Alenxadre Rigal

English Translation

"How to change de world?"

First of all, thank you for staying. As I started to say, I can't of course summarise the entire past 48 hours within the scope of my area of expertise. However, what I want to try to do is to address the huge and extremely important ambition which all the speakers have impressively and resolutely championed. And so I've chosen a question which is much too big for us and for me, but nonetheless it's a question which we constantly ask ourselves. So I will try to pick up on a number of points which various people have mentioned, but I'll approach them from a sociologist's viewpoint, or at any rate from what I know that we sociologists know. And so that's really what I want to present to you, on a number of levels, from the individual through to - and why not? - the State. How can we transform these structures? I'm not going to dwell too much on public policies because that's not my area of expertise and some of you know far more about them than me, from implementing them or from studying them or both. So there you are, let's get started. And perhaps we should also bear in mind that even though sociologists, such as Bourdieu, who some of you perhaps know, have really stressed the aspect of reproduction and how societies are stable over time, or in any case perpetuate inequalities, sociologists are nonetheless also used to discussing change. Indeed, sociology was in fact born in the early 19th century and evolved throughout the 19th century precisely because such huge changes were happening then that a way to explain them was needed or at least wanted. Anyway, I think we can do both or at least try to. And so as you'll see, we can look at individuals insofar as they interrelate with others, and at the same time look at groups, institutions or organisations on a larger scale. This slide shows one of my sources of inspiration, the book which arose from my thesis. If you're interested, I studied people who do without a car, and I will pick up on some of what I learnt especially in the early part of this presentation.

So: how to change opinions - what doesn't work? We hear it time and time again: you mustn't order people to do something; you can't tell individuals what to do; that simply doesn't work, it's not effective. Also being aware of a piece of information is not enough - this is something we haven't talked about much but often crops up in the discourse. We tell ourselves: "Oh, people need to be aware of climate change and global warming" but this really under-estimates the extent to which we are beings with ingrained and embedded practices and how much we are attached to these practices. So that doesn't work. What does work, for example, is the logic of the dynamics of engagement. This means, in mobility for example, you only need to have tried a car once or taken a bus once to make a better assessment of them than someone who's never used them. So the very fact of using a vehicle, or any other object, tends to make us form an attachment to it. And this will grow as we invest time, money and also learning in the object. And therefore, this is one of many ways, in the case of the car, for example, the driving licence which appears to be a brake, is also a hook because we've invested a lot in getting it. So to the next slide: as I worked in Switzerland for my book and my thesis, I sometimes use examples from the situation there. But it's the same here too, though the Swiss may

be a bit more responsive when talking about the environment. In 2020, there was a survey which showed that, in Switzerland, the issue of climate and the ecological state of the planet were the topics which most concerned the population. But at the same time, in the same survey, this same population was against the rise in the price of petrol and, for instance, the motorway toll vignette. So there you are: the same people, and nearly all of them with contradictory views, despite the fact that they were aware of the problem.

I won't read this to you, but it's the idea that being aware not only is frequently not enough to cause change, but to the contrary, it can be a brake, because you know that it's difficult, you know that you won't manage it, and thus you're in a negative loop, and for some in a state of eco-anxiety. I've already quoted the example of the driving licence, and so it's interesting to identify these sorts of obstacles which arise because you've invested so much, learnt skills, bought a car etc. and because of that, you find it very difficult to change. And that is then you can think about changing it, for example in the case of the driving licence: it doesn't cost much in financial terms, it can be changed mainly by law, and perhaps by extending the driving licence to include other forms of mobility. And, indeed, why not acquire other skills at that particular time? Or you can take the opposite route: make it so accessible, so cheap that suddenly there's no great investment in terms of money, etc. That's just one example; there are plenty of others.

If we now look at the question of practices: you can't break habits and nor can you attack them, because that jeopardises the way people live and their lifestyle. And here, the same applies and I think that that was part of the philosophy of all the speakers: despite everything, to respect people and the way they live, because of dependencies, and because of our logic of individual freedom, albeit with limitations. Similarly, something that the speaker from Oxford said; he mentioned the fact that, with regard to recycling for example, he targets it when students first arrive on campus. So where does that lead us? To the fact that we don't change constantly and that we can't change everyone at the same time, because not everyone is able to change at the same time even though everyone can change. So we need to think on two levels. In fact, we do that already, you do that already: on the one hand, it means not breaking habits but instead helping people learn new practices and different skills. There was a lot of talk about this, yesterday I think, in relation to architecture, about builders who have had to acquire different construction skills. And on the other it means targeting people at a time when they are already experiencing change. So we change when we are already changing. As an example, let's take moving home, marriages, divorces - a whole list has been drawn up for research, drawn up just as much by people studying consumerism as by those studying religion. These are therefore really some of the most shared and most solid results, which already influence public policies but could influence them even more. And, while this of course needs to be tested later, in theory this would mean less resistance - individual resistance and also collective resistance - since if you are made to change at a time when you are ready to welcome change, your resistance is necessarily lower, with regard to your way of life and thus individually, but why not collectively too? Here's a quick graphic to show that habits are not immutable, that they can be changed since we've all changed our own habits because that's what we had to do when we acquired them. But once we've acquired them, it is very difficult to change them because they are unconscious, we work on automatic pilot and that is an enormous help to us in our lives. So we need to think about when people are able to re-train and acquire new habits. Likewise, I think something which some of us find fairly obvious, is the fact that the majority of major changes in the life of individuals occur between 20 and 40 years of age or 20 and 30 years of age, generally for example when moving home. This is a pattern which can be represented very well graphically so I won't spend time explaining it. But it still applies even though the numbers are now declining: it is easier to act on a young population.

You'll say: OK, we'll act when people are moving home, but then we don't all move home all the time, so how do we set about it? I'll just take the example of moving home and I've done a very simple calculation to show that it's possible and not so ridiculous. Here, we have a population of 8 million. Where does the figure of 8 million come from? From Switzerland, these are the figures I used. In Switzerland, 500,000 people move home every year. I've ignored the fact that the same people may move every year or every two years etc. I simply wanted to find out whether this idea I've come up with and which I suggest is in any way valid. You will reach your own conclusions, but anyway: over the space of 16 years, the entire population of Switzerland moved on average at least once, and thus would have been exposed to these motivational policies at a time when they were most ready to change or most able to change. This doesn't mean that they will all change, but it does mean fairly significant numbers in a relatively short timescale.

Here, I talk about conversion because sometimes the term ecological conversion is used: this is where the change is a more radical one, where all habits are changed, and not simply mobility for example. Although it may pain some of us to hear this, the results of research show that people don't change for ideological reasons. What they generally do is change and then adopt a new ideology which justifies their changes. That doesn't mean that the ideology they adopt is bad, but that's how it is when we study people who change, that is what we see. Once again, whether they're changing their car or changing their religion, so these are very solid results. Likewise, and very sorry to disappoint you, but sudden mass conversions and massive changes in a population attending a speech or an event really don't seem to happen. Or at least, it's never been observed. So we won't get anywhere like that. What does work is close networks: family, friends, acquaintances in general, I haven't identified that aspect precisely. That's something we could discuss. These are the people who can introduce us to new practices, and we will adopt these new practices partly to conform and partly because ultimately we want to belong, to be a member of the group, by sharing and adopting a way of life. That's how I got into cycling, for example, but you no doubt all have your own personal examples. Likewise, the easiest people to convert are those who don't have very strong fixed ideas because they won't challenge the proposition put to them. At the same time, they are also to a certain extent more malleable. However, events such as ours are still worthwhile even though we won't change people who don't share our ideas, because in general they tend to energise us, to boost our resolve, and that reassures us and gives us the confidence to continue. So they're still essential even though they're not really going to change people who are not already on our side.

What doesn't work? OK, it's more difficult to find an example of that. Some of us discussed this yesterday, so it was a way of summarising my 48 hours, perhaps not everyone's 48 hours, but the example I chose was that of neo-rural municipalities. There are some, of course, which have survived over time, but by and large municipalities which existed or were tempted, failed. And so, on a large scale, this does not seem to be a solution although it does allow new ways of living to be invented. What works much better is minorities in cities. Why? Because of course there are more people in cities, and so there is immediately a critical mass of residents and this allows small communities to form around various and varied centres of interest and this can then influence public policies. Sometimes, a minority which invents a way of life or a practice will be noticed and this helps disseminate the lifestyle. So in the end, it's the same logic as we saw for the Haut-Bois project: how a group of pioneers of a certain practice were able to propose a model which then allowed standards to be created which will apply for other buildings in the future. In Grenoble you have also achieved something close to my heart since I studied it and quite simply because I think that it's a wonderful project: the "P'tit vélo dans la tête" workshop, the DIY cycle repair workshop or cycle cooperative. This initiative first saw the light of day in the 90's and may appear to be relatively insignificant since it has only around 1000 members. Yet, on the one hand, it has helped create the "Métrovélo" bike hire

scheme, and thus the new practice of the cycling counter-culture has resulted in a quite ordinary practice spreading across Grenoble and further afield. And at the same time, it has had a snowball effect: there are now 416 cycle workshops in France so you see it's not insignificant after all. There are various levels when it comes to disseminating a practice, but it would be a mistake to under-estimate urban counter-cultural practices.

And here we start to look at more complicated subjects – complicated for me too – that I'm starting to work on but am still relatively unfamiliar with. It is actually what we discussed this morning. Very few people pollute a lot. Although it's not only people in the West who are big polluters, the majority of us here today of course pollute more than the majority of the rest of the world. And here in this room, we know that very few people pollute even more than you and me. So we could ask this question: instead of trying to convert the entire population, which of course is highly beneficial beyond the area of global warming, how do we change these elites? It's a problem which sociologists often grappled with at the start of the Cold War, when they saw just how few people had access to the means to destroy the planet with nuclear weapons. This raises a problem: to change things, it would be beneficial if these elites were very concentrated and monopolised power. Because it's potentially much easier to convert closed groups, than a diffused network and diffused power. This prompts some rather counter-intuitive thinking, which in any case is up for discussion. Here, I am starting to go outside my area of expertise, but in any event, that was the question at the start of the Cold War in the United States. Clearly, we must bear this in mind and we discussed this earlier through the word "anthropocene" which was criticised by some of you, precisely of course in the sense that very few of us make History and make the climate, and thus deculpabilisation as mentioned today, not holding ourselves culpable, is also important. I can provide references for you if this issue interests you; a number of books have been written about elites, the first one being in English by an American sociologist who, in the 60's, imagined the possible causes of a third world war. Unfortunately, this has become a topical question once again, but it was very relevant during the Cuba crisis too. At the time, there really was a fusion in the United States, not a conspiracy but simply very connected elites: military, financial and political elites, and some members of the same militant groups, who joined the same institutions, and were relatively interchangeable. However, if we apply this idea crudely to France today, although a full investigation would actually be needed, we can see that our President had a defence committee during Covid. So we can see that it's not so absurd. Notre-Dame is, I believe, being renovated and a general is at the head of the committee in charge of renovations. So perhaps we're not at the same degree of concentration as back then in the United States, where the idea of a military-industrial complex exists, but it is an important topic for study in order to find out who to change and who to cause to be changed, and whether that is easy or difficult. And so I've translated part of a text on the subject into French. But that is really so that we can discuss it or share our thoughts about it.

And finally, the State - what doesn't work well? We also discussed this earlier, the risk is that of reaching an electoral impasse. Let's say that a good proportion of our cities become ecological or at the very least include an ecological logic in what they do, but that the thinking nationally is much more conservative, and that there are thus constant interferences and contradictions between the two levels which lead to a certain degree of deadlock, at least with regard to overall change. And we can see this in the United States: if we swap democrat for republican, then republican for democrathe result can be deadlock in various countries, or in any case we can see how that could happen. Likewise, a "New Dawn" and the people's revolution are also myths; that is not usually how the great popular revolutions occurred, but that doesn't mean that they can't. In any case, sociologists have attempted to define the criteria necessary for a revolution to be successful. Then we can want it or not want it; all I wanted to do was outline the situation.

So one model worked well and has been used to analyse a number of cases throughout the history of revolutions, but above all allowed an American researcher called Randall Collins to predict the fall of the USSR, something which also helped make him famous. For in fact, the State will fall when there is a financial crisis, which may come from an economic crisis outside the State, but which also often comes from an unbridled quest for power which causes huge expenditure and thus leads to a financial crisis, so the State is no longer able to finance its war or wars or to finance the State apparatus generally. This is what happened with the USSR and we can but hope that this happens again today with Russia. I am not enough of an expert in this area to talk about it, but let's just say that these things happened in the past and it is one way to put an end to empires and imperialism. So what happens? You have the financial crisis, you have elites at the head of the State, therefore not you or me. But the elites at the head of the State ask themselves how to get resources for the State, and it is at that point that divisions arise within the elites as to the methods to be used. I won't go into any more detail than that. It is the competition between certain groups within this governing group which leads to a radical transformation of the economic and political system in place. Apparently, this is what happened in the USSR, which doesn't mean that a popular movement cannot ensure the legitimacy of certain elites over others, cannot accelerate the movement, or cannot influence it, of course. But let's just say that it doesn't start in the population.

And to finish, on a still broader scale: capitalism. Some people use the term "capitalocene" to define our era and ultimately, although communism did exist, it was in competition with capitalist regimes. So how to change capitalism: what doesn't work? In any case at present, it seems to be no easy task to drive that change; large-scale movements are necessary. Because on a small scale, you have influence over the governing elites, the mayor or their team, on the one hand because you can see them relatively easily, and on the other because the power differential between you and them is really fairly small. When States or larger entities than States are attacked, the power differential is such that access to the elites is well-nigh impossible so it is very difficult to influence them by social mobilisation. Then there are various scenarios, and I will put one to you, namely a crisis within capitalism itself, where ultimately no ecological crisis is needed to bring down capitalism. Here it is – make of it what you will! So once again there is an American researcher who suggested that if the automation of jobs and work, which has already started on a large scale above all for manual and industrial workers, were to continue, and if it were to reach you and me, i.e. the intellectual, communication and service professions, and if the majority of our jobs were replaced by machines in a quest for productivity and profit, then we would no longer be able to consume and this would jeopardise the hitherto unfailing capacity to always consume more and consume new products, produced of course by capitalist businesses. This would therefore be one way to destroy this system and so partially resolve climate issues. And then, of course, the question of the collapse and depletion of resources is obvious and you doubtless know more about this than me. Once again, if you want to find the references that I used, there is a book in English which has been translated into French, and which is called "Does Capitalism have a Future?", and you undoubtedly have the smartest people in that field, or in any case those who have acquired the greatest knowledge, each of whom have their own hypotheses about the future of capitalism, and therefore that partially addresses the challenges we have discussed today.

So that's it - I've finished. This was a subjective summary, but I tried anyway to be as ambitious as everyone else has been during the past 48 hours, and I hope I've given you plenty to think about.