

Sceptical Optimism? Dealing with the Problems of Our Time
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Pessimism of the Intellect and Optimism of the Will A Confident Perspective on the Future

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This essay revolves around a simple intention: to verify whether there are reasons for a cautious optimism concerning the future. The answer to this question is less straightforward than it seems: it might very well be, as the Italian author Pier Paolo Pasolini once said that “great pessimism always implies great optimism” (Città Pasolini 2023); or, as instead the American linguist and activist Noam Chomsky stated, we might be faced by “[t]wo choices. We can be pessimistic, give up and help ensure that the worst will happen. Or we can be optimistic, grasp the opportunities that surely exist and maybe help make the world a better place.” (Chomsky & Polychroniou 2017). If the second scenario happens to hold, we do not really have much of a choice. For sure, there is no univocal answer to this question, yet making sure that we know all the facts inherent to the present is crucial for providing an answer as plausible as possible.

An analysis is not easy to conduct since we find ourselves at a historical moment which can perhaps be best described with the term “polycrisis”. The concept could be defined as “a cluster of related global risks with compounding effects, such that the overall impact exceeds the sum of each part” (Tooze 2022). Despite its appeal, it does not stand for much more than a descriptive framework: it simply points out to the fact that the crises we are facing at present are somehow intertwined and reinforcing each other. More than a comprehensive theory, it is an observation of reality – useful, sure, yet not much illuminating.

What is more interesting for the purpose of this paper are the reasons behind said “polycrisis”. Only a deep understanding of the various crises and of their common breeding ground, in fact, can bring about a criterion of behaviour and moral action. Even the more so since the words “crisis” and “criterion” share the same etymological root: namely, the Greek verb “κρίνω”, which can be translated into “to choose, decide”. We will start this discussion by looking at the above-mentioned crises, the most important being:

- the Russo-Ukrainian and the Israel– Hamas conflicts, to be seen in relation to increased military spending on the side of governments all over the world (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 2022).
- the COVID-19 pandemic and its continued effects on global health and economic output. Rapid and unregulated urbanisation, lack of medical personnel and of cooperation have exacerbated the crisis. (African Union 2022).
- The ecological and climate crises, further aggravated by the uninterrupted state subsidisation of the fossil fuel industry and by the complete absence of efforts to move our economies towards a more rational usage of natural resources.

In my opinion, there is a clear interrelation between all these phenomena, a clear red line connecting all of the above. However, this connection, certainly stemming from issues of the economic type, is systematically ignored by experts and academics of the field. Why is this the case? To get an answer, a deep dive into the economic dogmas of our time is quintessential.

Modern economic sciences embody an operational working, rejecting transcendence but pretending at the same time to be evangelical. Transcendence is here meant as a “seeking” for (moral) principles that then guide actions, while evangelicalism is here intended as embracing a metaphysical framework to impose certain beliefs and make them look “common sense”. The first aspect can be seen when there is talk of the “invisible hand”, the fact that leaving markets unbridled is always the best thing to do because they have never failed at

bringing about the optimal result. In such definitions, there is no longing for the abolition of poverty, food insecurity, health issues, etc. The second facet is evident when we talk, for example, about the non-accelerating inflation rate of unemployment, GDP-debt thresholds or about the inescapability of “conspicuous consumption” in a well-functioning economy, something that Thorstein Veblen theorised and which is even more true during a time in which GDP growth seems to be the ultimate objective of perhaps all national governments on this planet (Philips, no date).

The management of the relationship between economic activities and the environment will constitute the cornerstone of my discussion. In the past, the *market* was intended as something small, low scale, in which humans would come together to exchange goods and services they needed for survival. In the passing of time, it became something all-encompassing, seeking to monetise every aspect of human existence at an exponential scale (O’Neill 2017). The fact of the matter is that we have reached a point in which economic activities are so extensive and intensive that it is putting the survival of the same species who planned and built them at risk.

“Growth”, however, cannot be aprioristically dismissed as something negative: the growth of renewable energies constitutes arguably a positive fact as does growth of budgets in schooling or in public health. In our societies, this is clearly not the case: one aspect to be pointed out, for instance, is that 60% of World GDP is made up by pure and simple private consumption (Our World in Data 2023). Consumption and a consumeristic lifestyle represent the main driver of economic activities worldwide, but the side effects are extreme wastefulness on one hand and brutal (human *and* natural) exploitation on the other.

Consumerism can be effectively defined as an ideology, that is, a system of thought structuring the way we see the world, impacting our social behaviour in a considerable way. Even though it is not often recognised as such, Consumerism has nothing to envy to other “systems of thoughts” and did not arise from nothing. It can be said to be the Son of an “Unholy Trinity” in which Capitalism is the Father and Neoliberalism is the Unholy Spirit, as the well-known author George Monbiot once put it, using a powerful metaphor (Montague & Monbiot 2020).

Illustrating the purpose of Consumerism as an ideology, one suitable description could be the expansion of demand (and production) for mostly superfluous goods, to be sparked through aggressive advertising and “created needs.” This practically entails growth in both the vertical and the horizontal sense: the range and the quantity of products (and resources) used both increase at the same time. Given that it is difficult to think of an economy that does not operate in such a way, we can also affirm that Consumerism is a dominant and global ideology, and it is here to stay.

In addition to this, it is intensifying and broadening its society-shaping capacity. This fact is deeply worrying according to a scientific study, the maximum sensible level of consumption for a sustainable future life on Earth is 50 billion tons of generic consumption units every year; that would guarantee all people on this planet a lifestyle comparable to the one in 1960s Switzerland – a healthy and well-off one after all. Instead, we consume 80 billion tons of units every year. By the year 2050 and continuing not to tackle the problem of excessive consumption, it is forecasted that we will be consuming 180 billion tons of units every single year.

Looking at this data, it is not difficult to see how in the long run Consumerism will lead us towards self-destruction (Hickel 2020).

Despite this simple observation, most economic experts insist in not seeing other ways of economic development which do not prescribe economic growth, mainly driven again by private consumption. Some have even advanced the idea that separating economic growth from carbon emissions will be enough. In fact, there seems to be a widespread belief that economic growth automatically leads to sustainability, because better production technologies reduce energy and resource intensity. In other words, the hope for the future is that more goods will be produced (economic growth) but using at the same time much less resources (less resource intensity). This phenomenon is also referred to as economic “decoupling,” but, despite many governmental efforts, most notably in South Korea, it has not been observed anywhere yet. This might be explained by the fact that the price for the products themselves decreases exactly because less resources are needed per unit and consumption usually rises as a result, displacing benefits. In the future, everything will come down to whether resource intensity will decrease faster than the increase rates of consumption, but the signs of this happening are not there. As a policymaker, it would be a waste of time to put so much hope into this happening (Our Changing Climate 2020).

Even massive investments in the “green” sector may result only in a slowdown of environmental damages, as CO₂ emissions could still potentially rise in absolute terms: according to the study of consumption units, aggressive “decoupling” measures (i.e., sudden imposition of strong carbon taxes, pollution fines, and all the other market-friendly measures a government can decide to adopt) will result in ca. 130 billion tons of generic consumption units in the year 2050 (EEB 2019). That is by far not enough: thus, economic growth through conspicuous consumption should not be pursued, but it should be actively avoided, if we want to retain some hopes for a sustainable future. It is better to look for solutions elsewhere entirely, that is for alternative ways of organising our economies without the limitless pursuit of growth.

So far, there are absolutely no signals of a radical shift in the terms of the debate. There is much talk, instead, of “green capitalism”, “the greening of modernity”, sometimes even coming from renowned voices within the realm of our public debate. Former German sociologist Ulrich Beck was, for instance, a strong believer when it came such propositions (Beck 2009, 34). As it was already mentioned, there is no scientific evidence for “templates for an economy that radically shrinks the world’s carbon footprint without also shrinking our quality of life” (O’Brien 2023) and for decoupling of emissions from economic growth.

There continues to be no mainstream economist, at least to my knowledge, that would support a radical shift in the way our societies operate. In the best of cases, there are only ones supporting incremental changes or favouring a transition towards more social-democratic societies, meaning higher tax rates for the rich, more legal regulation, enforcement of competition, etc. The basics of the capitalistic economy as it is set up today, in particular the profit motive and our access to a consumeristic lifestyle, instead, are never seriously questioned, even if it emerges ever more clearly that a far-reaching overhaul of socio-economic arrangements is what is needed. Why is this the case?

This has clearly something to do with the current cultural climate, whose evolution stays firmly in the hands of the elites. The implication here is that there is cultural, moral, economic, and ideological leadership of a group over subaltern groups. This is *hegemony* in the truest Gramscian sense, that is the linking chain between the structure (the socio-economic arrangements) and the super-structure (the ideas in circulation, the beliefs, the discussion spaces and modalities, the socio-cultural arrangements) of a particular society (Scholar Blogs, no date).

By definition, hegemony comprises the whole worldview and the entirety of beliefs that the dominant classes have imposed on the subordinates and that subordinates have willingly, if not at times enthusiastically, accepted. In a certain sense, the word “hegemony” can be translated into modern-day “common sense”. The education system, the media environment around us and our (virtual or real) social networks are those means through which the dominant class imposes a certain hegemony on all of us, intentionally or unintentionally.

In such a situation, not a revolution of the material circumstances of society is so much required (even if it would certainly be helpful), but rather a revolution of the hearts and souls: the simple yet effective conviction that the seeking for ever-increasing profits and a consumeristic lifestyle are and will never constitute at the centrepiece of a fulfilled existence needs to be the starting base for such a revolution. “Pessimism of the intellect” and, thus, an intellectual realisation, as Gramsci wrote, is the antidote for detecting the lies and the deceits that are imposed upon us on an almost constant base, by the myriad of commercials, advertisements, and all the other propaganda tools of Consumerism.

The question remains: how should we approach the future? How should we act in presence of the awesome challenges we face? To me, what the renowned English historian Eric Hobsbawm has said at the end of his *Age of Extremes* (1994) remains crucial to be understood:

We live in a world captured, uprooted, and transformed by the titanic economic and techno-scientific process of the development of capitalism [...]. We know, or at least it is reasonable to suppose that it cannot go on ad infinitum. The future cannot be a continuation of the past, and there are signs, both externally, and, as it were, internally, that we have reached a point of historic crisis. The forces generated by the techno-scientific economy are now great enough to destroy the environment, that is to say, the material foundations of human life. [...] Our world risks both explosion and implosion. It must change. [...] If humanity is to have a recognizable future, it cannot be by prolonging the past or the present. If we try to build the third millennium on that basis, we shall fail. And the price of failure, that is to say, the alternative to a changed society, is darkness. (Hobsbawm 1994, 584–585)

Our objective here is pure and simple survival! The fact that the “forces generated by the techno-scientific economy” have proven that they are now great enough to destroy the environment is certainly true and, for more evidence on this, it suffices to look around. Ultimately, however, these same forces are created and developed by us and are, therefore, under our exclusive control. Whether they serve the purpose of devouring everything for the sake of growth at all costs or not really represents a free choice on our side. As Zygmunt Bauman once wrote:

[T]he most fearsome of disasters are those traceable to the past or present pursuits of rational solutions. Catastrophes most horrid are born – or are likely to be born – out of the

war against catastrophes. [...] Dangers grow with our powers, and the one power we miss most is that which divines their arrival and sizes up their volume.

But that's only because:

In our society, risk fighting can be nothing else but business [...]. The politics of fear lubricates the wheels of consumerism and helps to 'keep the economy growing' and steers it away from the 'bane of recession'. Ever more resources are to be consumed in order to repair the gruesome effects of yesterday's resource consumption. Individual fears beefed up by the exposure of yesterday's risks are deployed in the service of collective production of the unknown risks of tomorrow... (Bauman as cited in Beck 2009, 114)

Only through to the "optimism of the will", we have the ability and power to change the purpose that these forces serve and that is my main personal source of hope. I sincerely hope that it could be Yours too.

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