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## From the 20<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a change of values towards a socio-ecological transition

by François Silva, professor at ESCEM Tours/Poitiers and CNAM

This discussion forms part of a project embarked upon many years ago structured around the role of technology in our societies and the way in which we are ostensibly in the process of shifting towards other logics. We are between two states, caught in a process which some call a socio-ecological transition. We are experiencing a period in which two worlds cohabit, together a source of tension and conflict, but also one of manifold innovations and initiatives, some that are promising for the future, others dead-enders. It is from this standpoint that we explore the relevance and operationality of the concept of post-modernity as a means of expressing the shift of our world.

Modernity has been viewed as the expression of man's control over himself and over nature through reason, in a bid to pursue unlimited expansion, with the implication that growth could be infinite. Emerging after the 16th century, it became the dominant trend in the West during the 19th century. The 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, was typified by an awareness process and a challenging stance towards a certain number of obvious truths:

- the Earth is a finite planet,
- science and technology have the power to destroy Humanity,
- progress generates an increasing amount of disappointment, disillusion and anxiety. The worrying picture of climate disturbance accurately symbolizes the limits of Man's control over nature and Reason does not make Humanity (see the Holocaust to the Siberian gulags),
- Our patterns of consumption and production do not constitute a model for reproduction by the rest of the planet. If everyone were to adopt it, it would take 4 or 5 additional planets to cater to needs in terms of energy, raw and agricultural materials, not to mention the management of waste and CO2 emissions.

Thus, modernity is about to reach its limits and contradictions. We are currently at an intermediate stage midway between two paradigms (modern and post-modern), which are jostling for position. Post-modernity corresponds to the radical challenging of the principles of modernity. We call the emerging era "post-modern" for want of knowing how else to describe what we are building, as Michel Maffesoli notes. This concept of post-modernity<sup>1</sup> arose in the 1960s to express the idea of a rupture with modernity. Just as the modern period, since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, was not termed "modern" until Charles Baudelaire described it as such in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Failing any other available operative concept, in the meantime, this period should have been termed "post-medieval", and not "hyper-medieval.

"Have we entered a new modernity?"<sup>2</sup> Is Man currently witnessing a new transformation, as Marcel Gauchet<sup>3</sup> asserts, opposing the personalities of our contemporaries to the personality types that preceded them?

For Michel Foucault<sup>4</sup>, our era corresponds to a shift in the conception of the world. He uses the term *épistémè*<sup>5</sup> to refer to this rupture. Our society could thus be thought of as building

<sup>1</sup>Jean-François Lyotard "La condition post-moderne" (*The post-modern condition*), Editions de Minuit, 1979

<sup>2</sup> Title of an article by Xavier Molenat, Human Sciences Feature on "l'individu hyper-moderne" (*the hyper-modern individual*) November 2004 No. 154

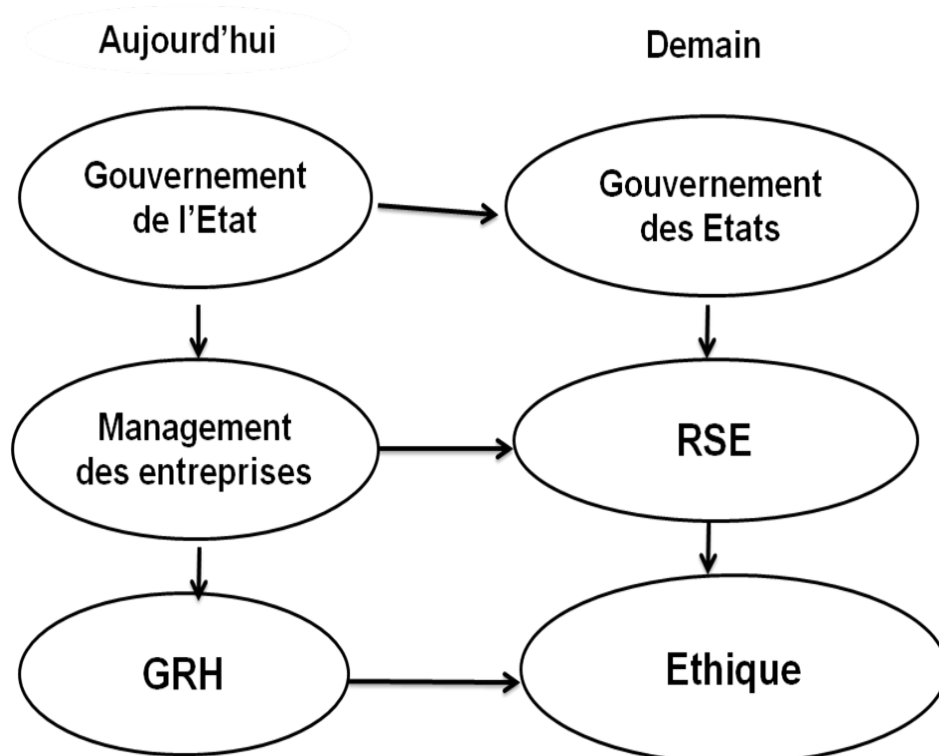
<sup>3</sup> *An essay on the psychology of our times*, Le Débat, March-April 1998

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les Choses (Words and Things)*, Gallimard, 1966

<sup>5</sup> This notion is similar to the Paradigm concept invented by Thomas Kuhn, who wished to use the term to describe a global, systemic model; there is a great similarity here with the Annales school in which Fernand Braudel developed his history of mentalities.

new modes of representation, which might thus together constitute a new paradigm. This change in the conception of the world has already occurred in different periods throughout History: at the end of the Gallo-Roman world with the emergence of the Middle Ages, and during the Renaissance with the emergence of modernity. Every time, these are major epistemological ruptures. The intermediate phases, however, constitute periods of tension between the two paradigms, given the interplay between different conceptions about the relations that every individual has with temporality, spatiality, sociality, privacy, knowledge, power, spirituality, etc..

Michel Joras had occasion to present a diagram representing the transition that we are currently experiencing.



This diagram clearly shows the national logic accompanying the development of enterprises since the 19th century. The economy and enterprises in the 20th century were driven by the wishes of the shareholder. After the 1960s, the Chicago School reworked existing liberal concepts. On the basis of their work, the neo-liberalism "revolution" imposed itself on the planet in the late 70s. "The problem was the State". Market deregulation was fast and furious, and opposed, therefore, to the Keynesianism and regulation that had strongly prevailed. One of the consequences was that the shareholder was given decision-making power and unilateral control. The aim, at the time, was to search for a new more positive term than value by which to refer to the concept of profit. Thus the stock market price gradually became the only criterion which shifted towards profit maximisation. Everyone is familiar with the speculative trend of the 1990s and 2000s with its financial drifts and "short-termism", which, for some, were nothing more than speculative logics for producing easy money at rates of 20 to 25% profitability.

The 21st century is drawing us into other logics: the globalisation of trade and the issues of sustainable development and social responsibility, which extend beyond the scope of the

single State. Standards and regulation are thus being introduced worldwide and are imposing themselves on enterprises. But for those standards to be respected, individuals need to integrate ethical values. In effect, in order for their professional practices to comply with these rules, individuals must carry, and therefore live by, values that enable them to develop sustainable development principles, in other words they must want to respect the individual and the planet, for "we do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children"<sup>6</sup>.

### **Emergence of a new paradigm: new constraints and contingencies**

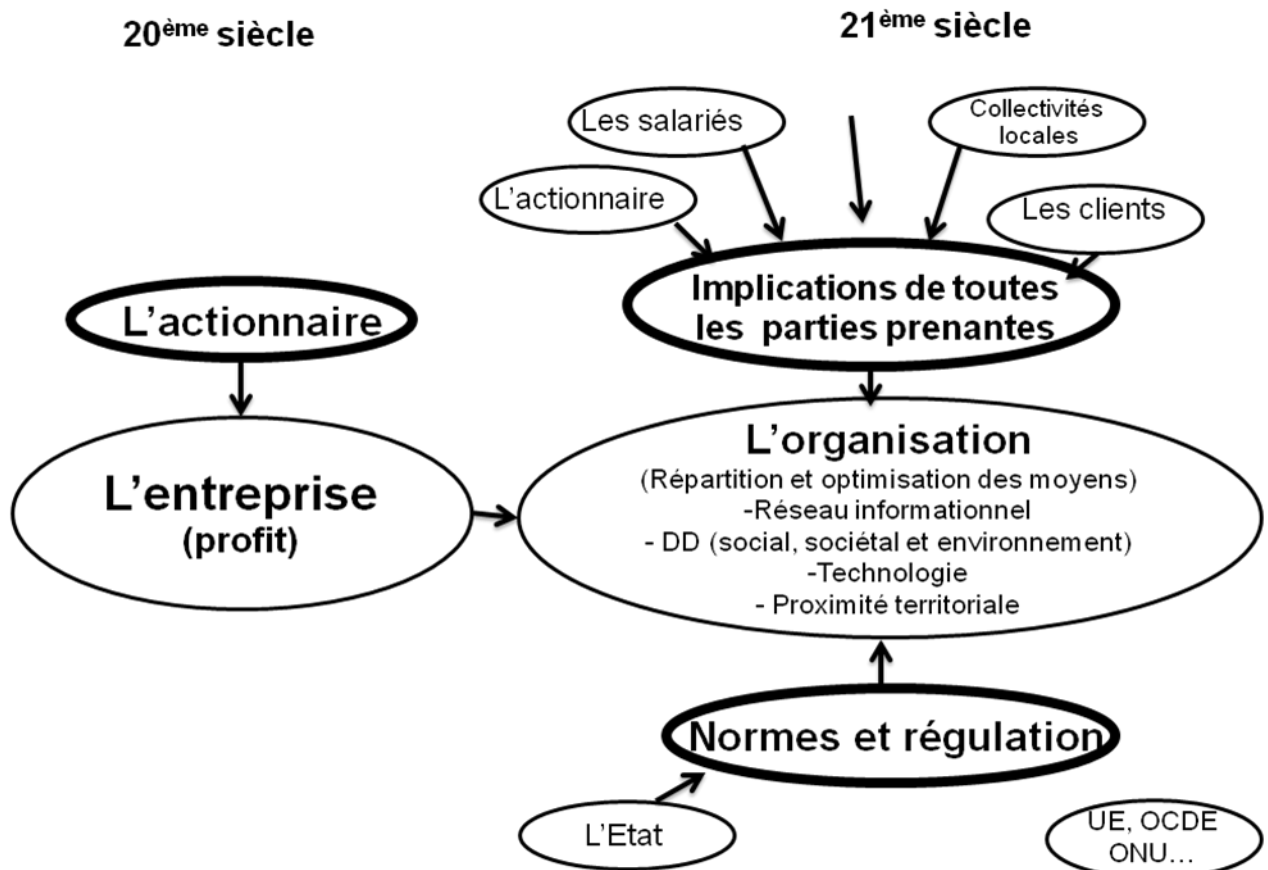
We consider it relevant to supplement Michel Joras' diagram. In effect, the legal status of the large enterprise, such as we know it today, was conceived in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with the creation of the joint stock company. It was a means of gathering the necessary investments required for building blast furnaces, railways or mines. However, the governance of these global corporations today can no longer lie solely in the relations between shareholders. For, as Antoine Reberieux<sup>7</sup> underlines, another aspect of financial capitalism, less to the force during this crisis, "is nevertheless directly at issue: namely the "shareholder" model of corporate governance, the failings of which manifested themselves both in the bankruptcy of the Lehman Brothers and in that of the Texan company Enron, just as spectacular an occurrence seven years earlier." As we have pointed out, the neo-liberal wave of the 80s spread the idea that only the shareholder, as the bearer of investment risks, should have the power and retribution for value creation. To believe this is to disregard the other stakeholders in an enterprise, the managers, as well as the employees, the subcontractors and suppliers, local communities and the entire living environment.

We meet again the fundamental idea that has prevailed over the development of the sustainable development concept: the life of the individual is subsumed into the history of humanity. "*We do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children*", as Antoine de St-Exupéry made us aware back in the 1930s.

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<sup>6</sup> Saint Exupéry, *Terre des Hommes (Wind, Sand and Stars)*, Gallimard

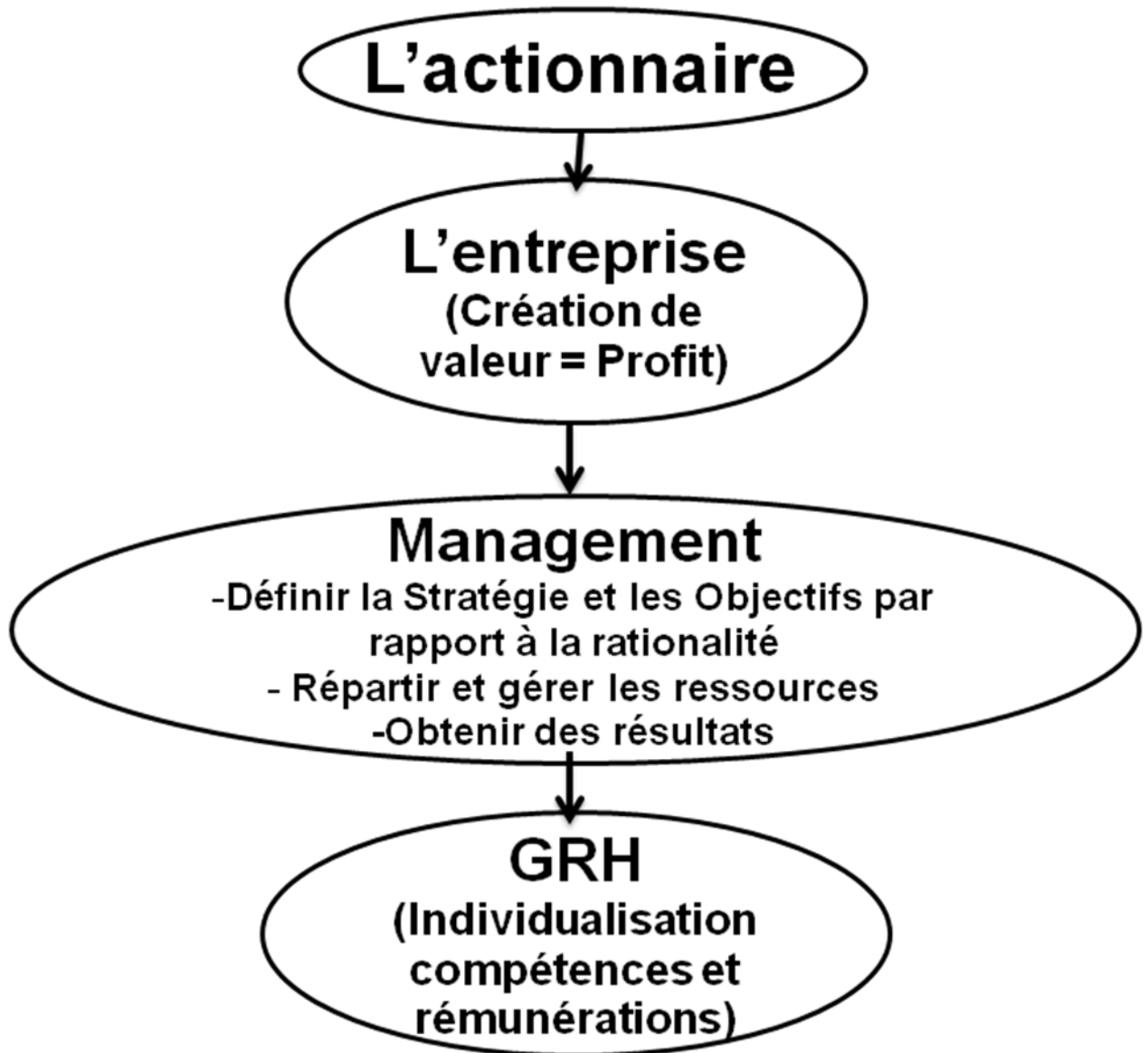
<sup>7</sup> Cahier Français, *Le capitalisme : mutations et diversité (Capitalism: transformations and diversity)*, March-April 2009, no.349, Edition produced under the direction of Olivia Montel-Dumont



**The individual is a social and affective being**

The entire approach of the methods engineer has been to optimise the work organisation by seeking to rationalise processes. The principles of scientific management were developed on this basis. Since the first industrial revolution, the entire history of the enterprise has been made up of a sequence of productivity gains. Thus, we will be able to produce increasing quantities of products employing increasingly fewer resources (human, energy, material, etc.) and in increasingly shorter timeframes. It is the result of constant changes in the work organisation and the introduction of new tools.

Fonctionnement de l'entreprise au 20<sup>ème</sup> siècle



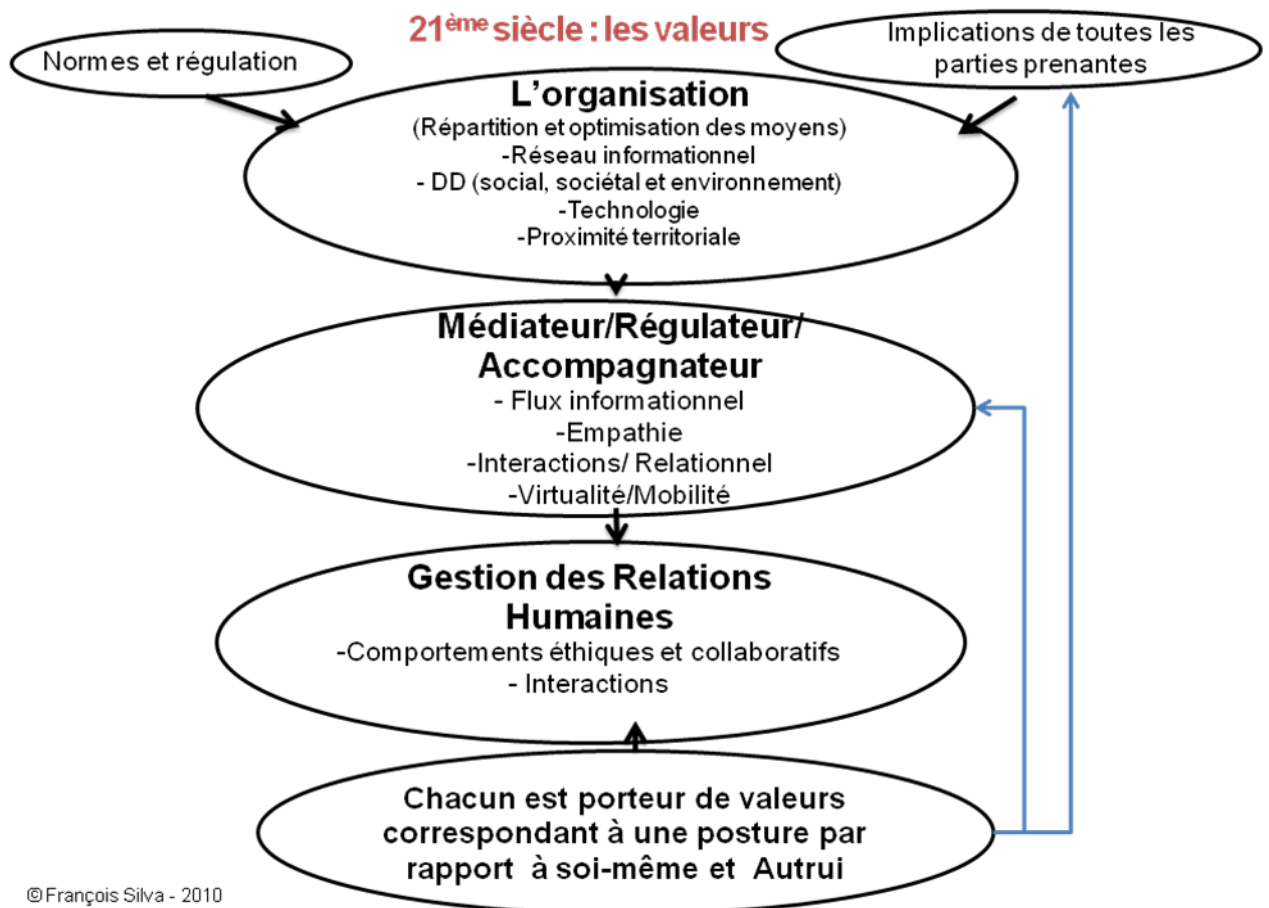
Throughout the 20th century, we encounter the idea that the work organisation should be structured and restructured around a principle of rationalisation, disregarding any affective impulses within the enterprise. When have we not heard managers say to their subordinates "Your moods are not my problem"? It forms part of the logic of cracking down on worker idleness as defined and pursued by Frederick W. Taylor.

Modernity, in its desire to individualise every person, has made us forget that a human being is first and foremost a social and affective being. The individual is an emanation and stakeholder of a social body consisting of attitudes and emotions. The entire sociology of the 20th century has been applied to a study of these socialisation processes: from Norbert Elias and his civilisation process through to Lucien Masson and his "*enfants sauvages*".

In a desire to shuffle off the yoke of the community that was stifling even the vaguest desire for autonomy, there developed an individualism after the Renaissance. This led, during the

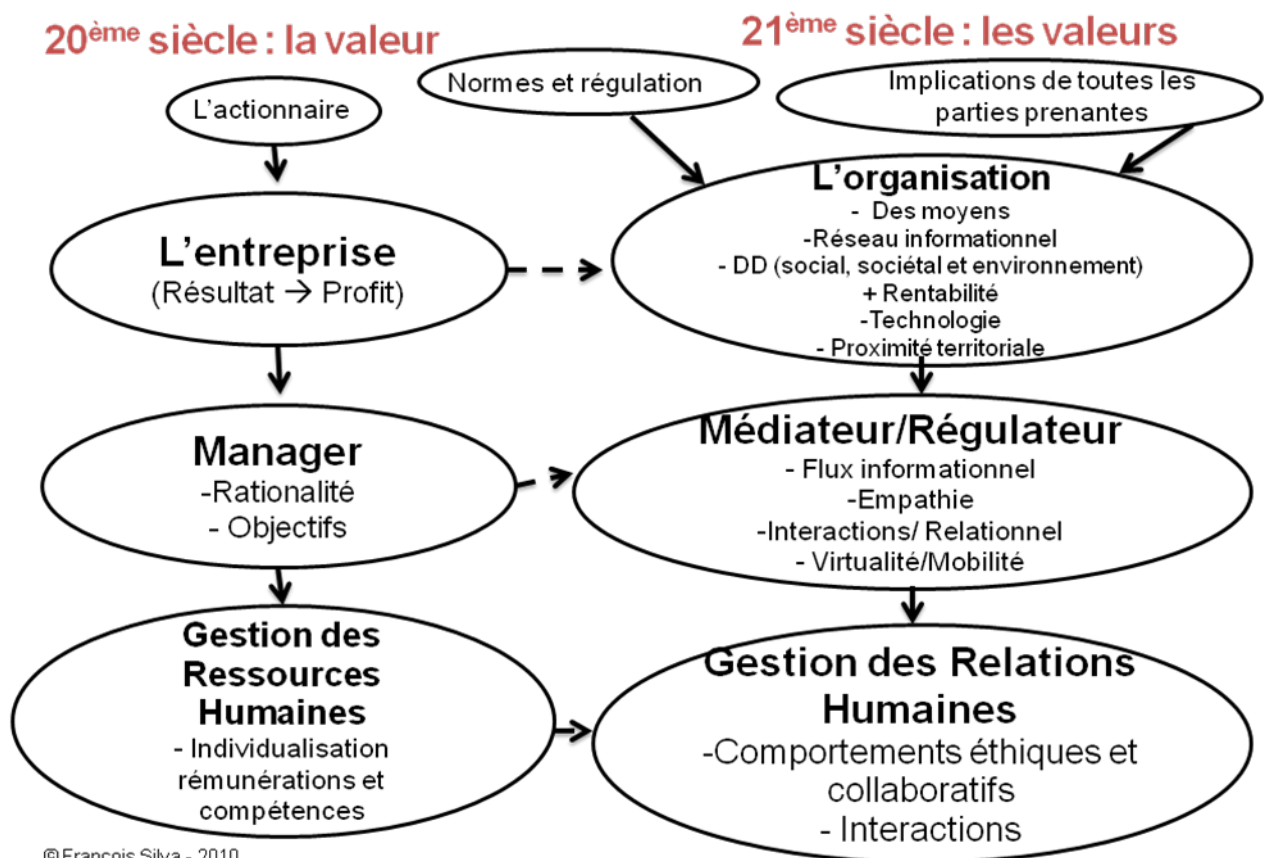
20th century, to an egoism and narcissism detrimental to life in society and to the principle of solidarity and fraternity that every individual must develop in his own circle and for his offspring. As the 5th century Babylonian Talmud stated: *"If I don't think of me, who else will? But if I only think of me, will I still be me?"* These principles, which form the basis of any human society, may be found in the concept that Marcel Mauss developed when he studied the functioning of "primitive" societies structured around the gift and counter-gift. This we may observe in enterprises where interpersonal relations between salaried workers are built on principles of communication of reciprocal esteem.

### The 21<sup>st</sup> century organisation



The 21st century work organisation must take account of these stakeholders, and the shareholder in his capacity as investment bearer is just one of many others. Simply owning the capital cannot confer full powers on that individual. He must share it with the remaining stakeholders. There is a principle of regulation and mediation between the stakeholders by which decisions must be taken. That organisation will define its objectives by structuring

them around 3 factors, each of which must be taken into account: economic efficiency in response to market needs, social and societal consequences, the impacts on the environment of one's products/services (throughout their life cycle) and one's operating processes. The organisation will need to break down its operating methods into work methods and processes while taking into consideration the three above-mentioned factors. The organisation thus becomes an organising process. "HRM" (human resource management) is changing shape in that it now assists work collectives to ensure that every individual is capable of behaving in compliance with the standards, principles and values that are being sought and claimed. Every individual works on co-operative principles, often remotely and in virtual forms such as new technologies will increasingly allow. But this type of "HRM" no longer essentially performs management, but plays a regulatory and mediatory role between players. It genuinely facilitates relations. It not only generates interactions between the different players, but it also, more importantly, optimises and improves the quality thereof. In effect, the many and varied tools, the multitudinous information and solicitations are all as many disruptions and interferences that ensure that information kills communication. Living in networked organisations means optimising one's interactions with the ecosystem. Individuals must be allowed to get to the heart of the matter and an organisation must allow its members to better control their interactions, including their information flows. The Human Resource function will change shape to help individuals optimise their interactions. Thus the monitoring and improvement of individual attitudes will play a non-negligible role in the support task of that function. For this reason, we intend to change its title and call it Human Relations Management.





If we thus compare the functioning of the 20th century enterprise with that of the organisation that will emerge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we note clearly that we are witnessing a change of paradigm, wherein an essential factor in the functioning of individuals will transition from value to values: from profit as a decision-making and motivation vector, achieving a result as soon as possible if one can, to the search for consistency between practices and values, but in a bid to respect the individual while optimising one's means.