

# The theme of the Catastrophe in the Information Society

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## 1 ABSTRACT.

During several eras (the Second Empire in France, around 1900 in Vienna, between the two World Wars and nowadays) Opinion has been influenced by three groups: Optimists, Pessimists and Analysts. We find a kind of social theory on Optimism in the book "Jacques Offenbach" written by the German sociologist Kracauer. Concerning Pessimists, they wish the Catastrophe because they believe in the "world to subvert". Analysts provide realistic analyses which are ignored. They have little influence.

According to the German sociologist Tonnies, we have to distinguish "opinions" and "The Opinion". The last is more structured, stable and is slowly educated.

Concerning cities, the hope is that the Analysts will educate "The Opinion". Are involved these analysts who insist on equilibrium (in particular when environment is concerned) and reject the "world to subvert". This will save cities being like in the vision of the Austrian writer Hermann Broch: the place where the masses expect the pseudo-ecstasies promised by demagogues.

## 2 INTRODUCTION.

Often in the past, Opinion has been influenced by three groups: Optimists, Pessimists and Analysts. We give four examples: Second Empire in France, Vienna around 1900, the era between the two World Wars and ... nowadays. While a catastrophe approaches, Optimists diffuse cheerfulness and announce happiness, Pessimists wish another catastrophe than the real one (which will occur), Analysts are realistic but without any influence.

To analyse Optimism as a social phenomenon, we shall use the theory of the German sociologist Siegfried Kracauer on Offenbach. Pessimists are understood as those believing in the world to be subverted. Concerning Analysts, we give several examples. One of them is the German sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies who was convinced that there is a stable opinion one can educate.

Nowadays the three groups are active on Internet. We should favour the sites which provide analyses and educate the Opinion in the sense of Tonnies, the stakes being obviously Peace and to Save the Planet.

## 3 THE THREE STREAMS INFLUENCING OPINION.

Let us present the three streams during several eras in this table:

	Optimism	Wished catastrophes (Pessimists)	Analysts
Second Empire	Offenbach	Revolution Counter-revolution	Maurice Joly <sup>(1)</sup> Victor Hugo <sup>(2)</sup>
Vienna around 1900	Johan Strauss	Imperialism	Robert Musil <sup>(3)</sup> Hermann Broch
Era between the two World Wars	Jazz, movies (Charlie Chaplin)	Revolution Counter- revolution	Ferdinand Tonnies Jacques Bainville <sup>(4)</sup> Walter Lipmann <sup>(5)</sup> Karl Kraus <sup>(6)</sup>
Nowadays	Medias, singers	Fundamentalism	Ecologists

(1) He is the author of the "The dialogue in Hell between Machiavelli and Montesquieu" a lampoon against the Second empire. It is a realistic analysis of it. This text was plagiarized in the famous fake the "Protocols of Zion".

(2) The famous French poet was also a political man who plotted against the Second Empire and must go into exile. He wrote lampoons against the regime.

(3) The Austrian novelist described the contradictions of Society at the time of the Austrian Empire in decline. His famous novel is "The man without qualities".

- (4) The French historian criticized the Versailles Treaty and announced hard times for France, around 1920. His vision of France having Poland as a unique ally, Germany being a strong foe, was prophetic.
- (5) The American writer criticized the Versailles Treaty and politics in USA in the twenties, arguing that Opinion is omnipotent, but not rational (the citizens do not fully understand politics, even if they are informed about it).
- (6) The Austrian journalist criticized journalists using “phraseology”. In other words, he denounced propaganda by Press. According to him journalists were the cause of the catastrophes in the 20 th century, the first World War, the Nazism

Hermann Broch, an Austrian writer, coined the term “cheerful apocalypse” to describe the Austrian Empire around 1900. We present some of his theories later in the article.

We explain why Tonnies was a realistic analyst later in the article.

Now, we shall examine the features of the three groups in detail.

#### **4 A SOCIAL THEORY ON OPTIMISM.**

Using the description of Paris at the time of Offenbach by Kracauer, we give the list of the necessary conditions of Optimism:

- A place and a milieu. Around 1850 in Paris, there was Le Boulevard. Here the milieu was made up of rich idle persons, adventurers, beginning artists, celebrities, businessmen ... Paris was the place of the good taste. The decisions on success or failure of operettas, plays, novels ... were taken here and accepted in the world. Later there were Vienna, Hollywood ... Today there is the West Coast. Probably this kind of place is irreplaceable. Medias and Internet are a sound box.
- Technologies. It was electricity at the time of Offenbach (it was used to illuminate the decors of operettas). In Vienna around 1900, technology allowed the Press. Of course, the era between the two world Wars was the era of movies. Today there are TV and Internet.
- Adjuvant. In Paris at the time of Offenbach, it was women, even if alcohol and drugs were not unknown. Later, alcohol and drugs have their role.
- Cultural genres. There were operettas, balls and concerts, then movies viewed in cinemas. Today it is songs and musical videos, which can be loaded on Internet. Also, rhythm is needed. From the Offenbach’s galops (gallops) to modern beat, through waltzes, jazz and movies, always speed comes with gaiety.
- Talents. We quoted Jacques Offenbach, Johan Strauss and Charlie Chaplin. Today the cultural industry is very much sophisticated. Talents are detected. Songs and musical videos are diffused through Medias and Internet. There are plenty of names of famous singers.

Optimists provide oversight, dizziness ...and pleasure. They bring a social satire which is funny and innocuous. At the time of Offenbach, one laughed at the jealous husband and the authoritarian father (Love always overcoming obstacles at the end). Today, any sign of Order and Norm is ludicrous. It is the free personal whim which triumphs. The main theme concerns the Ego: desire, successes, failures ... (to show individual failures does not go against Optimism, since failure is only the inevitable other side of success). The collective dimension is only evoked as a décor: places, styles, ambiances ... The Ego is only in two states: presence and euphoria, or absence and decline.

#### **5 WHO ARE THE PESSIMISTS?**

A “philosophy for action” inherited from the 19 th century is expressed by the characters of the novels of André Malraux. The world is understood in terms of antagonistic forces: those of progress and those of reaction. Action is inevitable. One cannot remain a sage who does not participate in events. One commits oneself. One chooses one’s side, and one has to win the antagonistic forces. It is a kind of trial. Only the outcome shows who was right and who was wrong (the sociologist Karl Mannheim has described this belief, concerning Socialists and Communists). Arthur Koestler, in his book “The Yogi and the Commissar” has shown how the “heroes” of his time oscillated between action, logics and interest in Society and in changing it (the Commissar) and spirituality, intuition and interest in the Self (the Yogi).

The Pessimists wish the Catastrophe because when the world has been subverted, one rebuilds a better society.

Let us present some of these choices:

	Subversion
Culture	Outstanding men benefit from the events of their time to create new styles and values (Nietzsche) <sup>(7)</sup>
Technology	Destructive creation (Schumpeter)
Tradition	Community returning to its authentic tradition (Spengler)
Politics	Extreme left and extreme right

(7) The Nietzsche's teacher, the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt, praised the Renaissance in Italy putting an end to the civilization of Middle Ages (creative destruction).

Today one cannot wish a Catastrophe. The stake is to maintain and restore equilibriums. One cannot believe that a better society will emerge from the subverted world.

The stakes and failures for cities have been defined differently in the past:

	Stakes for cities	Failure
18 th century	Reason	Barbarism
19 th century	Utopia	Disorder
20 th century	Progress	Regression
21 th century	Equilibrium	Destruction

## 6 AN EXAMPLE OF A REALISTIC ANALYST: FERDINAND TONNIES.

Let us insist on the Tonnies's theories, since he was a realistic analyst on several topics (the behaviour of the working class and the haves not, the Nazis, Opinion...).

According to him, the human being is explained by two contradictory wills, the organic will and the reflexive will:

- The organic will. It exists at the individual level (heredity) and explains subjectivity: habits, memory, and pleasure. Collectively, it is the Community. The organ cannot be separated from the organism. The goal of the organism is to continue its life. The Community strives to survive.
- The reflexive will. It is the realm of desire, knowledge and self-interest. The goal is happiness and satisfaction, the means domination.

Spatially, the Community corresponds to countryside and the village, Society to the city. Society is based on exchange, money and trade.

The opposition concerns many fields: statute /contract, woman and child / man, young / old, people / educated men...

Tonnies announced a catastrophe because of the behaviour of the working class and the haves not:

- The worker does not appropriate the product of his work. Also, he spends the money he earns immediately, to meet the needs of himself and his family. At the opposite, the money the capitalist earns is a means to earn more money. The workers can struggle to increase their wages, which have to be between two levels: the lower level allows the worker and his family to survive, the upper level threatens the existence of the capitalists' profit. Therefore, struggling workers could destroy capitalism. In modern words, Tonnies uses the notion of contingency, concerning social classes.
- In the city, which is necessary to the reflexive will to struggle against the organic will, the haves are the hostages of the haves not. The revenge of the haves not is possible (urban riots, revolutions ...). There are obstacles: conventions, the state and public opinion.

Tonnies was an opponent of the Nazis. According to him, the political evolution of Germany in the thirties was catastrophic.

Tonnies has written a book on Opinion. He denounces the “traffic of opinions”, opinions being like goods which can be bought (he cites examples in the German press around 1910).

He considers two kinds of opinion:

- The Opinion is like a deliberative assembly which votes and takes decisions. It is stable and long lasting. It accepts innovations but after an education, which is slow and uneasy.
- Opinions are in a fluid, “gaseous” state, transient, submitted to fashions and adverse to innovations.

On this topic also, Tonnies uses the notion of contingency. Let us recall what Arthur Koestler wrote about modern science in “The Yogi and the Commissar”: there are “levels of systematization” in physics, biology and sociology. The upper level is free and the lower level is dependent (as in the case: molecule / cell / organ / body). If the upper plan is free and the lower plan dependent, Opinion cannot be influenced by anybody or any group. It is the kind of hypothesis chosen by Walter Lippmann: the short-sighted dictatorship of the Opinion. The opposite hypothesis is that Opinion can be easily educated and is shaped by knowledge. The Tonnies’s theory is between the two hypotheses: to educate Opinion is possible, but slow and uneasy.

## 7 CONCLUSION

As Tonnies, the Austrian writer Hermann Broch has described people in cities who are threatened by catastrophes, the recourse being “education”.

They are in a “crepuscular state”, due to the atomization of values and the complex choices to make in the modern society (in the field of knowledge, for instance). The result is a sentiment of wrench and even panics. Demagogues influence them, promising “pseudo-ecstasies” provided by “victories”. The city is the place of rationality, apparently only. The reality of the city is shown by technology, sport and game. The means accumulated in the city are used to achieve the “victories” promised by demagogues. The city is “Promethean” and continues to accumulate means. The “Rural Revolution” (Virgil, Rousseau, Tolstoy) never happened. The distance between the city and Nature increases. In the cities, individuals accept their culture, but without participation in it, as a frozen convention.

To avoid the catastrophic influence of demagogues Broch proposes recourses. Surprisingly, his model comes from Religion. Religion proposes a few clear, simple values. It allows an “expansion of the Ego” when the world is known and the role of the Ego in it is understood (“gain in irrationality”, opposed to “loss of rationality” in the crepuscular state). Broch proposed techniques to educate people: examples are the “depreciation of victory” and the “respect” (when the demagogues wish adulation).

Today, that we call “maturity of Opinion” is of paramount importance. Let us take the example of the world summit on the climate change in Copenhagen, in 2009, which was a failure. In the two countries which were responsible for the failure, USA and China, Opinion is not mature. It is for reasons which are ... more similar than dissimilar. In the two countries, one wants unfettered economic growth because it allows consumption and leadership in the world, but USA wants to preserve it and China wants to keep it as a possibility.

The three “streams”, Optimists, Pessimists and Analysts, are visible on Internet. If one is scandalized, let us recall the parable by the French specialist of Medias Pierre Schaeffer: the monkey in the mirror. A monkey does not recognize itself in a mirror. In the same way we do not want to recognize Society in the Medias, even if Medias reflect Society.

Now, what can we do?

We could not add to the existing confusion and favour (promote) particular Internet sites.

According to Arthur Koestler in “The Yogi and the Commissar”, since modern science has accepted “levels of systematization”, we should avoid confusion (that is to say, to use a reasoning which is relevant at some level to deal with a topic which concerns another level). If all the “laws” of Opinion are not known, we know some ones:

- Individual opinions do not add

- Opinion changes, but often its changes are brutal and unpredictable
- There is no privilege of knowledge, since Opinion is submitted to passions (because of national interests, political interests, economic interests ...).
- Etc.

All we could do is to favour particular Internet sites which deal with crucial stakes, in an objective way, while applying rules allowing discussion.

Let us cite two examples:

- <WWW.manicore.com>. The site of Jean Marc Jancovici is on the future of energy and the stakes of climate change.
- <www.ipcc.ch>. This site presents the works in prospective of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Also, cities are concerned by stakes like climate change. They often implement “green” policies (in fields like public transport, buildings ...). They can manage Internet sites where the principles which justify these policies are displayed.

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