Theory Euphoria through Crisis (Part II)
On the Theory of Organization and Social Movement in the Context of Crisis

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In “Theory Euphoria through Crisis (Part I)” we have learned a lot about how economists love crises and handle them. I can reassure you that social scientists and historians love crises as well. An essential element of social science’s research topics are social crisis, political crisis, and ecological crisis, all of which are often connected to collective, individual or personal crises. A few ongoing examples are the decline in the birth rate and the demographic changes in western societies, the population growth in developing countries, the energy and water crisis, the food crisis – with bird flu and EHEC [E. Coli] – now also in European societies, and the crisis of the welfare state, especially in European societies, unemployment in Spain and Portugal as well as the depth crisis in Greece since 2008. I would like to focus on the 1970s as perhaps the most changing decade for many of the present crises and certainly for the development of theories about crisis.

So what actually happened around 1973 in social science research? I would like to introduce three publications, which had a fundamental impact on social science research and the public sphere during the 1970s and the early 1980s:

(1) **The Limits to Growth**, a study published by the Club of Rome in 1972,
(2) The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles among Western Publics, a study published by the political scientist Roland F. Inglehart in 1977, and


(1) In a bold way, I would like to claim that the economic crisis of the early 1970s and The Limits to Growth, the most relevant publication of 1972, as well as the subsequent media coverage about the so-called Meadows report, were used as the starting point of the new social movements in western societies, and, in this context, were relevant elements and drivers of social and cultural change in the 1970s. The participants of the new social movements pointed out that ecological problems would change the economic system, since the 1960s that women’s rights are not only relevant for women but also for operations in every organization and social system, and within the peace movement that the NATO and Warsaw Pact states should invest in disarmament, not in armament.¹ Through citizens’ initiatives and demonstration, people were searching for and testing new ways of political thinking, articulation and political impact beyond state structures and party politics. Maybe the book The Limits to Growth wasn’t exactly the trigger for the new social movements, but the book did anticipate what would follow in the next decade.

Published by Dannella and Dennis Meadows, Jörgen Randers and William W. Behrends, The Limits to Growth was a result of the MIT Project of the Club of Rome.² This informal and international scientific organization was founded in 1968 by thirty individuals from ten different countries, to research nothing less than the future development of humankind. With financial support from the Volkswagen foundation, an international team examined five basic factors that determined the limits to the growth of the planet – population, agricultural production, natural resources, industrial production and pollution. The book was addressed to the general public and actively brought to the attention of the media. Thus, the impact of the results was rather important. The following three points were the main messages of the book:


1. If the present growth trends in world population, industrialization, pollution, food production, and resource depletion continue unchanged, the limits to growth on this planet will be reached sometime within the next one hundred years. The most probable result will be a rather sudden and uncontrollable decline in both population and industrial capacity.

2. It is possible to change these growth trends and to establish a condition of ecological and economic stability that is sustainable far into the future. The state of global equilibrium could be designed so that the basic material needs of each person on earth are satisfied and each person has an equal opportunity to realize his individual human potential.

3. If the world’s people decide to strive for this second outcome rather than the first, then the sooner they begin working to attain it, the greater their chance of success will be. The paperback book is filled with statistics, charts, and calculations which provide information about the growth of population, the growth of savings, world industrial production, and economic growth rates. The main claim of the book was that there are limits to exponential growth, among other things because of the limited amounts of some natural resources like aluminum, chromium, gas, and crude oil. Other limitations were different forms of pollution – carbon dioxide concentration in the atmosphere, nuclear waste, chemical concentration in lakes and seas. The oil crisis of 1973 seemed to verify the report’s analysis and produced a context which pushed the books main claim even more into the public view.

Scientific criticism was harsh, and with good reason. Scientists from different disciplines determined that the calculations of the trends produced invalid results, which were invalidated further by their interpretation. But even thought he study used invalid statistics and data, it illustrated the mind set and the change in the way of thinking in the early 1970s: turning away from economic growth models of the decade before, which were still driven by the paradigm of industrialization. Now the post-war boom was certainly over.

*Something changed in the 1970s, either because of the crisis or due to the relative prosperity that the western societies had reached in the second half of the 20th century. Another social scientist with a good nose for empirical data was the American political scientist Roland F. Inglehart, who taught at the University of Michigan and had published
the analysis and theory (2) **The Silent Revolution**: Changing Values and Political Styles among Western Publics, in 1977.³

It is easy to say what the book was about: Inglehart used Maslow and the pyramid of needs, which says that individuals satisfy their basic needs first, things like: breathing, food, and sleep; second, safety and security of body and work; third, love and belonging, friendship and family; fourth, esteem, confidence, achievement, and respect; and finally, fifth, self-fulfillment, morality, creativity. The logic of the pyramid of needs is linear, with individuals in societies developing from the bottom of the pyramid (food) to the top (self-fulfillment). So Inglehart said that economic growth and wealth in western societies had created a post-materialistic attitude in a growing number of western societies, caused by the following: The greater the economic wealth during the childhood of an individual, the greater the likelihood that he or she will generate post-materialistic attitudes and values.

With his correlation, Inglehart gave an explanation for new social movements and the political claims for environmental protection, nuclear disarmament, women’s rights, and civil rights, as well as peaceful, alternative life in transnational contexts, particularly in western societies. This theory also helped explain the founding process of some successful green parties in western societies⁴, which were the political expression of these new values and the so-called new politics.

If we take this theory of changing values and Inglehart’s research seriously, these changing values would generate more happiness and greater fortune in societies. In 2007, the political scientist argued that self-fulfillment and care, not money, are essential elements for a happy and possibly also successful life. Inglehart said that individuals should care for their environments. And if they succeed in creating a correlation between the things they want and the things they get, between their values and their experiences, they will have a very good chance of being happy or even satisfied.

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The next protagonist and intellectual is none other than the sociologist and inventor of system theory, Niklas Luhman. In 1985, he wrote an essay about modern societies and

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whether they are able to find ways to cope ecological endangerment. In this essay, which is published in a small collection or rather publication (3) Protest, System Theory and Social Movement, he assesses the ecological movement in a slightly deprecating manner. In general, he defined protest in 1991 as a form of communication which is aimed at someone who is responsible. Protest does not want to act, but rather, protest expresses dissatisfaction. According to Luhmann, the protesting, or just talking about protesting, of the ecological movement in the early 1980s seemed to be something like a “Formula 1” for all who wanted to participate in the political race. In the early 1980s, it was somehow in vogue to talk about environmental pollution and to know that the Club of Rome published The Limits to Growth in 1972, and that the scientists’ analysis was probably right. He also pointed out that communicative systems were “self-referential” systems, which always communicate about communication. He argued that the ecological movement, meaning the greens, were right in their positions, but that it was difficult to listen to them. With this thought, he justified the communication of fear as an alternative. For the following reason: The communication of fear is always authentic – also outside the communicative system. Nobody could claim that there is someone who does not feel fear. Everyone could also be in fear for someone else. So fear was becoming one of the most powerful arguments and rhetorical elements of the new social movements. In the biography of Petra Kelly, a founder of the Green Party in Germany, one can find the attribute of fear in her communication that could explain her charismatic strength in the new social movements and in the founding process of the green party in Germany in the 1980s. In every letter and every speech she is pointing out the threatening danger of the apocalypse in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

But back to 1973 and the impact of the early crisis on that decade: After 1973, it was possible for scientists to deliver arguments for social movements. After 1973, it was possible for protagonists of social movements to talk about disarmament and happiness in the same sentence, after talking about personal fears and the destructive power of using nuclear energy. After 1973, we could look at the founding process of a new, green party in nearly every European country, where not only do-gooders but members of the upper middle class and also hedonists were bringing a new style of politics into the old European Parliaments.


So we have experienced nearly everything in the years since 1973: new politics, social movements and a changing in media approach; strong feelings, love and fear; huge social capacities, intellectualism and participation, which were caused by the crisis in 1973 and the years surrounding 1973. As economists, social scientists and human beings – could we ask for anything more from just one year?

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