

## Wisdom: the new political challenge?

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“L'heure de la sobriété heureuse

Laurent Ledoux & Roland Vaxelaire

As many others, you may have read about the recent upturn of the stock market with a mix of relief and perplexity. On the one hand, we hope that the crisis and its painful consequences, especially for the weakest around us, will not be as rough as we had feared. On the other hand, we are - although maybe reluctant to admit it - worried that a prompt recovery will prevent us from learning the lessons from the crisis, and thoroughly reconsider our economic system and our lifestyles.

Indeed, as many others, you may have felt an awkward feeling noticing the abundance of presents bought and received in the last few weeks, or jumping into the frantic succession of profuse meals, when Christmas Eve is meant to be, even for non-believers, an occasion for introspection. Some may say that it is good for the economy. But is it that good for us? Does this overflow really fulfill our wishes?

These questions are at the heart of the reflection that the economist and philosopher Patrick Viveret has had for 40 years. Throughout his books he helps us better analyze and apprehend the profound link between the outrageousness and our society's angst. According to him, one of the keys to understanding this articulation lies in the confusion that we maintain between our needs on one hand and our wishes on the other hand. Contrary to the needs, that self-regulate through satisfaction, our wishes, would they be for wealth, power or meaning, are limitless as they emerge from the awareness of death and are a form of resistance against it. The blind spot of Liberalism is to overlook that when one's craving of wealth, even when already rich, will never be fulfilled. The blind spot of socialism is to ignore that by limiting the desire of wealth of some by the power of others, and by failing to acknowledge that the desire for power is unlimited as well, the system may stray to despotic, authoritarian or even totalitarian. The reasoning is a fortiori the same for “religious states”, considering that their wish for meaning is even more boundless: hence, if some rulers opt for the control of “the meaning of life”, the nature of their control will be as harmful, or even more, than the control of wealth or power.

What should we do then? According to Viveret, you should act upon the aim of desire, by reorienting the energy and dynamism of our societies towards « better being », far from our frenetic race to possess more and more. If unlimited desires for possession cause huge ecological and social damage, unlimited desires to be a better being, which are for example embodied by the quest for beauty, serenity or friendship, as proposed by the best tradition of wisdom and spirituality, do not cause any problem. Viveret advocates then for « happy sobriety », as an antidote to contemporary outrageousness and angst.

Sobriety does not mean poverty. It means accepting limitations of material possessions in order to better develop oneself as a human being. It is being stripped so as to have enough room for the mind, for the consciousness, in order to better appreciate, savour and look for the quality of each moment. It is the renunciation of artefacts, gadgets that make you feel heavy, uncomfortable and prevent you from going the extra mile as a human being. It is a decolonization of our consciences that are heavily cluttered by our desire for ownership.

Sobriety does not mean « decrease » either because, if there is a need to decrease (or to slow down) in such fields as polluting means of transportation or energy, there is a need to grow in such fields as education or healthcare. Jacques Attali speaks of “adegrowth”, from adequate growth, requiring, among others constructing a system of production unceasingly adapted to new knowledge about resource conservation.

Sobriety should not be considered either only as an ecological challenge: it is also a social and democratic challenge because such a new orientation of our desires will only become possible if everybody does well out of it, which implies making social justice much stronger, more transparent and thus much more democratic.

Sobriety is not a sad and ascetic project, which is how one too often imagines all that is related to wisdom. Sobriety is “happy” because it is a project that, contrary to the rush for “more and more”, makes you go through the adventure of conscious human beings in the universe that, far from being threatening rivals, are the partners of a journey that is equally fascinating and mysterious.

However, as one may ask, isn't sobriety close to the types of internal, personal and private conversions that Jesus, Socrates, Buddha or Mohamed advocated before, without ever being completely successful, given the outrageousness ruling our contemporary societies? Absolutely. We may then seriously wonder how a sufficient number of people might become adherent so as to be able to intrinsically change the current logics of our societies?

Simply because we no longer have any choices. If we do not change, our species is rather unlikely to survive: sooner or later, our outrageousness, socially speaking as much as ecologically speaking, will lead to the destruction of humanity due to wars and/or natural disasters. In the past, the physical vulnerability of our ancestors, of small mammals that ran less fast, that did not swim or fly, that were less strong and less fat than others, was the source of the extraordinary qualitative leap that led to human conscience. Nowadays, we face a similar challenge, not a biological one, but a political and cultural one. That's why the wisdom required by adhering to “happy sobriety” is not only a personal and private challenge but also a political one.

But, concretely, which policies can we implement in our society and our companies to stimulate that change, before it is too late? Viveret, a former advisor at the Revenue Court, is one of the inventors of the RMI (Minimal Indexed Revenue) and the author of a report of new ways to quantify wealth (much before Stiglitz, Sen & Fitoussi), is bursting with ideas about that issue. He will have the opportunity to present them in Brussels on January 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> during two seminars organized by Tetra & Philosophie & Management.

Laurent Ledoux & Roland Vaxelaire  
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