and political institutions and hierarchies could be profoundly shaken up and give way to something else;

- language itself will necessarily evolve, and the meaning of words will change to reflect the concerns and realities they need to express.

2. A Transdisciplinary Chair in the Service of an Economy of Care and Meaning

During the two centuries of the industrial era, mankind paid little attention to the consequences of its actions on the earth's environment. It's only in the last few decades that the consequences have become apparent, with the climatic disorders that we know about and the scale of the discharges constituting so many sources of pollution damaging living organisms and their diversity⁴. Of course,

³ Jean-François Fressoz, *Sans transition, une nouvelle histoire de l'énergie*, Le Seuil, 2024.

⁴ Jared Diamond, *Effondrement, Comment les sociétés décident de leur disparition ou de leur survie*, tr. fr., Gallimard, Essais, 2006.

since the beginning of the 18th century, there have been many whistle-blowers. But they were not listened to, so powerful were the interests they challenged, and the minds of the 21st century are very similar to those of the Roman patricians.

Since then, climate denial has become almost impossible to sustain, but this does not mean that public and private behavior has really changed. They continue in the same vein, with the state, on the one hand, arguing against the abusive artificialization of land, and on the other supporting ‘major development projects’ (agricultural areas taken from the forest, freeways, high-speed railroads) that represent a major encroachment on farmland and ‘green zones’, despite their dubious interest. What’s more, we advocate ‘economic growth’ even though we know it is mortifying for the planet.

The real question, therefore, cannot be limited to the search for more virtuous solutions (renewable energies or limiting CO2 emissions). It’s a question of knowing whether to consider the cause of humanity independently of the consequences for the planet, or whether to take a more global interest in the future of the planet as humanity finds it. Such an option obviously represents a very different stance from that to which we are invited by the religious and philosophical traditions whose skein constitutes the Western memory and the foundation of its identity, as the West is striving to impose it on the whole of humanity to the detriment of the diversity of traditions and cultural foundations that weave humanity into its diversity and globality.

However, this is just one of the options available to the West, as illustrated by Messire François’s attitude to the wolf of Gubbio. It’s the 12th century, and a terrible wolf is terrorizing the inhabitants of the small Italian town of Gubbio. Messire François, who is rumored to have the ability to talk to animals, arrives. What he’s asked to do is to stop the wolf devouring the town’s children, and to do that, it’s thought, he must get rid of it. In fact, this is what Brother Dominic, a contemporary of Messire François, would have done. Instead, he went to find the wolf, spoke with him and returned to town with the following proposal: the wolf would stop devouring the little children, but in return, the townspeople would give him something to eat. Both parties are thus satisfied, and the townspeople even end up entrusting the wolf with the care of their children.

But this is not the path followed by the West. The option most generally adopted is the one supported by Brother Dominic: to impose the point of view that claims to be true, and thus to impose a certain vision of the world – that of humanity – on the living world as a whole. To consider this point of view as the only valid one, and to subordinate to it the totality of being⁵. In other words, to consider what happens in the ‘clearing’ where man lives as being what must be imposed on the whole forest, even if it means compromising the existence of all that lives there.

⁵ In Heidegger’s sense.

And so, beyond the tinkering represented by ‘renewable energies’, what is required today for the survival of humanity, given that its very existence is compromised in turn by what comes from the forest, and which it is struggling to understand? First and foremost, a rediscovery of the living and the intelligence of the living⁶. If we define intelligence as that which enables a living being to face up to reality and adapt to it in order to stay alive, then intelligence obliges humanity, in the circumstances it has itself provoked, to question the conditions of its survival, and thus to reconnect with a reality from which it never ceases to seek escape. This intelligence presupposes, first and foremost, empathy. If Messire François has succeeded in making the wolf and the inhabitants of Gubbio coexist, it’s because he has questioned the wolf’s motives for devouring the children. But it was simply because he was hungry. Hence the second dimension of this intelligence of the living today: taking care of others in order, in a single movement, to take care of ourselves.

This is where we need to change the object to which we attribute value. Should the creation of value consist in building a new freeway, or an airport, or in preserving the green spaces that will thus be destroyed for a very long time? Rather than producing new artefacts, which we don’t know will be really useful in the long term, whatever their impact on the planet, isn’t it first and foremost a question of taking care of what already exists, without which we couldn’t exist? To take care of biotopes and landscapes, to take care of the living non-human beings who live there, to take care of everything that surrounds us and without which we could not live, to take care of other humans, near and far, and to take care of ourselves⁷.

To achieve this, we need to start from the social foundations. The word economy originally referred to the art of running a household. The economy is the bundle of rules, customs and instruments (from money to bills of exchange to securitization) that ensure the survival of societies.

Through our approach, we hope to build a set of rules, customs and instruments which, because they ensure care and meaning, will ensure the survival of societies. This economy of care and meaning can only develop if it is in phase with the expectations of individuals. Individuals are looking for meaning in their work.

Individuals need recognition, to share a common identity, to meet and interact socially. In the voluntary sector, for example, after the turbulence experienced by voluntary work during the health crisis, we are approaching pre-crisis levels: 24% of French people volunteered in associations in 2019, rising to 23% in 2023. In Switzerland, in 2020, 41% of the population over the age of 15 were involved in institutionalized or informal volunteer work.

People’s need for meaningful activities is not confined to their private

⁶ J. Baird Callicot, *Pensées de la terre*, tr. fr. Wildproject, 2011.

⁷ Jean-Christophe Combes, *L’humanité ne se négocie pas*, préface du Pr. Mohamed Yunus, L’Aube, col. Paroles d’acteurs, 2021.

lives; it also extends to their professional lives. In the workplace, when meaning is lacking, people resign.

In the USA, more than 24 million people have left their jobs since April 2021 – a figure never seen before. A situation that is not without consequences for the economy and society. According to a recent study by McKinsey, 40% of the 5,774 people questioned in 5 countries said they would resign in the next three to six months, across all sectors. Of course, just as much as the figure, the cause needs to be analyzed. In fact, the main causes are a lack of recognition from their company (54%) or their managers (52%), or the feeling that they don't belong in the workplace (51%). Similar trends can also be observed in Japan and Germany.

The term 'Purpose Economy' was coined by Aaron Hurst, CEO of the Taproot Foundation, the largest non-profit consulting firm in the USA. It's an umbrella term for different approaches to a new conception of the economy. Similarly, the Zukunftsinstitut defines the economy of meaning as follows: 'New dimensions of value creation, far removed from the logic of growth and profit maximization, are brought to the fore: social added value, sustainability, employee satisfaction, social progress.' These include concepts such as the 'Next Economy' and degrowth. The 'sharing economy', the 'smart economy' and the 'circular economy' are forms of this trend towards a responsible economy⁸.

So, in a market where qualified people can choose their jobs, it's worth noting that they increasingly prefer meaningful activities and companies with a clear purpose or mission. Purpose-driven organizations – those with a clear mission – have a competitive advantage in the medium and long term. They are more productive, grow faster, innovate more, achieve greater customer satisfaction and retain their employees longer than their competitors. In France, we should also mention the mission-driven approach.

Taking into account the economy of care and the economy of meaning as we have developed there, thus implies a radical shift from unlimited growth to a sustainable way of life and economy. For companies, this means taking more than isolated measures in the fields of corporate social responsibility (CSR), diversity and inclusion, employer branding or ESG-based investments. According to this approach, companies must provide concrete solutions to social and environmental problems. In addition to this positive role for society, companies must also give meaning to their activities internally. When the company's vision and purpose are explicit, employees can identify with their company.

The point here is not to describe what tomorrow's world should look like, but to outline a possible path forward, avoiding both fatalism and a catastrophism that would be nothing more than a self-fulfilling prophecy. Once again: no one can claim to say where such a path might lead us. It's neither a return to

⁸ Tronto, Joan, *Un monde vulnérable, pour une politique du care*, tr. fr. La découverte, 2009.

the past, nor a perfecting of what makes sense to us today. It's about going beyond. And this surpassing will force us to revisit what we take for granted, not just in our daily existence, but in the principles of action that make up our cultural heritage. This means that this overcoming will have to be expressed in a grand narrative and worldview that have yet to be invented. The only thing we can say is that it will no longer be a worldview based on the production of value through extraction from the earth's crust, and the 'development' of habitable space for the sole benefit of humanity, to the detriment of the rest of the living world⁹.

The 'economy of care and meaning' that is thus essential needs to be thought of not as a corrective to policies that remain essentially based on the extractivist paradigm. Our entire vision of the world needs to be shaken up and renewed. Certain weak signals show that this evolution is underway: manifestations of climate disorder and the poisoning of the biosphere are multiplying, the grand narrative of happy globalization has now lost much of its credibility, the West that was the bearer of it is in crisis, many young people are rejecting the future that was proposed to them, many are militating against the established order, or even turning towards lifestyles that are more respectful of the environment.

3. Conclusion

We need to be respectful of the diversity of approaches. His message can thus be reduced to a simple precept: we need to learn or relearn how to care and give meaning to each and every one of our actions. We need to develop our ability to live together, with others, human and non-human, on a single territory that constitutes a common good for all living things. We need to develop our way of life and our activities by conceiving what is valuable in a different way. What is valuable is not, or not only, the artefacts, useful or not, that we accumulate, but also a sunset over a sea devoid of wind turbines, a smile devoid of ulterior motives, a gesture towards others, including that animal that looks at me and wonders about my intentions towards it. Quite simply, to value life.

Should we expect the future to take care of itself? To do so would be to renounce the very essence of human nature. After having been nature tamer, he must now behave like a caretaker. As we have shown, the Social Solidarity Economy (SSE) has understood this. But the SSE itself needs to reinvent itself around a social entrepreneurship that provides care and meaning.

The entire economy must now be transformed to serve this need. The economy is based on entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship is about finding solutions to problems. But human activity, as it was conceived and is experienced, has itself become a problem. Entrepreneurship must now be the entrepreneurship

⁹ Bourg, Dominique et Whiteside, Kerry, *Vers une démocratie écologique*, Le Seuil, col. La République des idées, 2010.

of care and meaning. That's why we're inviting you to move **towards an economy of care and meaning**. The creation of an international transdisciplinary chair would be an invaluable step in this direction.

Acknowledgment and conflicts of interest

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Any errors or omissions are our own.

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