

## **Has Ecocentrism Already Won in France? Soft Consensus On the Environmentalist Grand Narrative?**

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Several recent events have confirmed that environmental issues are coming to the forefront of media and politics in France in recent years: we find an evidence of this in the success of Nicolas Hulot during the presidential election campaign of 2007, or in the “Grenelle of Environment”, an all out program of environmental public policies the same year. Are these political events the sign that public opinion is ripe to adopt an ecological way of life? Not sure, but it certainly means that the ecological worldview is legitimate in much, if not the entire French population. After several other scholars (Kempton & alii, 1995), we propose to test the hypothesis that there is already a consensus about environmental values in France, and more fundamentally an environmentalist *weltanschauung*. In other words, we postulate that the old grand narrative stemmed in the biblical history or in the liberal and socialist ideologies have faded in favour of a new ecological paradigm. By the way, that is the objective of this paper.

There are many ways to poll environmental values and plenty of indicators. A lot of them have been pushed forward to measure ecological awareness: the love of nature with the scale of Schwartz values (Schwartz, 1994), the quest of justice (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1984), the environmental commitment by personal action or financial sacrifice, which challenges economical needs (Inglehart, 1995)... All these indicators lead to very different results. The European Values Survey of 2008 has chosen an original way which consists in measuring to what extent Europeans adhere to the ecological “grand narrative”, (Lyotard, 1979, Nisbet, 1982, Bozonnet, 2007) appeared during the seventies in USA and Europe, by using the

battery of questions known as “ecological paradigm” (Dunlap & alii, 2000). For the first time, this battery was tested in the whole French population<sup>1</sup>.

## **Methodology**

European Values Survey has been created in 1981 to measure the evolution of sociological values at the international level: the domains inquired are about family, friends, job, politics, association membership, xenophobia, and so on. In 2008 however, the staff in charge of the questionnaire decided to add the ecological paradigm. This paper deals only with the French part of the survey, a sample of 3071 individuals, polled half at random, half by quota selection, by face-to-face interviews in 2008 summer. For more information, one can consult the website of EVS<sup>2</sup>. These results do not permit to compare with previous EVS, but we shall match data with the American surveys, that will give us an idea of the scale validity.

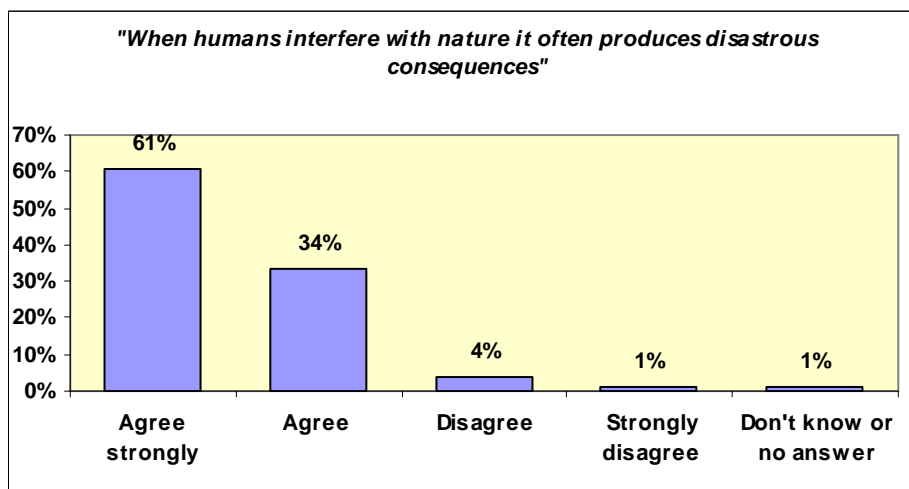
## **The Ecological Paradigm: the five stages of the grand narrative**

The ecological paradigm battery of questions has been created in 1978 and updated in 2000. Its underlying philosophy postulates a total ideological shift. In the beginnings of the modernity, humanistic and progressive thinking had promoted humankind as central subject of history in place of Providence. Afterwards, the nineteenth industrial grand narrative cast in the role of hero, either captain of industry in the case of liberalism, or the proletarian figure telling the socialist story. Notwithstanding this humanist hegemony, at the end of the seventies, Riley Dunlap and his peers suggested that the advent of environmentalism led to a radical change of paradigm in Europe and North America, and from then on, the postindustrial grand narrative leading character was no more a human class, but it happens to be the nature oneself. So we moved from an anthropocentric narrative to an ecocentric one, in which the comeback to nature, or better, to an environment assuring the quality of life, would be the essential finalities of the existence. This drastic change means that such an economical value as growth at any cost, stemmed in the liberal or socialist grand narratives, would be put in the background. The same would be true for religious values, embedded in biblical history,

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is inspired from another text: Jean-Paul Bozonnet, « Environnement, nature, techniques », in *La France à travers ses valeurs*, (dir. P. Bréchon, J.-F. Tchernia), Paris, Armand Colin, 2009, pp. 122-142.

which delegated to human beings the divine power on the creatures, and in the way, gave them a status closed to the antique Prometheus. Thus, the nature would no more have an instrumental value as a mere resource useful to humankind, but it would fundamentally be a special being, needing protection by virtue of its intrinsic value; this assumption leads heavy consequences about human non-economical duties as landscape defence or animal rights. Finally, the ecological paradigm according to Riley Dunlap (2000) is divided in five dimensions, which represent five main stages of the grand narrative: first the fragility of nature's balance and secondly the reality of limits to growth, lead to a third point, the rejection of "exemptionalism"<sup>3</sup>. Fourthly, this rejection is a form of antianthropocentrism and may result in a fifth point, the feeling of a possible major ecological crisis. The Dunlap's battery measures each of these five dimensions by 3 indicators, that is to say, 15 questions in total; because of lack of space, only 6 of them were kept in the EVS questionnaire in 2008. The battery began by the following sentence: "*I am now going to read out some statements about the environment. For each one read out, can you tell me whether you agree strongly, agree, disagree or strongly disagree?*"

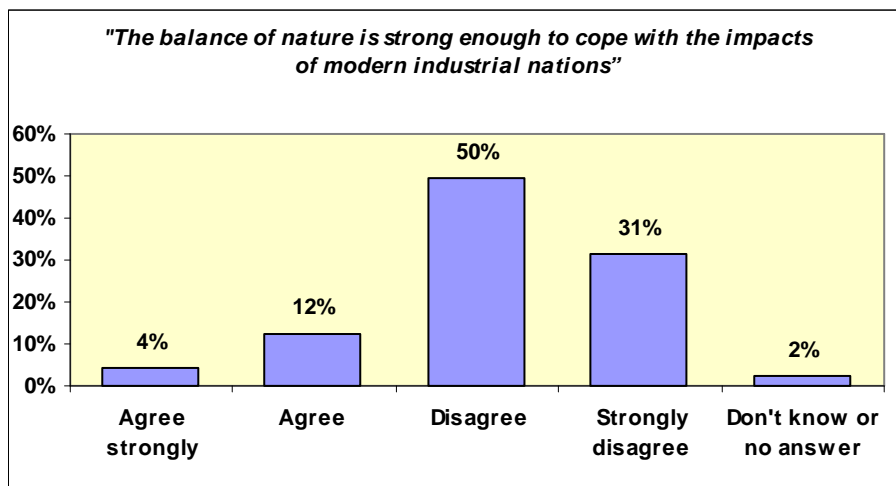


The first sentence belongs to the first dimension of the ecological paradigm, the consciousness of nature's fragility: "*When humans interfere with nature it often produces disastrous consequences*". The vast majority of French people, 95% of them, "agree" or "strongly agree" with this idea. There is strong consensus that nature once seen as a solid and permanent reality, against which human action seemed derisory, is nowadays apprehended as

<sup>2</sup> French website: <http://www.valeurs-france.fr/>. European website: <http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>

<sup>3</sup> This concept means that human beings, thanks to their consciousness and their capacity to transform the nature, would be exempted from constraints and determinisms of others creatures.

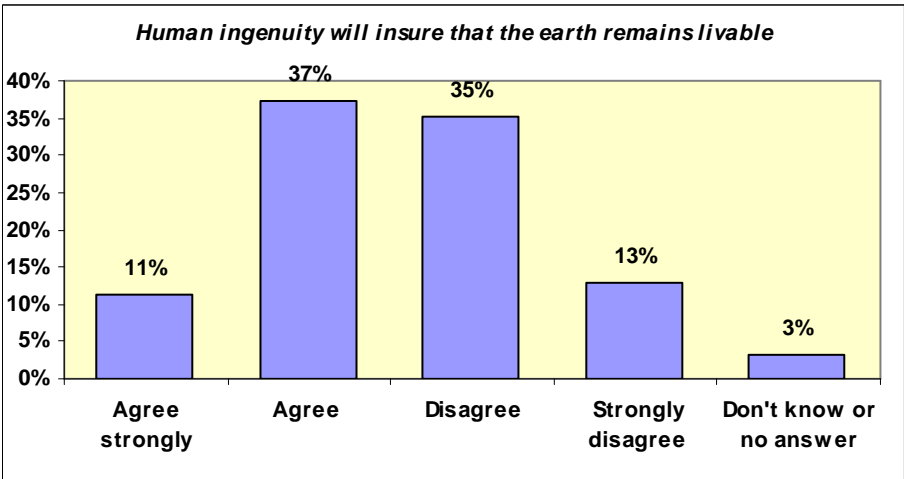
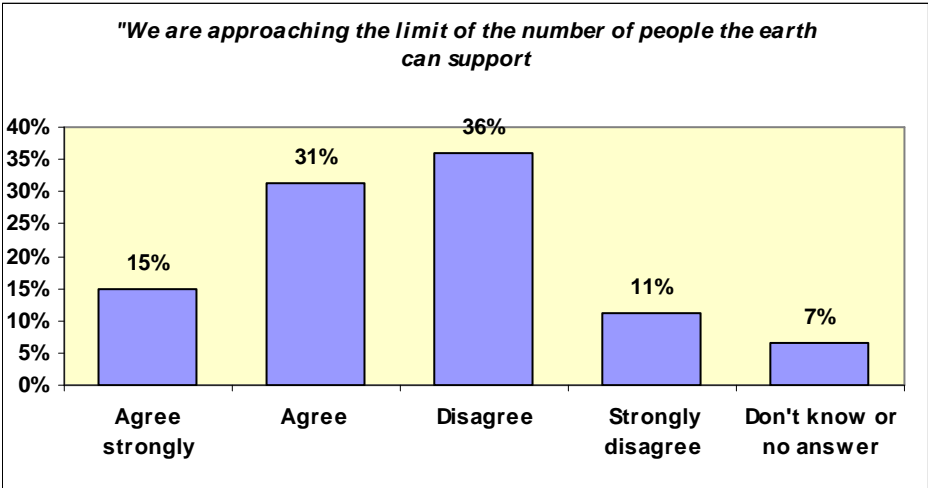
a delicate living environment, dangerously disturbed by humans. There no French point of comparison available, but we know the data of a survey for USA Washington State, on which Dunlap relied in 1990 in order to construct his scale: in this case, the results were also almost unanimous, with a score of 82% of “agree” or “strongly agree”. Thus, one side of the Atlantic to the other, we find the same general agreement on one basic premise of the ecological "grand narrative".



In the same vein about the fragility of nature’s balance, but in a negative way with respect to the ecological paradigm, another question was asked in the EVS survey: “*The balance of nature is strong enough to cope with the impacts of modern industrial nations*”. This statement falls within the traditional anthropocentric paradigm, which considers the nature as an indestructible and inexhaustible resource, even as the disproportionate opponent of old times. The results below show that the traditional conception of nature is a residue in France: only 16% of the population approves it, instead of the 81% who “disagree” or “strongly disagree” with this idea, confirming the consensus already highlighted by the previous indicator for this dimension of the fragility of the nature’s balance. The Dunlap survey in 1990 reaches a result almost identical with 80% of Americans on the same position.

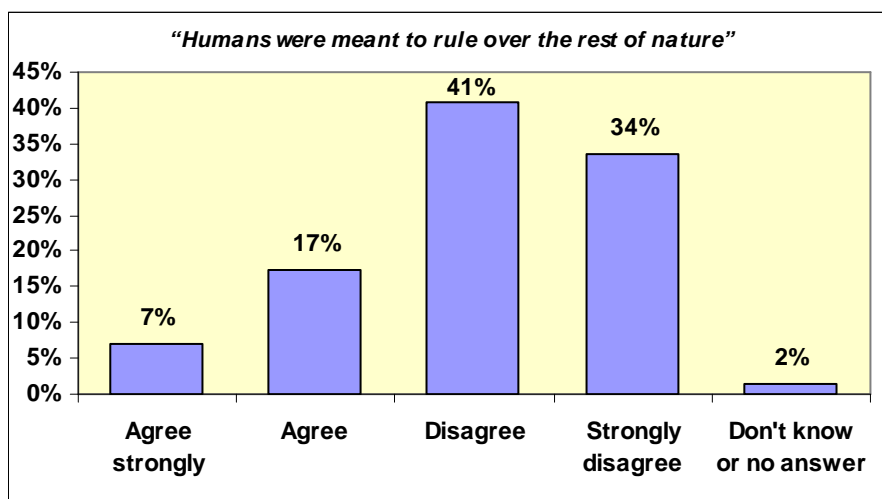
A second dimension of the paradigm postulates the consciousness of the economical limits. The indicator used here suggests that the planet suffers from overcrowding: “*We are approaching the limit of the number of people the earth can support*”. While industrial ideologies projected an economic expansion without limits, nowadays the concern over rapid population growth in the twentieth century is a major ideological component of the environmentalism. This concern has been emphasized since the end of the sixties with the huge success of the book of Paul and Anne Erlich in the United States, translated and

published in France in 1969, which anticipated dreadful famine in the world for the seventies and eighties. This obsession with overpopulation was the basic argument of the report Meadows, *Limits to Growth*, published by the Club of Rome (1972); and at the same time, it was the base of the election speeches of René Dumont. This statement divides French population into two almost equal parts, since 46% of them agree, instead of 47% who disagree and 7% who refused to settle. However, if this indicator reflects awareness of the dangers of overpopulation on the planet, it should be noted that it is also a Malthusian statement. In France, these demographical speculations have never attracted many people: it is rather the lack of birth, instead of overpopulation, which is the subject of concern from typical French opinion. This probably explains the relatively low rate compared to the highest in the investigation of Dunlap, who find that 53% of Americans favour this proposal in 1990.



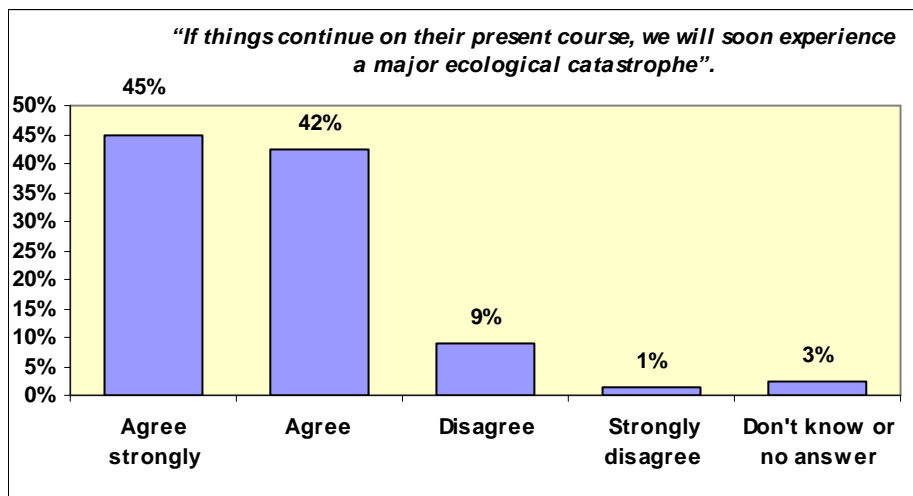
The third dimension of the ecological paradigm consists in rejecting the "exemptionalism", that is to say to acknowledging that humans are subject to the same natural limits as other living beings. The indicator chosen for this dimension tests it in a

negative way, and does not measure adherence to environmentalism, but the earlier Promethean conception: "*Human ingenuity will insure that the earth remains livable*". The results are perfectly balanced between supporters and opponents of this idea: the former concern 48% of French people, who finally rely on ingenuity of humans to keep the planet livable, while the latter, another 48% are doubtful about their abilities. We figure out behind this negative attitude, the mistrust towards science and technology, unable to compensate the damages caused by the progress. These figures are quite far from the consensus about the consciousness of the nature's fragility, and show only partial adherence to that pessimistic paradigm. At the end, the comparison with the U.S. survey confirms the stability of the scale of Dunlap, since 47.5% of Americans surveyed also fall on the side of the refusal of exemptionalism.



The fourth stage of the ecological narrative comes to his central assertion of ecocentrism, which entrusts the role of subject of history to nature, rather than humankind or a particular social group. In this case, EVS survey also chose a negative indicator, which tests in actual fact anthropocentrism, specifically Cartesian figure of man as master and possessor of nature. The statement adopted by the EVS survey is the following: "*Humans were meant to rule over the rest of nature*". The results here are unambiguous, since 75% of French people say they "*disagree*" or "*strongly disagree*" with this proposal, and therefore we find values close to the consensus already previously found. This Promethean wording is a combination of biblical reminiscences and Saint-Simonian ambitions, which participates in the two ideologies. The large majority of refusal that emerges clearly indicates that the both narratives, either the religious one that placed the Creation at the disposal of humans, or the industrial one that magnified the nineteenth century captain of industry, are now rejected in

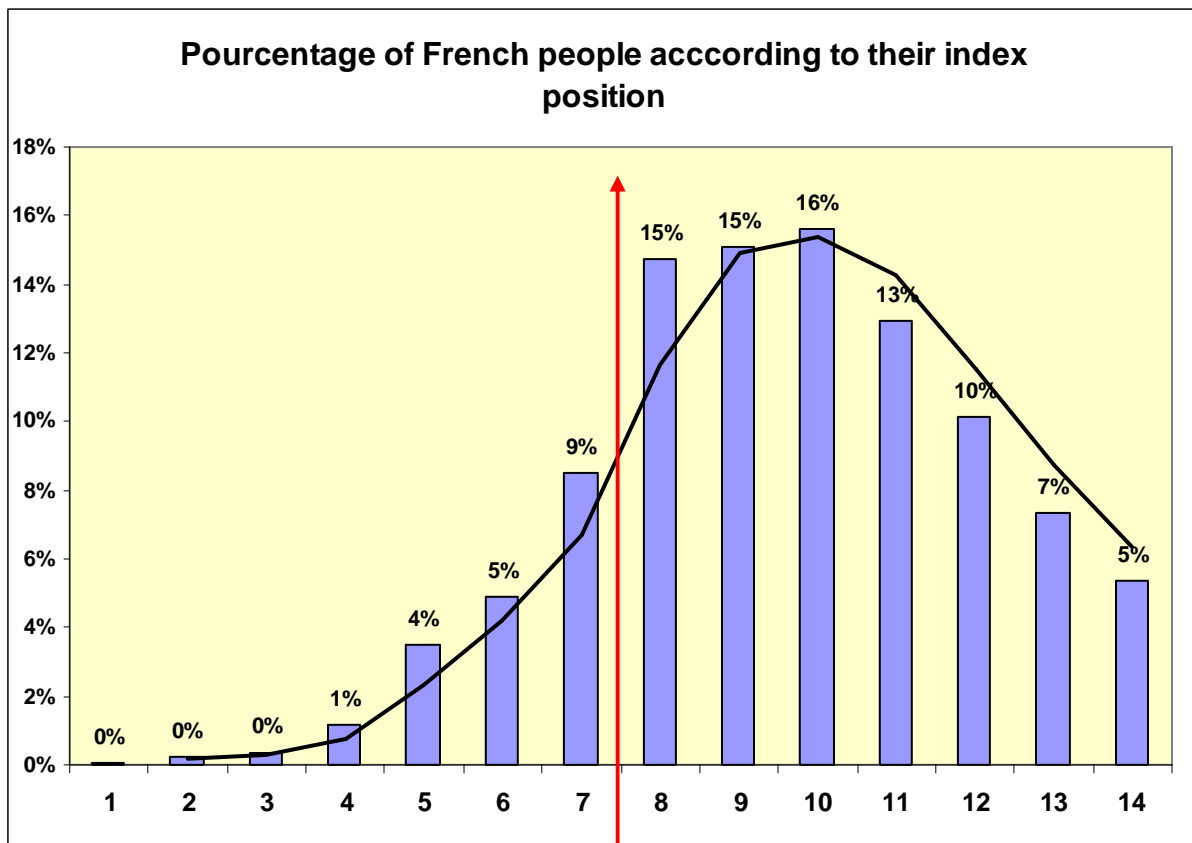
France. It should be noted that the results for the investigation of Riley Dunlap were only 58% in 1990: this low rate is likely due to an Americans' specificity, more influenced by both biblical culture and industrial adventure.



Finally, the fifth stage of the ecological mythical narrative is tragic: it ends with the environmental disaster. This last dimension of the paradigm, the possibility of an ecological crisis, was tested by the following statement: "If things continue on their present course, we will soon experience a major ecological catastrophe". The results confirm that French people consensually believe in this stormy parousia: 87% of them think that we cannot pursue development at the current pace without a major ecological crisis. Maybe we should temper the catastrophic appearance of such a suggestion; it does not imply unavoidable cataclysm or absolute impotence, but a foreseeable outcome in the absence of action. Notwithstanding, this gloomy unanimity reflects some pessimism about the current situation. This one is not limited to France, since to a lesser extent, 65% of Americans surveyed by Riley Dunlap were in the same case.

### **An environmentalist consensus?**

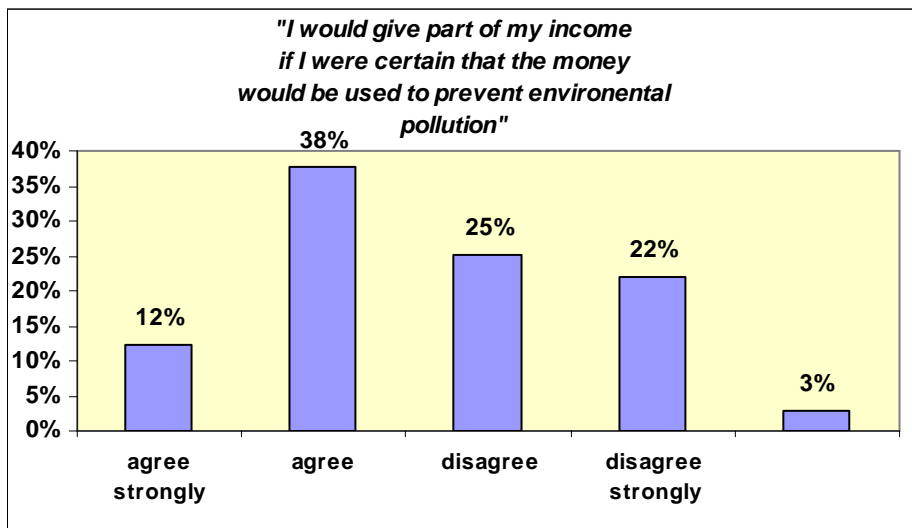
After reviewing the various indicators of the ecological paradigm of Dunlap, we can propose a synthesis by constructing a cumulative index constituted by the answers of the battery. To construct this index we pull aside the issue of overpopulation that does not seem appropriate to the case of France, and we keep the other 5 questions. For each of them, we assign each individual a score of 1 to 4 on the scale of environmentalism, and we add these notes: thus, we get an ecological index from the score of 1 for the most anthropocentric individuals to 14 for more ecocentric people.



The chart above shows the very unbalanced position of the French on the ecological index: 80% of them are above the average on the side of ecocentrism, and less than 20% below the average side of anthropocentrism. These data confirm the very large part of ecological paradigm in French population.

### **A soft consensus**

Notwithstanding this large ecocentric majority, a significant part of the population still preserves the ancient conceptions of the world: so the consensus is not total. Moreover, most people do not adhere to all stages of the grand ecological narrative, but only to some statements among the five indicators of the battery. Therefore, we have not in most cases a highly structured ideology, but the scattered fragments, and sometimes conflicting, and making cognitive dissonance. It is as if this great story was silently introduced in recent decades, pieces by pieces, not necessarily related between them. Perhaps, this is the symptom of a lack of structure characteristic of the postmodern era. In any case, the unanimous presence of ecological paradigm gives the impression of an ideological background vaguely defined and poorly understood.



At last, the vast majoritary of French supporting is far from sufficient to stir up environmental action. In the 2008 EVS survey, when the French are asked if they would “*give part of their income if they were certain that the money would be used to prevent environmental pollution*”, only 12% of them “*strongly agree*” and 38% “*agree*”, but almost half of them, that is to says, 47% of them, refuse. When all is said and done, it seems, that unanimity is a soft consensus, unable to overcome economic necessity.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, a grand environmental narrative has emerged from the sixties in the West, and has led a major change in the conception that societies have of their relationship with nature. This narrative represented by the ecological paradigm is now well rooted in people's minds in France. This paradigm developed by Riley Dunlap in the United States and tested in the European survey of 2008 shows this radical shift of the fundamental value system. Anthropocentric conceptions of the world, derived from the religions of the Book and then relayed by humanism and industrialism from liberal or social origin, entrusted to humans unlimited power over nature. Today, however, it is no longer the God of the Bible, or the philosopher of the Enlightenment, or the Saint-Simonian technocrat that dictates the new values system. In 2008 in France, these conceptions of the world have become minority, even residual: a grand postindustrial narrative focussed around the nature has replaced them. There is now consensus on the beginnings of this story: the fragility of endangered nature and the limits of economy. However, the French are more divided on the next stage and half of them remain confident in the ability of humans to manage the relationship with nature.

Nevertheless, the heart of the system of values based on the refusal of an undivided domination of nature, which is a form of ecocentrism, seems to have become part of an ideological consensus in France. Finally the last stage, the prospect of a future history, a bit rough, or even chaotic for the environment, is not to exclude for the majority of French if nothing is done to change the relationship with nature. Despite this dark prediction, the French ecological consensus is weak, and environmental practices do not follow.

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