

A Catastrophic History of the World

by Cyril Legrand

Jean Vioulac is one of a number of authors who have written a historical-philosophical saga of humanity as a way of reflecting on the coming catastrophe. It is not certain, however, that his saga will lead to anything other than a new catastrophic discourse with no prospect of a solution.

About: Jean Vioulac, *Anarchéologie. Fragments hérétiques sur la catastrophe historique*, Paris, Puf, 2022. 360 p., 22 €.

Philosophy in Times of Distress

In his latest book, *Anarchéologie. Fragments hérétiques sur la catastrophe historique* (Anarcheology: Heretical Fragments on the Historical Catastrophe), Jean Vioulac takes up a problem that has already been widely discussed yet remains no less pressing. As he recalls in the first pages of the book, “*the question is simple and difficult: How did we get here? It is only on this basis that, perhaps, one can ask the question: How do we get out of here?*” (p. 12). Insofar as this inquiry concerns the historical catastrophe, the one “*that has already taken place, in Verdun, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Chernobyl*” and the one “*that is coming and threatens to sweep away humanity as such*” (p. 11), it immediately confronts the philosopher with another fundamental question: What, in this context, can we expect from philosophy? And what can philosophers contribute to the continuous flow of documents, expert reviews, reports, essays, etc. being produced to diagnose the current and future disaster?

Vioulac assigns philosophy a demanding, radical task: that of deploying a critical lucidity that is dissident and heretical, polemical and subversive, unnerving and even dangerous. For only through such a lens can we perceive and experience as a catastrophe the catastrophic reality whose genealogy is being traced. The critical tone pervades the entire book: We must “contemplate our times via the heretical gaze of anarchy” (p. 164); settle “into a disquieting strangeness that throws a new, strange and disquieting, light on all things” (p. 173); develop a “tragic thought,” which alone can “conceive of catastrophe as the denouement of historical tragedy” (p. 348). In a nod to the counter-culture, Vioulac openly embraces the “anti-social” character of his approach (p. 161), and even, as he wrote in his previous book, a true “punk philosophy” (as opposed to “pop philosophy”).¹ But make no mistake: The an-archy in question is not the political doctrine of Proudhon or Bakunin, but the philosophical attitude of questioning all foundations (ἀρχή)—an attitude which leads, at the end of an archaeological investigation in the company of Marx and Husserl, to the thesis of an absence of foundations. In this sense, it is literally an “anarcheology.”

An Indictment of History

Since determining how we got here requires identifying the origin of “the catastrophe,” the reflection must also be fundamentally historical, or *historial* (p. 66). Drawing on Husserl, Vioulac clearly shows how important it is for philosophy to assume the primordial historical element: Every phenomenon should be traced back to its historical origin, to the point where “all ultimate questions, whether metaphysical or theological, become one with the question of the meaning of History” (p. 42). This is especially true for the question that lies at the heart of the book: To think the catastrophe is to think the *historical* catastrophe.

Here again, Vioulac embraces a clearly marginal approach. Against a history that memorializes and fossilizes the past, against all forms of historicism and teleology that fix facts in a Universal History, he recommends that we adopt a dissident and heretical position (p. 26) and that we “attempt to wrest the historical process from the conformism that always lends it the expected meaning” (p. 163). If we are to think history and its catastrophic future, we must “leave (u-topically) the spaces in which it is currently played out (the Museum, the University, the research apparatus, the archive, etc.)” (p. 82) and approach it from the perspective of the margins, the

¹ *Approche de la criticité. Philosophie, capitalisme, technologie*, Paris, Puf, 2018, p. 96.

underworlds, and the gutters (p. 338). The point, then, is to indict history instead of legitimizing it (p. 12) and to bring to life the memory of the vanquished rather than to commemorate that of the victors.

Vioulac does not hesitate to make strong accusations in pages filled with despair bordering on humor: History is the history of barbarism (p. 192), the history of madness (p. 244), a pathological history (p. 263), a permanent catastrophe and a process of annihilation (p. 270). He also specifies that this approach should not be confused with a form of decadentism, for the idea of decadence—which is reactionary, as are, incidentally, some of the authors mentioned in the book, including Houellebecq, Céline, and Philippe Muray—“rests on the naive idealization of a supposedly Edenic past against which one judges the present” (p. 191). In fact, he adds, “the current state of historical knowledge prevents us from fantasizing about the historical past insofar as it reveals—in all places and at all times—hunger, poverty, misfortune, suffering, hard living, simple stupefaction” (*ibid.*). In a way, decadentism is still too optimistic. Instead, we should resign ourselves: “History has so far been devoid of meaning; its core logic has not only entailed annihilation, but also the disenchantment of the world, the devaluation of values, and the destruction of signification; it can only appear as a tale told by an idiot, full of noise and fury, signifying nothing: It is nihilistic in its very essence” (p. 342). Even humanity’s greatest wonders have been achieved against a backdrop of suffering and death.

The Beginning of History: The Neolithic Revolution

Humanity, however, has not always lived historically—it has a pre-history. The catastrophe known as History does indeed have an origin: It began, writes Vioulac, in and through the Neolithic Revolution that lasted from the ninth to the seventh millennia BC. As the “true beginning of History” (p. 98), this revolution marked the transition from life as nomadic hunters-gatherers to one as sedentary agriculturalists-pastoralists (p. 105). It was also characterized by a break with animality (p. 109), the development of social institutions (p. 115), the advent of neurosis (p. 121), the emergence of religion (p. 121), the negation of nature by work (p. 266), the establishment of social inequalities and exploitation (p. 132), etc. In short, it was a

Revolution in the sense that it entailed a profound reversal and turnaround—and this regardless of its duration (p. 108).

While Vioulac’s analytical “explorations of dark historical times” (p. 99) may well be referenced and supported, they nevertheless draw on fairly classic, evolutionary tropes. As David Graeber and David Wengrow’s latest book makes clear,² most such tropes are at the very least inaccurate, if not totally invalidated by the most recent archaeological research. They also overlook the entire spectrum of hybrid practices and alternative lifestyles that developed during the three thousand years or so of this “revolution” and that sometimes lasted long afterwards: Indeed, sedentarization (which is not always accompanied by agriculture and pastoralism) does not always lead to inequalities (which also exist in hunter-gatherer societies, not all of them nomadic) any more than the creation of cities (as distinct from megasites) necessarily implies the emergence of centralized power, etc.

One might object that these practices and lifestyles merely correspond to transitory and marginal phases and that, in the words of Vioulac, “here more than anywhere else the philosophy of History, which thinks the event, must be distinguished from historical science, which is attentive to the dissemination of facts” (p. 111). Yet, as Graeber and Wengrow rightly point out: “An authentic radical project would perhaps be to consider the history of the world from the point of view of those intermediate places and times that are abusively reduced to ‘in-betweens.’”³ Vioulac does engage in such reductionism, giving the impression that the Neolithic Revolution was a univocal, irrepressible, and monolithic process. At times, he even clearly lapses into cliché—namely of the Rousseauist type: “Jean-Jacques said it all as early as 1755” (note 1, p. 97)—when he describes “primitive” man as mired in “immediacy” (p. 105), as similar to a “proletarian animal” (p. 110) marked by “narcissism” and “magical thinking subjected only to the pleasure principle” (p. 120) and living in “the silence of the windy desert steppe” (p. 133).

The Industrial-Capitalist Catastrophe

If History began with the Neolithic Revolution and unfolded as an irrepressible succession of catastrophes and disasters, it then culminated, according to Vioulac, in

² David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, New York, Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021. See the book review by Charles Stépanoff, “L’archéologue et l’anthropologue,” 9 May 2022: <https://laviedesidees.fr/L-archeologue-et-l-anthropologue>.

³ Graeber and Wengrow, *op. cit.*

another revolution, the “Capitalist Revolution,” also referred to as the “Industrial Revolution,” the “capitalist catastrophe,” and the “industrial catastrophe.” In short, it ended in the “second revolution known to humanity after the Neolithic Revolution” (p. 231), one that us humans may not survive. For as the author reminds us in a prose both terse and desperate:

Today, the signs are piling up of a global cataclysm that nothing seems able to ward off: climate disruption, continuous rise in global temperatures, melting ice and rising sea levels, ocean acidification, air and water pollution, deforestation and desertification, mass extinction of species, proliferation of infectious diseases and zoonoses, exponential increase in quantities of toxic waste, and especially nuclear waste [...] which are compounded by the prospect of the collapse of a global economic system undermined by debt and still dependent on depleting fossil fuel reserves [...] everything today indicates that we are reaching a *critical threshold* beyond which human survival is in jeopardy. (p. 167)

This catastrophic vision, which Vioulac embraces as the “epistemological horizon of our time” (p. 168), is no longer original or marginal: In just a few years, it has become the official discourse. Reports, expert reviews, articles, reportages, and essays on collapsology have invaded the media, and anyone can now easily verify the extent of the disaster. It is now almost a truism to identify “capitalism” or “industrial society” as its ultimate cause.

Here, the originality of the analysis lies mainly in a broad historical and philosophical perspective that presents the Capitalist (or Industrial) Revolution as the counterpart of the Neolithic Revolution, or rather as its reversal, and even literally as its catastrophe: “because it put an end to sedentary agriculture and rurality and destroyed the city in favor of the urban area, but also because it radically transformed man’s relationship to reality, to time and space, to animals and to technology, to the earth and to the sky, while completely redefining the subject, which is now subjectivized by its subordination to Capital” (p. 231). In other words, the Capitalist Revolution that we have been experiencing for only two hundred years is not only comparable in scale to the one that took place between the ninth and seventh millennia, but it is its exact reversal. Vioulac emphasizes, with Marx and against traditional Marxism, that capitalism is irreducible to a simple relation of exploitation of one class by another, to a property regime, or to a mode of production, but must ultimately and metaphysically be understood as a “*new ontological regime*” (p. 232)—in this case, as a new configuration of the world in which the whole of reality is subjected to the logic of value.

Towards a New Revolution?

Vioulac, then, proposes no less than a historical-philosophical saga of humanity; a sort of metanarrative for philosophers that, despite a radically different approach and thesis, is comparable to Graeber and Wengrow's latest work and to Yval Noah Harari's bestseller, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*⁴—which is quoted in the book (pp. 185-186). While this overarching vision reveals—at the risk of shortcuts—the scale of the Neolithic and Industrial Revolutions, it also points to the scale of the new Revolution that ought to be taking place. For if humanity is to avoid its own demise, another revolution is needed, one that is comparable to the previous two—a “historial reversal” or “ontological regime shift,” to use Vioulac's own words (p. 315):

The question of the Revolution has become self-evident due to the growing awareness of the unprecedented danger posed to humanity by the climate crisis and the destruction of the environment, and therefore of the need for what is now euphemistically referred to as [...] the “ecological transition”: But what this designates is a *complete* transformation of the mode of production, consumption, and circulation, a transformation that must be *global* and *rapid* because it is urgent, very urgent, which explains why only the concept of Revolution can enable us to address the issue at stake. (p. 314)

However, it is not clear how, when considering things on this scale, one can even begin to answer the question “How do we get out of here?”—which Vioulac promised to tackle in the first pages of the book. If the point is indeed to “initiate a process that would be as far-reaching as the Neolithic and Industrial Revolutions but would consist, this time, in a conscious and voluntary human act” (p. 351), then we are left with the question of how to proceed. Not only does the book fail to outline any avenue or lever for action, but this type of analysis generally leads to passivity and melancholic despair—if not to a form of “punk dandyism” (p. 299). Unsurprisingly, Vioulac argues that we must acknowledge the failure of past revolutionary attempts, some of which were truly catastrophic: “*The Revolution can itself be a catastrophe, one in which the promise of liberation is immediately betrayed by an excess of terror, servitude, and exploitation*” (p. 325). And the last lines of the book are filled with resignation: All that remains in the end is to “retreat into silence, an awfully vexed silence.”

⁴ Yval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, New York, Harper Collins, 2015.

In a 2008 book focusing on the various forms of catastrophic discourse, Jaime Semprun and René Riesel note that “this desolate expectation is itself an integral part of the catastrophe,” and deplore the fact that most catastrophic discourses, whose rhetoric can sometimes sound radical and revolutionary, take no interest in revolutionary practice *per se*.⁵ Although Vioulac adopts a “historial” approach, he devotes only a few lines to concrete revolutionary history (p. 335)—with May ‘68, for instance, retrospectively reduced to “no more than a moment in the irresistible process of development of the hedonistic and narcissistic individualism needed by consumer society” (p. 327). He does specify that these events were “missed opportunities” (p. 335), but nevertheless describes them as irresistibly swept along by the disastrous march of history. It is difficult, from this overarching and retrospective viewpoint, to fully appreciate the contingency of events and all the alternative possibilities they might have contained.

More generally, Vioulac’s work contains a tension—even a contradiction—between, on the one hand, the methodological precept to treat history as contingent, discontinuous, and non-teleological, and, on the other, concrete historical considerations that lead to writing a rigid and ineluctable philosophical-historical saga of humanity. It is as if, when undertaking the concrete study of history itself, Vioulac did not uphold the principles he championed. Far from “embracing the tradition of the oppressed” and collecting “the sparks of messianic time” (p. 338), he deploys a scholastic and memorialized history, in which clearly distinct periods delimited by revolutions are juxtaposed and emptied of the contradictory processes and crucial events that made it so rich.

Nevertheless, Vioulac does provide analyses that need to be addressed. Most importantly, he offers a valuable compilation of references and quotations on the model of Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, a genuine toolbox akin to the collections of selected literary passages once known as “chrestomathies”—literally useful knowledge. It is up to readers to determine the use they wish to make of it.

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⁵ Jaime Semprun and René Riesel, *Catastrophisme, administration du désastre et soumission durable*, Paris, Éditions de l’Encyclopédie des Nuisances, 2008, p. 123.

