


Beyond Neoliberal Presentism: An Eco-Temporality for the Anthropocene

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine the relationship between neoliberal presentist temporality and the climate-environmental crisis, arguing for the necessity of envisioning a new “eco-temporality”. The deconstruction of the modern concept of progress in postmodern thought and postcolonial studies is considered, making a case for the undesirability of its complete abandonment – since a progressive temporality retains a role in enabling political change and long-term vision. To capture the connection between politics and temporality we develop the concept of “political temporality”, which we define as the schema of interaction between the social representation of time and what is perceived as politically feasible in each community at a given time. Furthermore, we analyse the most prominent features of neoliberal temporality (structural presentism, the public/private distinction, individual subjects, and philosophy of history), sketching an account of how each of them impacts ecological and climate politics. Finally, to envision a new, Anthropocene-friendly “regime of historicity”, we lay down two basic conditions that an “eco-temporality” should satisfy. In the last two sections, we sketch a new (multi)temporal model that is meant to be apt for the Anthropocene, drawing on Ernst Bloch’s concepts of “multiversum” and “contemporaneity of non-contemporaneous elements”.

Keywords

Anthropocene, Temporality, Neoliberalism, Bloch (Ernst), Multiversum.

Resumo

Neste artigo, examinamos a relação entre o capitalismo neoliberal, uma temporalidade presentista, e a crise climática e ambiental. Passamos por várias características da temporalidade neoliberal (presentismo estrutural, distinção público/privado, sujeitos individuais e filosofia da história), esboçando um relato de como cada uma delas impacta a política ecológica e climática. Além disso, consideramos a desconstrução do conceito moderno de progresso linear em estudos pós-coloniais, ao mesmo tempo em que defendemos a indesejabilidade de seu completo abandono - uma vez que uma temporalidade progressiva mantém um papel crucial na viabilização de mudanças políticas e visão de longo prazo. Para estabelecer a conexão entre política e temporalidade, com base em Koselleck, Lévi-Strauss e Hartog, definimos a temporalidade política como o esquema de interação entre a representação social do tempo e o que é percebido como politicamente viável em uma determinada comunidade, em um determinado momento. Para vislumbrar um novo “regime de historicidade”, adequado ao Antropoceno, precisamos aprender com os fracassos tanto do presentismo neoliberal quanto da temporalidade linear do progresso e, ao fazê-lo, abrir novos espaços para a ação política. Estabelecemos assim duas condições básicas que qualquer novo modelo de “eco-

temporalidade” deve cumprir para evitar essas dificuldades. Por esta razão, nas duas últimas seções, esboçamos um modelo alternativo (multi)temporal que deve ser adequado para o Antropoceno, com base nos conceitos de “multiversum” e “contemporaneidade de elementos não-significativos”, do autor alemão Ernst Bloch (Bloch, 1970, 1991).

Palavras-chave

Antropoceno, Temporalidade, Neoliberalismo, Bloch (Ernst), Multiversum.

Introduction

In this paper, we begin examining how neoliberal capitalism supports a presentist temporality, further showing how this feature structurally undermines our collective response to the climate and environmental crisis. Furthermore, we analyse which alternative temporalities could better suit the Anthropocene and its peculiar challenges, going through a critical assessment of the category of “progress” and postmodern thought as well. Finally, drawing on some insights from the German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, we sketch an alternative temporal model (the “*eco-multiversum*”) which, we argue, could be able to meet the political and environmental needs of the desynchronized multicrisis we face in the wake of the Anthropocene.

In the first section, to lay down a proper conceptual framework to accomplish these tasks, we develop the concept of “*political temporality*” as the schema of interaction between the social representation of time and what is perceived as politically feasible in a given community at a given time – a conceptual tool that we use to describe the correlation between a community’s perception of time and the degree of their agreeableness to engage in political praxis. We then recall Hartog’s concept of “presentism” and offer some critical reflections on postmodern and postcolonial thought concerning the concepts of historical “totality” and “progress”. In the second section, we argue that neoliberal presentist temporality is essentially anti-environmental and locks us in a catastrophic environmental crisis (and, especially, catastrophic anthropogenic climate change). We then go through several features of neoliberal capitalism that are involved in creating a structural presentist, short-term approach, sketching an account of how each of them impacts ecological and climate politics. Although neoliberal temporality has been proven to be anti-environmental, we claim that a nostalgic return to the modern temporality of linear progress cannot be enough, especially in the wake of the postcolonial critique of “Westernizing” progress (Chakrabarty, 2000; Allen, 2016). The puzzle is captured by two conditions that a temporality ought to satisfy to be considered apt for the environmental crisis: (a) we need a concept of progress that allows a political praxis model that is adequate to counteract climate crisis, both at the

mitigation and the adaptation level¹; and (b) we need to preserve freedom in the form of pluralism – since paternalistically prescribing a universal narrative of progress for all the global stakeholders is not a feasible option any longer. We may address the combination of these two as the Praxis-Progress Problem.

To begin solving the puzzle, in the last two sections, we sketch an alternative multi-temporal model that is meant to be apt for the challenges we face in the Anthropocene. To do so, we draw on Ernst Bloch to expand in a multidimensional model the concept of political temporality that we previously assembled. We argue that any multi-temporal model ought to comprise at least five different temporal features (linearity, non-anthropocentricity, non-ecocentricity, cyclicity, pluralism) to be able to meet the political and environmental needs of the Anthropocene. We recall Bloch's concepts of "contemporaneity of non-contemporaneous" and the "multiversum", as presented in a couple of essays from 1935 and 1965. We argue for the utility of the Blochian model as it allows us to accommodate multiple temporalities in the same model, allowing us to "pluralize" our concept of political temporality. The ultimate goal is then to accommodate five different temporalities in the same model to address the complex intertwining of non-contemporaneous temporal structures that the environmental crisis exposes.

First of all, is necessary to lay down some introductory remarks on temporality. Here we will not deal with the metaphysics of time, but rather with a sociological approach: we are interested in how a community experiences time and how this experience impacts that community's political life. Multiple studies from quite different theoretical backgrounds hinted at the fact that a new, "presentist *regime of historicity*" (Hartog, 2015)² has arisen alongside neoliberal capitalism, next to an end-of-history narrative and a widespread feeling of constant temporal acceleration (Hartog, 2015; Harvey, 1989; Jameson, 1991; Fukuyama, 1992; Sloterdijk, 2005 Di Chio, 2015; Sugarmann & Thrift, 2017; Rosa, 2009; Boukalas 2020). As we will elaborate later, in this paper we are going to hold together both the dimension of the individual experience of time ("psychology of time") (Sugarmann & Thrift 2017) and the social narrative (implicit or explicit) through which history is represented (philosophy of history). This will require a brief discussion of the linkage between neoliberalism and postmodern thought, in particular addressing Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (Lyotard, 1984) and Jameson's critique of it (Jameson, 1984a, 1991). Moreover, drawing on Koselleck and Lévi-Strauss, we propose a working concept of "political temporality" that ties together each regime on historicity with a certain degree of predisposition to political "*praxis*".

¹ A weaker version of this requirement simply prescribes the need of a communal temporal horizon that could permit collective coordination in climate solution. See Manulak (2022).

² A "regime of historicity" is defined by Hartog as «the modalities of self-consciousness that each and every society adopts in its constructions of time and its perception» (Hartog, 2015, p. 9).

Lastly, some introductory remarks about so-called “neoliberal environmentalism” (Stoner, 2020). Neoliberalism has been described as «essentially anti-environmental» (Chamayou, 2021). Previous studies have widely assessed the main critical issues of neoliberal environmentalism in managing anthropogenic global warming³. Despite growing concern in the business world for climate change and new “green” corporate theories (Benjamin, 2021), neoliberal globalization is still far from environmentally friendly. While pre-neoliberal epoch global GHG emissions were slowing down between the 1960s (+4.5% annually) and the 1990s (+1%), they were growing again by 3.4% per year between 2000 and 2008, with just a temporary setback during the 2008 crisis and a quick recover in 2010 (+5.9%) (Klein, 2014, p. 87)⁴. The reason why we still struggle to see alternatives beyond the horizon of neoliberalism, and its market-friendly model of climate governance, is part of the problem we address in these pages through an assessment of the political effects of a distinctively neoliberal temporality.

Towards a definition of “political temporality”

Let us start by constructing an adequate conceptual tool to address temporality from a political perspective. As we mentioned, anthropology, sociology, and philosophy have been interested in the socio-political and psychological consequences of temporal structures for at least one century⁵. As particularly useful for our scope, Reinhart Koselleck’s work on the semantics of historical time offers two fundamental meta-historical categories to address the question «how, in a given present, are the temporal dimensions of past and future related?» (Koselleck, 2004, p. 3)⁶. These are the “space of experience” and the “horizon of expectation” (Koselleck, 2004; Hartog, 2015). Different articulations of experience and expectation give birth to specific temporal regimes, where the three temporal dimensions (present, past, and future) have different weights and tensions between them. For example, in Koselleck’s account of modernity, the structure of modern temporality «is characterized by an asymmetry between

³ Including, inter alia, lack of accountability and democratic control, excessive deregulation of the private sector and privatization of key energy industries, free-trade agreements with ISDS clauses (investor-state dispute settlements), robust lobbying, priority to (ultimately inadequate) market-based climate solutions, short-termism, “corporate environmentalism” (Zhang & Assunção, 2004; Stern, 2006; Caney, 2014; Hickel, 2017, 2020; Di Paola & Jamieson, 2016; Piketty, 2020a, 2020b; Parr, 2013; Ciplet & Roberts, 2017; Ciplet, Roberts, Kahn 2015; Jones & Stafford, 2021; Klein, 2014, 2019; Zumbansen, 2013; Srnicek & Williams, 2015; Wright & Nyberg, 2015; Malm, 2016).

⁴ Thirty years after the UNFCCC was signed, our global GHG emissions are still growing as we approach the +1.5°C threshold (IPCC, 2022, 2023), while the «window of opportunity to secure a liveable and sustainable future for all» is «rapidly closing» (IPCC, 2023, p. 25).

⁵ For a genealogy of this approach, see Gell (2000).

⁶ For a critical assessment of Koselleck’s conceptual categories, see Imbriano (2016).

experience and expectation that is produced by the idea of progress and the opening of time onto a future» (Hartog, 2015, p. 17). In other words, within modern temporality, experience and expectation depart, causing time to be perceived as always «new» and «progressive», open to unknown developments which are no longer predictable based on past experience.⁷ And, finally, the modern space of experience «expresses the step from a universal history in the form of an aggregate to a world history as a system», introducing an immanent «conception of history as a totality» (Koselleck, 2004, p. 104).

One of Reinhard Koselleck's main contributions to our understanding of political change is the connection between how time is socially represented and political action. In Koselleck's analysis, one of the reasons why modernity had been the age of political revolutions is that it understands history as "progress" (Koselleck, 2004). In other words, according to Koselleck, envisioning radical change requires, as its condition of possibility, to detach from a "natural" or traditional conception of time, in which past experience determines what is to be expected in the future. Henceforth, modern political change requires a conception of the future as always new, unknown, fast, and accelerating, enabling «new, transnatural, long-term prognoses» and utopias (Koselleck, 2004, p. 22)⁸. Or, more simply, it requires a conception of time and historicity in which change is at the very least imaginable⁹.

Claude Lévi-Strauss in his distinction between historically "cold" and "hot" societies, where "cold" societies are the ones that view change as a «disorder and a threat», while "hot" societies «come to view it [the idea of history] as a tool through which they can act on the present and transform it» (Lévi-Strauss, 1966). That is to say, "hot" societies see transformation in time in a positive light, enabling as a consequence innovation and *praxis* to be acted on more easily. This is arguably what, according to Koselleck, makes the social perception of time really "historic".

⁷ «During *Neuzeit* the difference between experience and expectation has increasingly expanded; more precisely, that *Neuzeit* is first understood as a *neue Zeit* from the time that expectations have distanced themselves evermore from all previous experience» (Koselleck, 2004, p. 263). Interesting for the scope of this article, Bruno Latour argued that, as modern (enlightenment) thought creates the consciousness of the irreversibility of time and an "epistemic closure" with the past, it also prompts the detachment of "history" from "nature" (Latour, 1993).

⁸ As Koselleck argues, «henceforth history could be regarded as a long-term process of growing fulfillment which, despite setbacks and deviations, was ultimately planned and carried out by men themselves. The objectives were then transferred from one generation to the next, and the effects anticipated by plan or prognosis became the *titles of legitimation of political action*. In sum, from that time on, the horizon of expectation was endowed with a coefficient of change that advanced in step with time» (Koselleck, 2004, p. 266). On the Enlightenment and a new conception of time see Latour (1993).

⁹ Crucially, according to Koselleck, approaching the future through the category of *progress* ("*Fortschritt*") (a mixture of "rational prognosis" and millenarian expectations) and a cumulative *Weltgeschichte* enables the prototypical modern subject (the bourgeois) to act on present reality creatively, envisioning new (and chiefly *political*) solutions which break with Ciceronian *Historia magistra vitae* (Koselleck, 2004).

Drawing on these insights, in this paper we address the nexus between the social representation of time and environmental politics. To do so, we define a new conceptual tool, *political temporality*, as:

Political temporality: the schema of the interaction between the social representation of historical time in a community x at a time t , and what is perceived as politically feasible in x at t .

We call this last partition of the logical space the *space of political possibility*.¹⁰ To offer an example, Koselleck's modernity is characterized by a politically "hot" temporality which allowed the Western world to envision unprecedented political arrangements, e.g., liberal democracy and communism. On the other end of the spectrum, in Hartog's account of the Homeric heroes or Sahlins's account of the Fijian traditional customs, or again in Todorov's characterization of pre-Colombian approach to time, a completely different political temporality is reconstructed. These political communities lack the dimension of the past, which gets substituted by its codification in ritual forms and mythology (that are immanent to the present), and thus the future is conceived only as a possible ritual repetition of already codified past knowledge (Hartog, 2015; Todorov, 1982). Therefore, the space of political possibility collapses entirely on the "cold" space of ritualized knowledge of the past: no novelty is admitted, nor it is possible to conceive it.

Partly drawing on Koselleck's account of modernity (Koselleck, 2004), Hartog elaborated the concept of the "regime of historicity" as a comparative conceptual tool, to describe each society's way of perceiving itself in time and its common understanding of history (Hartog, 2015). Hartog notoriously characterizes the contemporary (neoliberal) regime of historicity as "presentist". The dimension of the present is totalizing since the space of experience and expectation have departed so neatly that it seems impossible to reconnect them (Hartog, 2015, p. 18; Baudrillard, 1994). In other words, presentism implies that the temporal distance between the present and the sources of meaning that inform it is drastically compressed (Di Chio, 2015, p. 51). The production of historical time itself seems to be suspended (Hartog, 2015).

¹⁰ The genealogy of this theoretical approach in philosophy and political theory, which seeks to characterize the relationship between temporality, history, and praxis, goes back to a predominantly Marxist critical tradition, which encompasses Walter Benjamin (Benjamin, 1936), Louis Althusser (Morfino, 2018); Ernst Bloch (1970, 1990), Guy Debord (Debord, 1967), Tzvetan Todorov (Todorov, 1982), Marshall Berman (Berman, 1982), David Harvey (Harvey, 1989) and Fredric Jameson (Jameson, 1984b, 1991). For a genealogical account of the sociological scholarship on social time, see Gell (2000). For a comparison between Koselleck and Walter Benjamin on the political significance of time, see (Porrino & Volpi, 2020). For further references to this tradition of thought, see (Lübbe, 2009; Di Chio 2015; Ricciardi, 2017b).

Progress in the wake of Postmodern and Postcolonial thought

This experience of discontinuity with the (recent) past has been widely described in the literature, among scholars coming from very distant political stances. For example, the Marxist scholar Fredric Jameson saw the postmodern sense of history as an ideological legitimization of neoliberal capitalism (Jameson, 1991), as well as Marxist geographer David Harvey diagnosed a wave of "space-time compression" as an effect of the transition to post-Fordist capitalism (Harvey, 1989). Even the neo-conservative political theorist Francis Fukuyama partly captured the same discontinuity in his "end of history" thesis (Fukuyama, 1989, 1992). This shift in the experience of historical time is accordingly situated at the beginning of the neoliberal "restoration" from the late 1970s onwards (Harvey, 2005). Applying Lévi-Strauss's toolkit to neoliberal capitalism, as he did in an interview during the 1980s (Hartog, 2015, p. 25), post-Fordism underwent a process of metahistorical "cooling off" in which historical change ceased to be perceived as positive (or even, as a matter of fact, attainable at all). The absence of any explicit historical metanarratives and faith in "progress" characterizes the political temporality of neoliberal societies as one in which the space of political possibility has dramatically shrunk¹¹.

We ought to remember that there have been admittedly good reasons to get rid of "progress", at least in its modern, Europeanizing sense. As symbolized by Lyotard's enthusiastic rejection of modern "grand narratives" and the concept of historical "totality", postmodern and postcolonial thought have sought to expose the intimate ideological connection between a Eurocentric understanding of progress and oppression, imperialism and colonialism (Lyotard, 1984; Chakrabarty, 2000)¹². Lyotard himself described, in a nutshell, the new dominant ethos in postmodern humanities vis-à-vis history: the idea of an "end of history" is replaced by the pluralist idea of the free exploration of infinite heterogeneous finalities, since «everything that does not satisfy that *fissuring of the end*, everything that presents itself as the realization of a *single end*», is no longer felt as appropriate in the new cultural sensibility (Lyotard, 2009, p. 63). In other words, what is conceivable as "progressive" at the end of the traumatic experiences of

¹¹ It is possible to describe the Anthropocene narrative itself as the «strongest candidate to become the *métarécit* of our epoch» (Cera, 2023, p. xi), However, although sometimes appealing to humanity's collective responsibility towards the planet which they now have the power to radically transform («pet-ification» of nature) (Cera, 2023, p. 5), the Anthropocene narrative does not seem to motivate a radical transformation of our system of production, turning instead towards a transhumanistic imagery that basically leaves the system as it currently is. See Mendes (2020).

¹² For the need of postcolonial deconstruction of current environmental-anthropocenic narratives, see Giuliani (2021).

the 20th century, has little to do with Koselleck's progress. It rather boils down to the pluralist defense of difference as an end per se.

The emancipating potential of the "postmodern cultural ethos" in human sciences has certainly not been illusionary. Nevertheless, the postmodern rejection of "totalizing" categories such as progress and historical metanarratives has been accused of having unintentionally contributed to the legitimization of the (then) emergent neoliberal order (Benhabib, 1984; Jameson, 1984a, 1984b, 1991; Harvey, 1989, 2005; Eagleton, 1996a; 1996b)¹³. Moreover, as Jameson pointed out, «the hostility to the concept of 'totalization' would thus seem to be most plausibly decoded as a systematic repudiation of notions and ideals of *praxis* as such, or of the collective project» (Jameson, 1991, p. 333). The greatest danger, as early critics of postmodernism foresaw, was unconsciously legitimizing the status quo of free-market capitalism: as Jameson famously commented, «[i]t seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations» (Jameson, 1991). Nowadays, in the face of climate change, this danger is aggravated by the fact that both capitalism and in particular its neoliberal variant have repeatedly proven their anti-environmental potential.

Surprisingly enough, the terms of the debate over temporality, progress, and *praxis* have not changed as much as one could expect in the four decades since Lyotard's *La Condition Postmoderne*. Deconstructing and decolonizing our understanding of history has not ceased to be considered a crucial issue, with the partial addition that now, in the face of climate change, ecological thought seeks to decolonize it from an anthropocentric bias as well.

Postcolonial thought, according to Chakrabarty, was historically relatively slow to pick up ecological stances and the implicit "one-worldism" of many environmental narratives (Said 1978; Klein 2019), sensing that «all claims about the "oneness" of the world had to be radically interrogated by testing them against the reality of all that divided humans and formed the basis of different regimes of oppression: colony, race, class, gender, sexuality, ideologies, interests [...]» (Chakrabarty, 2021, p. 17; Cfr. Chakrabarty, 2009).

In a way, postcolonial thought felt the cognitive dissonance between a "cosmopolitan" global commitment against climate change and the subaltern refusal to accept a "one-world" narrative that obscures past and present oppression. As admitted by Chakrabarty, «what scientists have said about climate change challenges [...] the analytic strategies that postcolonial and postimperial historians have deployed in the last two decades in response to the

¹³ In Harvey's words, «neoliberalization required both politically and economically the construction of a neoliberal market-based populist culture of differentiated consumerism and individual libertarianism. As such it proved more than a little compatible with that cultural impulse called 'postmodernism'» (Harvey, 2005, p. 42).

post-war scenario of decolonization and globalization» (Chakrabarty, 2021, p. 18).

The cognitive dissonance is partially replicated in the competing interests of developed and developing countries at UNFCCC conferences (Dietzel, 2019). Here we face the same dilemma that critics of the postmodern ethos saw in Lyotard's rejection of grand narratives: on the one hand, without at least a *weak* concept of progress and a minimal metahistorical narrative, it gets dramatically difficult to conceive political *praxis* on a scale apt for the collective problems we are presently facing, e.g., climate change. On the other hand, we deeply feel that we cannot relinquish pluralism without reviving dangerous universalist concepts of "totality". Meanwhile, forty years ago as today, neoliberal capitalism is still the stone guest between our experience of time, our way of envisioning history and progress, as well as the possibility of *praxis*, with the aggravating circumstance that the climate crisis was proven to be simply unmanageable in the current version of capitalism – and, according to some, in capitalism in general (Li 2020; Mann & Wainwright, 2018).

Adding complexity to an already complex conundrum, deep ecology (Naess, 1973) has long warned us that to appropriately address environmental issues we need to dispose of our anthropocentric biases and adopt a holistic, eco-centric point of view. For what concerns history, this arguably requires disposing of any human-centred metanarrative and concept of progress, to reunite the *Anthropos* to the "deep history" or "deep time" (Gould 1987; Smail, 2008) of geological and natural time (Chakrabarty, 2009; 2021). Indeed, if we want to improve our appreciation of human geological agency and impact on nature, as encapsulated by the geological definition of Anthropocene, we can hardly avoid adopting natural history's *long durée* as our privileged perspective. Moreover, we need this perspective to make institutions resilient to the climate crisis and possibly able to mitigate it ("deep institutions", Hanusch & Biermann 2020). As we are going to argue in the next section, we subscribe to the idea that the neoliberal short-term vision and presentist temporality deeply undermine environmental protection. However, as we address in the last part of the paper, adopting an eco-centred perspective that completely relinquishes the "Anthropos" would arguably make restoring the possibility of political *praxis* even more difficult: how to motivate humans to act through a human-blind perspective? Once again, we face a dilemma: by completely relinquishing "progress" – an essentially anthropocentric temporality – we may endanger our (already thin) chances to politically change neoliberal capitalism into a more desirable (and more environmentally friendly) socio-economic system. Therefore, the risk mainly consists of legitimizing the status quo and its sclerosis. We will get back to this point later, introducing Ernst Bloch's *multiversum*.

Neoliberal Presentism, Climate Change, and Time Discounting

Previous studies have highlighted the anti-environmental character of the neoliberal free-trade and free-market globalization model¹⁴. In this section, we seek to connect the literature about neoliberal temporality to the one concerning neoliberalism's environmental flaws. To do so, we focus on the temporal implications of the role of financial markets, of the blurring in the public/private dichotomy, and on the subjective, psychological dimension.

A vast literature identifies structural short-termism and acceleration as one of the most salient features of neoliberal capitalism (Rosa, 2009). First of all, presentism, short-termism, and acceleration do not exclude each other, as they are perfectly compatible features. Hartmut Rosa draws the parallel between acceleration, neoliberal flexibilization, and what we named the space of political action:

we find the perception that in late modern society [...] real change is in fact no longer possible: the system of modern society is closing in and history is coming to an end in a "hyperaccelerated standstill" or "polar inertia" (Rosa, 2009, p. 96).

Financial markets, especially since electronic trading was developed, live in the constant now, in the «tyranny of the present» (Baschet, 2018), while they have become unprecedentedly influential through deregulation policies both at the national and international levels. Critical scholars diagnosed the implicit ascription of semi-divine features to financial markets (Becchio & Leghissa, 2017; De Carolis, 2017)¹⁵. Similarly, on the political level, other scholars assigned quasi-

¹⁴ We use "neoliberalism" or "neoliberal capitalism" as umbrella terms to characterize the general transformation of global capitalism during the last four decades. For the scope of this paper, neoliberal capitalism indicates a mixture of ideological and non-ideological features: *inter alia*, a free-market, free-trade and deregulation ideology, finance-driven globalization, a departure of sovereign states' scope and legitimacy from the post-war social-democratic compromise, a general growth of inequalities, a dominance of neoclassical economics over alternative economic schools (Harvey, 1989, 2005; Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999; Mirowsky & Plehwe, 2009; Peck, 2010; Davies, 2014; Dardot & Laval, 2013; Klein, 2007; Brown, 2005, 2006, 2017; Streeck 2014; Slobodian 2018). A statistic-based definition of this transition is to be found for example in inversion of the trend of inequalities in lead capitalist economies (USA, Europe, Japan) between 1970 and 1980, which started to grow again after three decades of steep decline (1945 – 1970) (Piketty, 2020a, p. 47), or in the rapid decline of the highest marginal tax rate in USA and lead European economies between the late 1970s and the 1980s (meaning less taxes for the rich and a weakened downwards redistribution of wealth) (Piketty, 2020a, p. 49). Similar results are to be found in the inequality of revenue and of property within the same economies in the same years, which both started to grow again after decades of decline (Piketty, 2020a, pp. 481, 484), in the collapse of the share of public property (1978-2018) as an indicator of privatization in virtually all the major economies (Piketty, 2020a, p. 694).

¹⁵ In this regard, the theological-religious status of markets in the current political-economic system is paralleled by a substantial feature of the Anthropocene as a brand-new "grand narrative", namely the rise of technology to «an object of faith, the secularized surrogate of a divine principle» (Cera, 2023, p. 4). The consideration of markets under neoliberal ideology thus reveals to share a crucial and paradoxical element of the Anthropocene narration: the pushing

sovereign effects to markets (Callison, 2014; Vogl, 2014). Becchio and Leghissa especially emphasize markets' atemporal features: «the market is given another trait that is usually part of the endowments of divine figures, namely *atemporality* [...] [because] one cannot perceive any beginning or end of the activity of financial markets» (Becchio & Leghissa, 2017, p. 163)¹⁶.

The problem is then arguably not in how the "free" market system does not work sufficiently well but, rather, that it even performs too well. The Hayekian dream of leaving the political decision to the spontaneous order of the market – today revived by capitalist fantasies about artificial intelligence (Boukalas, 2020) – appears ultimately incapable of taking care of the environment, primarily because markets and nature exist within different temporalities.

As Rosa points out, the acceleration of the economic system and technological development is the cause of a general "*desynchronization*" between politics and the systems that surround it. If, on the one hand, acceleration causes more complexity and unpredictability, which inevitably prolongs the time of (especially democratic) deliberation, on the other hand, «the time given to politics to decide an issue» decreases and pushes politics to become «situationalist» (Rosa, 2009, p. 102). This, next to the neoliberal tendency to privilege private over public interest and to generally distrust democratic politics, amounts to a deep democratic deficit (Brown, 2005, 2006, 2017). We find ourselves in a paradoxical situation in which we would need to enlarge our temporal horizons, but we are constantly forced to see them shrink¹⁷. Similarly, the connection between temporality and the insufficiency of political action against climate change has recently been addressed by Andreas Malm as a desynchronization between the temporal structure of resistance and revolts («temporality of exasperation», Malm 2021, p. 45) and the prognostic character of the climate crisis. In the meantime, the tight schedule of the climate crisis sets a temporality of its own (Malm 2021, p. 45). Once again, we face a problem of desynchronization exacerbated by neoliberalism and the unforeseen temporal character of the climate crisis unveiling.

In Rosa's account, policymakers live under the constant pressure of being on a "slippery slope", advocating «situationalist» policies justified by the rhetoric of «technical necessity» and "no alternative" (Rosa, 2009). This is partly caused by an objective lack of substantial control or steering power of the political over

aside of humans as the central subject of history and nature, and the rise of technology to the true and only subject of the Anthropocene epoch – a "technolatry" which is paralleled by a consequent "feralization" of the human being (Cera, 2023, p. x).

¹⁶ «[W]hile the trading day approaches its end in Tokyo, traders sit in front of their screens in the City, and when they begin to move to the next pub, their mates are going to begin the working day in Wall Street» (Becchio & Leghissa, 2017, p. 163).

¹⁷ «Early modernity promised the capacity to shape and control the world and time and to initiate a historically legitimate future progress. But in late modernity, time itself has come to destroy the potential for any form of social or substantial control, influence, or steering» (Rosa, 2009, p. 102).

economics – what Polanyi would have described as “disembeddedness” of economic institutions, freed from most of their non-economic constraints (Polanyi, 1944). However, this depends as well on a consciously perpetrated political model (a “treat-based governmentality”, Boulakas, 2020) that uses the state to perpetuate the present and prevent the conditions of structural change. For the first time in history, as Boulakas argues, the capitalist class lost its «vision of or appetite for the future» (Boulakas, 2020, p. 12). As he puts it, «both by expanding its temporal sovereignty with regards to politics and surrendering it with regards to the economy, state strategy is geared towards perpetuating the present» (Boulakas, 2020, p. 2).

It is not difficult to imagine how such a restructuring of the global political-economic system encourages what economists call time discounting or time preference, which has been recognized as non-optimal for climate change policymaking (Caney, 2014). Moreover, a society that is structurally predisposed to time discounting – which is embedded both in material conditions, everyday culture, and construction paths of individual identities – hardly avoids ending up with a presentist, anti-ecological temporality as its sole point of view.

A crucial factor to explain the “dis-embeddedness” of the capitalist system from the promise of the future and change (Boulakas, 2020) is arguably the epochal shift in the public/private dichotomy which has been prompted by neoliberal policies, alongside the partial demise of the traditional modern political actors (the nation-state, state sovereignty, democracy, welfare systems, and trade unions)¹⁸. Private powers are underpinned by the logic of *profit*, contrary to public powers’ (*potential*) capability of pursuing “the common good” and legitimizing (as well as getting legitimized) by meta-historical narratives that structure temporarily on the collective human political agency. Consequently, in principle, the dichotomy between private and public can be described as setting up or relying on two different temporalities, within which private and public actors act and justify themselves. As dictated by the dominant neoclassical economics model, whose hegemony in macroeconomics reportedly goes hand in hand with

¹⁸ A blurring between private and public spheres and a rise of the importance of private over public law has reportedly been a trend in national and international politics over the last decades (Foucault, 2008; Jamieson & Di Paola, 2021; Zumbansen, 2013; Davies, 2014; Williams & Zumbansen, 2011; Cordelli, 2020; Ricciardi, 2003, 2016). Public decision-making got more and more informalized as private actors came to be involved in norm-making governance networks (Callison, 2014; Vogl, 2014; Zumbansen, 2013). Private-public partnerships, privatizations, and out-sourcing of state’s functions have been promoted in the name of efficiency by “New Public Management” from the 1980s onwards (Davies, 2014; Dardot & Laval, 2013; Cordelli, 2020). In this political order, private finance actors and transnational corporations, new (or renewed) international organizations, and free trade agreements are granted an unprecedented (and often unaccountable) political power, promoting critical scholars to use formulas like “corporate capitalism”, “transnational private regulatory governance”, “Empire” or “legal empire of trade and investments” (Badrinarayana, 2010, p. 258; Hardt & Negri, 2001; Williams & Zumbansen, 2011; Zumbansen, 2013; Davies, 2014; Wright & Nyberg, 2015). This arguably applies to global climate governance as well (Pattberg & Stripple, 2008).

neoliberalism (Becchio & Leghissa, 2017), private actors act to maximize their self-interest¹⁹. Neoclassical economics' structural short-termism is thus inadequate to develop intergenerational ethical stances, as it is incapable of evading the logic of privately conceived short-term profit. As Klein's concept of "shock doctrine" captures, the best way we can hope neoliberal capitalism to react to natural disasters is by commodifying the disaster for profit and using it to justify a reinforcement of a "frugal" neoliberal ideology and policymaking (Klein, 2007).

Under the hegemony of free markets, «legal and executive power blend with forms of economic rationality» generating a «sovereign-economic ambivalence» in neoliberal sovereignty (Davies, 2014, p. xii)²⁰. In a way, neoliberal society is already the (imperfect) implementation of an inherently presentist, short-term utopia removing democratic political agency and entrusting the free market as a superior regulating system (Hayek, 1982; Piketty, 2020a)²¹. Private actors, on their side, and especially transnational corporations, appear to be trapped in a short-term logic even when that undermines their self-interest. "Corporate environmentalism"²² is mainstream among both policymakers and company directors (Castree, 2008; Wright & Nyberg, 2015). Moreover, firms are embedded in a network of economic actors (banks, hedge funds, institutional investors, rating agencies) that apply pressure on directors for environmental issues to be externalized (Benjamin, 2021; Chamayou, 2021; Wright & Nyberg, 2015)²³. Additionally, mainstream corporate governance theories supporting principles such as "shareholder wealth maximization" and "shareholder primacy" developed during the second half of the 20th century. This amounts to a progressive process of "privatization of corporations" and loss of their public function, which came to the fore during the 1970s and 1980s (Barkan, 2013;

¹⁹ This, according to some scholars, characterizes the neoclassical model as "timeless" (Georgescu-Roegen, 1971). Or, at least, it raises concerns about the adequacy of neoclassical economics in adequately dealing with time (Boland, 1978).

²⁰ The term "governance", as opposed to "government", is a common way to frame the restructuring towards a polyarchic, apolitical, non-hierarchical order which multiplies the actors on the global stage (Rosenau & Czempiel, 1992; Chayes & Chayes, 1995; Hardt & Negri, 2001; Dardot & Laval, 2013; Linsi, 2020).

²¹ It must be acknowledged that neoliberal capitalism itself has been the consequence of a chiefly *political* – and thus contingent, rather than merely "technically necessary" – project to whose implementation nation-states have been crucial actors as well (Mitchell & Fazi, 2017). However, at the time being, decision and norm-making are certainly dispersed in a network of heterogeneous actors, to which the private-public distinction hardly holds anymore, and that is structurally incapable of responsibly implementing environmental regulation and respecting democracy (Crouch, 2004).

²² Indicating tendencies to avoid external regulation, self-regulation, faith in private-led technologic innovation, and private-public co-production of environmental regulation.

²³ After decades of deregulation ideology, financial markets became the most prominent source of revenue for companies and for their executives, and the target on which most profits are reinvested, hence decoupling economic growth from prosperity and tying corporate choices to markets' short-term vision (Lazonick, 2014).

Benjamin, 2021). In the constant competition for investors' thrust on financial markets, which has increasingly become firm's principal asset, the company that fails to make environmental protection profitable is highly disincentivized to act in that direction, as well as the state that pushes its environmental regulation too far is at risk of foreign capital flight (Wright & Nyberg, 2015). Besides, even if acting quickly on climate change would be profitable in the long-term for TNCs, firms, and investors who are particularly exposed to climate-related risk (e.g., the fossil and mining industry), they are pressed to minimize the risk, since it would abruptly worsen their status²⁴.

Some scholars, following insights of ecological Marxism and ecosocialism, go so far as to affirm a structural incompatibility between capitalism and adequate climate response, mainly due to the degree of GDP degrowth that would be necessary to match significant emission reduction (Arrighi, 2010; Li, 2020; Mann & Wainwright, 2018; Piketty, 2020b). Either way, a more interventionist approach to policymaking and regulation, driven by the public interest and long-term planning, still appears better than "business as usual". This arguably involves envisioning a new temporal model to back up new politics and policies.

Acceleration and presentism have consequences for the individual experience as well (James, 2008; Sennett, 1998; Di Chio, 2015), which in turn affect people's ability to be concerned about their environmental footprint or to vote for candidates that prioritize climate action in their agenda²⁵. And presentism is, unfortunately, the temporality in which climate change arose to the status of global emergency through the 1980s and 1990s: not just an instance of a "bad" temporality, then, but of "bad timing" within an already bad temporality as well (Latour 1993, p. 8; Klein, 2014; Rich, 2019). Combined with neoliberal trends of flexibilization and commodification of various aspects of life, in late 20th-century acceleration encourages «a temporal contraction of identity reflecting the contraction of the present» which is partly measurable through the instability of careers, life projects, and individual personality (Rosa, 2009 p. 99). As Dardot and Laval emphasize, the categorical imperatives of neoliberal subjects are performance, constant competition, and a narcissistic imperative to immediate libidinal satisfaction in multiple spheres of life (Dardot & Laval, 2013: 313). Hartog also notices how unemployment, a key feature of neoliberal flexibilization

²⁴ E.g., cutting them off from long-term borrowing, causing capital reallocation, draconian regulatory interventions, and repricing of stranded assets (Benjamin, 2021; Wright & Nyberg, 2015; Dine, 2015).

²⁵ As Christopher Lasch already noticed in 1979, late capitalism pushes us to live in a narcissistic present: «to live for the moment is the prevailing passion – to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity» (Lasch, 1979). This represents a significant discontinuity compared to what Lewis and Rose Coser identified as a "conformist" temporality, active and individualist at the same time (Coser & Coser, 1963), which we can associate with post-war Keynesian-Fordist capitalism (Harvey, 1989).

of working conditions and life projects, «is a key factor in this imprisonment within the present and a presentism experienced henceforth as oppressive and without hope» (Hartog, 2015, p. 113). Pushed by both cultural imperatives and material constraints (working and living conditions, advancements in communication and information technology), such a subject becomes partly incapable of firm ideas and, crucially, stable political commitment, giving birth to a new form of bottom-up “progressive” political action model which privileges «localism, direct action, and inexhaustible horizontalism» – what Srnicek and Williams would define “folk politics” (Srnicek & Williams, 2015). Unfortunately, despite some scholars placing their hope in bottom-up movements to contrast the climate crisis (Mann & Wainwright, 2018; Klein, 2014), this kind of political commitment has proven incapable of envisioning radical alternatives to neoliberalism so far, as the climate crisis would require. Meanwhile, the primacy of the “folk politics” model is paralleled by the structural tendency of neoliberal elites to steer the media system towards individualistic environmentalism or, at best, corporate environmentalism (Wright & Nyberg, 2015), which tries to put ethical responsibility for climate change *solely* on individuals as customers (“green consumption”) or to marketize environmental concerns (“greenwashing”).²⁶

The End of History

As we briefly recalled earlier, a substantial number of scholars agreed that between the 1970s and the 1990s, there has been a subterranean alliance between the rise of neoliberal capitalism and a specific understanding of history, such as the “postmodern” rejection of historical meta-narratives. It appears appropriate to explore this hypothetical ideological alliance as one of the crucial causes of the resilience of neoliberal capitalism. Despite the widespread dissatisfaction with neoliberal ideology’s promises, especially after the 2007-2008 financial crisis, its weak response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Heyd, 2021; Gonçalves & Bertolami, 2021; Volpi, 2021) and the decades-old inefficacy in addressing climate change, neoliberalism still appears as the hegemonic force of our political imagination – although in a spectral, “zombified” fashion (Crouch, 2011).

While modern temporality and sense of historicity were arguably already in a deep crisis in the early 20th century and the inter-war period, a “new futurism” driven by the need «to reconstruct, to modernize, and to implement central economic planning» (Hartog, 2015) was again mainstream in the aftermath of

²⁶ Natasha Bernall, ‘Google, Microsoft and the Strange World of Corporate Greenwashing’ Wired (31 January 2020) available www.wired.co.uk/article/corporate-greenwashing (accessed 28 March 2023).

World War II. In Europe, it took the forms of the “*trente glorieuses*”, the “German miracle”, etc., while, in the background, the cold-war competition between a socialist and a market-based conception of progress would keep a progressist vision of the future alive. During the last forty years, our way of dealing with the future has dramatically changed, as the 1970s punk culture slogan «no future» would summarize (Hartog, 2015; Berardi, 2013). The socialist understanding of progress was hence erased from mainstream consciousness while the US started projecting its uncontested economic and military hegemony globally. Partly in tune with this more recent crisis of historical progress, and partly as the ultimate reaffirmation of the modern *Weltgeschichte*, Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis has been widely addressed in this regard as one of the core ideological legitimizations of neoliberal capitalism on the terrain of philosophy (Žižek, 2001, Fisher, 2009; Ricciardi, 2017a). In a crucial historical moment (notably, just while USSR was crumbling down) Fukuyama drew on Alexandre Kojève’s account of the Hegelian end of history (Kojève, 1980; Fukuyama, 1992; Volpi, 2022) to describe Western capitalist liberal democracy as the endpoint of human ideological evolution and its universalization «as the final form of human government» (Fukuyama, 1992)²⁷. Looking more deeply, Fukuyama’s move was to declare the death of the non-liberal, non-free-market societal model’s aspirations to universality, as free-market liberalism won first in the realm of *consciousness*. Accordingly, no political project is capable of projecting globally a widely acceptable universalizing image of itself except for capitalist liberal democracy (Fukuyama, 1992). It is the creation of a truly global market that, according to Fukuyama, will lead to Kant’s “perpetual peace” and the universal adoption of an economistic mentality that abhors non-profitable violence (Fukuyama, 1992 p. xix). In the end, it is the free market’s victory that closes off the political horizon and makes so difficult to envision an alternative to neoliberal capitalism.

Unfortunately, the end of history narrative ultimately justifies the market order which in turn structurally undermines our response to climate change. Contrary to its claims of representing the end of ideological disputes, the end of history is then rather an ideological narrative that underpins neoliberal presentism and turns the question of power into a matter of mere technical necessity (Ricciardi, 2011). With “no alternative” in sight, the status quo fills up completely the space of political imagination. Having reached the end of history, we dwell solely on «economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands» (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 17), the world seems to wander off in auto-pilot mode, and we collectively live in an unending present (which does not

²⁷ For a genealogy of the “*posthistoire*” idea, see Niethammer (1992).

exclude the fact that we feel constantly stressed by a perceived acceleration of the pace of life).

To further clarify how markets and a "post-historical attitude" to history connect, let us briefly turn to the way Michel Foucault partially confirmed *ante litteram* Fukuyama's thesis and its link with neoliberalism. In the courses of 1978-1979, in which he offered his seminal analysis of neoliberalism and neoliberal governmentality, and in particular of the early implementation of the ordoliberal project in post-war West Germany, Foucault pointed out how the new German state, incapable of anchoring its political legitimacy in history, developed a new approach to history with profound economic consequences (Foucault, 2008)²⁸. Foucault foresaw that an unprecedented "double circuit" between economics and politics underpins the new German state's political legitimacy:

History had said no to the German state, but now the economy will allow it to assert itself.

Continuous economic growth will take over from a malfunctioning history. It will thus be possible to live and accept the breach of history as a breach in memory, inasmuch as *a new dimension of temporality will be established in Germany that will no longer be a temporality of history, but one of economic growth* (Foucault, 2008, p. 86).

In a way, the kind of political legitimacy that the ordoliberal leadership sought for Germany in the aftermath of National Socialism – the complete de-legitimization of its historical past – is the prototype of the departing of social democracy from history and progress. Making economic growth the only temporality on stage has deep presentist consequences, as it does on the political level. In a political framework that, just like post-war Germany, is solely meant to guarantee economic freedom (and not to exercise sovereign power, *inter alia*), economic growth replaces sovereignty, and democratic consent is *automatically implied* by the very participation in the economic game and it is made *permanent* (Foucault 2008, p. 84)²⁹. Adhering to the economic game guaranteed by the new state implies, henceforth, conferring legitimization and sovereignty to the new institutional arrangement. In the case of post-war

²⁸ We here assume that ordoliberalism (also known as German neoliberalism) and Austro-American neoliberalism (as Foucault himself distinguishes them, Foucault, 2008, pp. 77-80) can be reasonably paralleled as two different variants of the same doctrinarian core and of the same communal 'enemies', and that it makes sense to study them together (Dardot & Laval, 2013; Davies, 2014; Cerny, 2016).

²⁹ «Consent has been given to any decision which may be taken to guarantee this economic freedom or to secure that which makes this economic freedom possible [...]. And even this is not saying enough, for the economy does not only bring a juridical structure or legal legitimization to a German state that history had just debarred. This economic institution, the economic freedom that from the start it is the role of this institution to guarantee and maintain, produces something even more real, concrete, and immediate than a legal legitimization; it produces a *permanent consensus* of all those who may appear as agents within these economic processes» (Foucault, 2008, p. 84).

Germany, the economy precedes the very formation of the state and the approval of the new constitution, both logically and chronologically (Davies, 2014). It is the economy, in effect, that creates public law and legitimizes it, hereafter creating a «double circuit» between market, law, and politics (Foucault, 2008, p. 86). Furthermore, this «economic genealogy» of the state is not simply understood as a once-and-for-all act of foundation, as it gets endlessly reproduced («permanent genesis») in the everyday functioning of the state-guaranteed free market, guaranteeing in turn the irrevocability of the consensus (Foucault, 2008, p. 84). History has then no place in the “political unconscious” (Jameson, 1981) of the Federal Republic³⁰.

Ernst Bloch’s “non-contemporaneity” and the “multiversum”

Earlier we addressed the problem of neoliberal political temporality: how to get rid of totalizing philosophies of progress without, by doing so, getting rid of the possibility of *praxis* as well? Is there a way not to throw out the baby with the bathwater and reconcile our desperate need for political solutions to climate change and the lack of acceptable universal narratives that would not repress freedom and pluralism? Freedom, although differently conceived, has dominated political debates over the last three centuries. However, within postmodern thought, freedom has been often disjointed from universal narratives of human emancipation (Lyotard, 1984) – or, at the very least, their relationship became much more problematic. As Chakrabarty recently summarized: «scholars in the humanities, after all, have been raised—and with good reason—for over five decades to be extremely suspicious of all claims of totality and universalism», but, at the same time, «in the era of the Anthropocene, we need the Enlightenment (i.e., reason) even more than in the past» (Chakrabarty, 2021). After all, as in Crutzen and Stoermer’s early definition of the Anthropocene as a new possible geological era, humans will not just stop being a major geological force just by refusing an anthropocentric understanding of history: «mankind will remain a major geological force for many millennia, maybe millions of years, to come» (Crutzen & Stoermer 2000, p. 17).

Envisioning what kind of temporality we would hypothetically need to cope better with the anthropogenic climate disaster while avoiding anachronistic returns to a relinquished account of historical totality, requires us to hold together and harmonize two sets of concerns. We addressed the combination of the two as the *progress-praxis problem*:

³⁰ «[T]here is a circuit going constantly from the economic institution to the state; and if there is an inverse circuit [...], it should not be forgotten that the element that comes first in this kind of siphon is the economic institution. There is a *permanent genesis*, a permanent genealogy of the state from the economic institution» (Foucault, 2008, p. 84).

- (a) we need a concept of progress that allows a *praxis* that is adequate to counteract climate crisis both at the mitigation and the adaptation level.
- (b) we need to preserve freedom in the form of pluralism: the West can no longer paternalistically prescribe a monolithic, universal narrative of progress that standardizes the Western developmental path for all³¹.

Finding a solution to the problem is arguably a daunting task, which can hardly be accomplished through an article. What we aim for in the remaining pages is taking on some cues from Ernst Bloch's philosophical production and arguing for their utility in this context. Furthermore, we aim to put some Blochian conceptual tools to use in sketching the very rough profile of a temporal model that is apt for the Anthropocene.

Let us then briefly introduce Ernst Bloch's understanding of world history as presented in the essay on "non-contemporaneity" (*"Ungleichzeitigkeit"*)³² in 1935's *Heritage of Our Time* and in a lecture that he delivered in 1955. In those occasions, Bloch partly foresaw – from a Western Marxist point of view – the puzzle of progress and its linkage with political praxis. In *Heritage of Our Time* Bloch sketched a vibrant account of Hitler's rise in Germany by approaching time from a sociological perspective. Society, Bloch argues, may be non-contemporaneous to itself: «[n]ot all people live in the same now. They do so externally, through the fact that they can be seen today. But they are thereby not yet living contemporaneously to the others» (Bloch, 1990, p. 105). As Hegel and Marx partly noticed already, Germany is «the classical land of non-contemporaneity» (Bloch, 1990, p. 106): remnants of past, pre-capitalist ways of living and modes of production live next to modern, «contemporaneous» industrial society. Especially three distinct segments of German society, namely young bourgeois, peasants, and the impoverished middle class, live within an anachronistic temporality, which in Bloch's account eventually explains Hitler's greater seductive power (non-contemporaneous element) vis-à-vis the proletarian revolution (contemporaneous element). It is not a matter of individual self-delusion: the economic crisis of the thirties has exacerbated entire classes' desynchrony, both from an objective and subjective point of view. To Bloch, non-contemporaneity was in this case a way to explain why the impoverished and fully proletarianized German society would still not embrace communism: ideologies of past epochs, which Hitler embodied, «recur with more ease in Germany because they are present in the material structures of those past epochs»

³¹ One of the most prominent trends in recent scholarship and literature on the Anthropocene, the Climate Crisis, and Environmental thought has been the widespread call for opening the debate to indigenous people, increasingly identified as a crucial component of the system change that would be needed to overcome the environmental-climate crisis. See Mazzocchi (2020).

³² Bloch first developed the term *"Ungleichzeitigkeit"* to criticize the mainstream Marxian approach to Germany, that would explain its lack of revolution to its backwardness. See (Bloch, 1924, p. 599; Bodei, 1982, p. 18).

(Morfino, 2018, p. 127). Ultimately, non-contemporaneous elements and antagonisms interfere with the “contemporaneous” contradiction of capitalism between capital and labour, which would “normally” push it towards communism, and “distract” workers through an appeal to non-contemporary values and conspiracy theories such as The Protocols of the Elders of Zion. Bloch proposes thus a «poly-temporal, poly-spatial dialectic» instead of the classic Marxist model of “simple” contradiction (Morfino, 2018, p. 128). The political goal here is not to repress non-contemporaneity but to bring it “on the battlefield” of the contemporaneous contradiction between capital and labour (Bloch, 1990).

There are a few insights we can draw on here. In 1935 Bloch is admittedly still adopting an overall unilinear progressive temporality: the “polyrhythm” of temporalities is for now only apparent (Morfino, 2018) since contemporaneity and non-contemporaneity are not yet defined as relational concepts, but they are “measurable” through a fundamental, objective system of reference (namely, the Marxist materialist account of history). Only the main contradiction (capital vs. labour) is genuinely contemporary. Nevertheless, the relationship between temporality and material conditions, on the one hand, and between temporality and *praxis* is already fully developed.

Going back to the same topic in an entirely different political situation in a conference in 1955³³, later published as *Differentiations on the Concept of Progress* (1963), Bloch develops and radicalizes the idea of temporal pluralism³⁴. First of all, no «certain chronological index of progress» (Bloch, 1970, p. 114) can be conceived anymore, by which what comes *later* in history is to be conceived as “progress” compared to what has gone *before*: things are not that easy. Such an understating would boil down to a mere «fetish of duration», as it is recognizable in social democracy’s understanding of progress as automatic and economistic and needs to be exposed to avoid major setbacks (such as National Socialism). Secondly, Bloch is in this text an early proponent of the decolonization of the concept of progress: he refuses a Eurocentric linear path, exposing its deep connection with colonialism and imperialism (Bloch, 1970, p. 120). Identifying Europe as the final goal of world history, whether it is about social rights or art, ultimately serves white men’s domination (Morfino, 2018 p. 129). Most of all, there is a «new aporia» arising in the concept of progress: how to accommodate the «gigantic amount of non-European historical material» in any adequate representation of world history? (Bloch, 1970, p. 120). Crucially, according to Bloch an «ahistorical negation» of progress is not the solution to the aporia: that would require too drastic a measure, namely «the demise of the

³³ For an exposition of the historical background of Bloch’s theoretical proposal in the wake of the much too slow de-Stalinization of East Germany, see Bodei (1982, pp. 131 – 134).

³⁴ The irreducible multiplicity of social times has been a longstanding interest in sociology. See e.g., Gurvitch (1964). For a comparison of that literature with Bloch’s account of non-contemporaneity, see Bodei (1982, pp. 22-24).

coherent process of history itself, which unites countries, people and epochs» (Bloch, 1970, p. 122). Instead, according to Bloch, humankind still needs to preserve an apt concept of progress, which

requires not unilinearity but a broad, flexible, and thoroughly dynamic "multiverse": the voices of history joined in perpetual and often intricate counterpoint. A unilinear model must be found obsolete if justice is to be done to the considerable amount of non-European material (Bloch, 1970, p. 143).

Bloch here helps us to acknowledge our deep need to rethink progress in a non-Eurocentric, non-unilinear way, starting from the recognition of the *social* function of the concept of progress itself: if we do not question the «why and wherefor» of progress, we leave space for the infiltration of potentially oppressive social goals (Bloch, 1970, p. 143). On the other hand, relinquishing progress tout court is not a feasible option out of the riddle. Bloch highlights in this regard the epistemic difficulty of systematizing world history in the absence of any conception of progress. In our case, drawing on Koselleck and Bloch's earlier assessment of the connection between social time and praxis, we rather move the accent on what renouncing progress means in terms of collective political action: surrendering to the end-of-history narrative of neoliberal capitalism as an inescapable, eternal present.

The idea of world history as a *multiverse*, a multi-dimensional manifold with variable metrics inspired by the Riemannian space, partially overcomes the aporia. In Bloch's account of progress, the «diverse nations, societies, and civilizations of the Earth (in all the stages of their economic and social development, and the dialectical laws governing these stages) have their place» (Bloch, 1970, p. 144) and strive towards a common immanent goal, without presupposing their convergence on an already existing cultural model. In other words, Bloch is proposing not to relinquish a unitary world history and progress, but to adapt those meta-narratives to the manifold of seemingly incomparable different cultures and nations. On the one hand, the Eurocentric bias must be abandoned. On the other hand, neither conceiving history as a mere co-presence of different cultures and different historical times (or, in the terminology we introduced here, of different political temporalities) seems to be enough³⁵. Here the content of Bloch's progress (a general socialist goal, next to a de-provincialized cultural convergence of humankind) is not as important for us as the temporal structure – the multiverse – that he envisions to reconcile progressive philosophy of history with a postcolonial, subaltern sensibility. Bloch compares the multiverse to a *symphony* enriched by numerous counterpoints

³⁵ Bloch's proposal of the multiverse indeed criticizes the «co-existence» of cultural cycles, as in Spangler, Toynbee or Frobenius (Bodei, 1982, p. 140). To parallel Bloch's multiversum to the already mentioned distinction between "hot" and "cold" societies in Lévi-Strauss, see Bodei (1982, pp. 143).

and different voices, which does not feature a *continuo* of all the voices (Bloch, 1970, p. 122). The multiverse allows us to envision a model that permits the coexistence of a concept of progress with many different social ways to experience and represent time, preserving cultural differences. From a conceptual engineering point of view, focusing on the social function of progress helps us isolate “what we want the concept of *progress* to do for us”, insulating it from postmodern and postcolonial criticism³⁶. At this point, it appears possible to sketch a way out of our puzzle by drawing on Bloch’s philosophy of progress and contemporaneity of non-contemporaneous elements.

Towards an Ecological multi-temporality for the Anthropocene

Is it possible, drawing on Bloch’s account of progress, to envision a way out of our puzzle? Can we get rid of what we do not find acceptable anymore in the concept of progress and at the same time preserve progress’s potential for *praxis*? Earlier we defined *political temporality* as the schema of the interaction between the social representation of historical time in a community x at a time t , and what is perceived as politically feasible in x at t . What we require from a political temporality which can be apt for the Anthropocene, as mentioned above, is that it needs to enlarge the manifold of political possibilities we perceive as feasible, breaking the glass ceiling of what Mark Fisher called *Capitalist Realism* (Fisher, 2009), allowing an adequate form of *praxis* to be potentially carried out. There is no *just* way out from climate change without the possibility of radical change driven by a political commitment that stems from below (Klein, 2014; Mann & Wainwright, 2018). As we recalled, achieving this goal arguably involves restoring the conditions for a political temporality which can “perform” as “good” as the old concept of progress did in supporting political action. Granting, given the collective nature of climate change and the intrinsically global effort required to stop it, the new temporal model ought to be as inclusive and pluralist as possible.

To this extent, we may adopt Bloch’s concept of the multiverse to pluralize political temporalities and make explicit the complex temporal structure we are envisioning, which we may call an *Eco-multitemporality*. In other words, what Bloch’s account may allow us to do is to “freeze” the question about which is the ideal temporality for the Anthropocene and to pluralize the model instead: is it conceivable not to choose between different temporalities, but to pick a selection of useful temporal structures among the many possibilities instead?

³⁶ For an extensive introduction to conceptual engineering, see Burgess, Cappelen & Plunkett (2020).

In what follows we make an effort to develop this insight, although this is a task that surely goes much beyond the scope of the present paper and will require further research. Let us first set some conditions that the new temporal model should satisfy to be "Anthropocene-friendly". Drawing on the insights we reached earlier, we require our eco-multiversum of temporalities to comprise at least five distinct features at the same time. We can formulate this requirement through five conditions that the multiversum must satisfy to be apt for the Anthropocene:

1. *Progressive/linear*. The model comprises a sense of the overall *progress* of humankind towards a "better" (more just, equal, safe, healthy) world, thus allowing praxis to be enacted in its name.
2. *Non-anthropocentric*. It does not collapse on a purely anthropocentric perspective: we need *long durée* and deep time to fully comprehend the scale of anthropogenic climate (and environmental) crises and build resilient institutions.
3. *Non-ecocentric*. The model does not collapse on a purely ecocentric, deep ecology-inspired perspective either. We need to preserve a sense of a conscious human political agency that allows climate and environmental praxis. It also possibly needs to offer people reasons to reduce their emissions that do not require forgetting their socially driven self-interest, e.g., coupling environmental politics and social justice.
4. *Cyclical*. The model allows a *cyclical* temporality to be also effective in modeling our impact on the ecological and geological world, defining the limits to what is to be allowed in our manipulation of the natural environment and what is not.
5. *Pluralist*. Lastly, the model preserves cultural pluralism and does not comprise a paternalistic, Eurocentric perspective on "progress" that alienates different cultures and different paths.

A temporal *multiversum* that satisfies the five conditions would solve the temporality-praxis puzzle concerning climate change: we could have an adequate historical, progressive meta-narrative that allows humankind to act unitarily and resolutely against climate change, without alienating societies that are on a different developmental path and without being blind towards the degree of our impact on nature. This appears as the only possible way out of the sclerosis of neoliberal presentism and the end of history narrative, which proves to be unsatisfactory for the Anthropocene, without reviving any imperialist-colonialist narrative.

In the end, the multiverse possibly represents a way to generalize the global contemporariness of non-contemporaneous elements which the climate crisis exposes. First of all, we see developed nations' account of progress as a unilinear developmental path; developing nations' refusal to comply with unjust

limitations of their emissions budget in the name of their right to develop. The impoverished Western middle class indulges in climate-sceptic populist politics and climate denialism, instead of facing the situation as science presents it (just as, in Bloch's account, the German impoverished middle class chose Hitler). At the same time, unprecedentedly large, deregulated, and influential financial markets and corporate capitalism subsist in a strictly short-term temporality. Moreover, we observe the natural environment's incapacity to keep pace with our endlessly accelerating pace of consumption, radicalized religious groups that arise alongside new millenarianisms, or old geopolitical power's return to imperialist foreign politics. A *multiversum* could arguably better face neoliberal society's desynchronization crisis (Rosa, 2009) and overcome the polyphony of non-contemporaneous elements within it.

One important note: we are assuming, on the one hand, that a plurality of social times is *real* and that it is currently exacerbated by the climate crisis. We are henceforth stating that we live in a world characterized by the "contemporariness of no-contemporaneous elements" from a *descriptive* perspective. On the other hand, though, we are also *normatively* urging us to adopt the multiverse model to consciously acknowledge and embrace the manifold of social times we live in and to accordingly develop multi-layered narratives that allow adequate political action against climate change³⁷. The universalization of one single temporality, e.g., neoliberal reluctant presentism or an eco-centric deep history, does not seem to be the solution to the PPP: we do not need to look backward, to modern categories of world-historical progress; instead, we need to start from the critique of progress by postmodern-postcolonial thought and proceed accordingly to develop the right kind of (multi)temporality to address an empirical problem.

If we had to intuitively represent our temporal multiverse graphically, it would probably look like an n-dimensional non-Euclidean space (where n is the number of different temporalities, which we want to include in it). The curved axes represent the fact that the temporal dimensions can be non-Euclidean, as in Bloch's fascination for Riemannian space, and have different metrics. As the straight, oriented line is the most common graphical representation of "modern" temporality of progress, or as the circle is usually associated with ancient cyclical

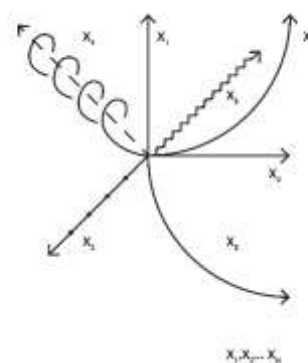


Figure 1

³⁷ Bloch himself indirectly gives us some suggestions about what kind of political arrangement could emerge from an appreciation of the unitarity of humankind and human history as a multiverse: «it is not a chronologically linear but a chronologically *differentiated* and *federative* and only thus fruitfully centred relationship» (Bloch, 1970, p. 131).

conceptions of time, the n-dimensional space is the "empty" graph of the *multiversum*, which we can fill with as many different temporal dimensions as the scope demands.

It is useful to underline that the "eco-multiversum" holds together different ways to experience time, without assuming any "real" time as an objective and universal frame of reference. It permits multiple "local" interests and ways of living to be recognized within a non-Eurocentric frame. This hardly implies negating the objective *urgency* for a radical climate response: we do not need to assume the inconsistency of the clock's time, because this account has a different target, namely *social* time. It is also important to highlight that, in the social domain, there is a strong correspondence between the way time is socially experienced by a community and the meta-narrative through which time is structured and given shape, just as the narrative of secular progress structures a unilinear conception of time. This implies that constructing the "multiversum" requires a pragmatically oriented choice of which meta-historical narrative we need to address our environmental and social challenges. In other words, to envision the multiverse we need to define in advance which concrete output we desire to attain (i.e., acting resolutely and united on climate change) and choose among the possible narratives which ones would allow us to reach the goal. According to Lyotard, Kant himself, as one of the main references for classical philosophies of "*Weltgeschichte*", in his philosophical attempt to envision an *Idea for a Universal History* was quite clear that his drive was mostly pragmatic and the metahistorical narrative he was proposing might as well have been just an "as if" (Lyotard, 2009)³⁸. The narrative that he was proposing (that Nature has a "plan" for human history – namely *progress*) was possibly just *fictional* (like a "novel", see Lyotard, 2009), but reason requires it for a pragmatic need. Can we expand and adapt the Kantian approach, at least according to Lyotard's interpretation³⁹, for the Anthropocene? Can the idea (or fiction) of a natural plan of humankind be needed to allow political action in favour of that (possibly fictional) goal? After all, our eco-multiversum might as well amount to a self-fulfilling prophecy, without losing its normative power. The major difference here is that, in the face of climate change, we need a temporally multi-layered narrative to lay the foundations of our eco-multiverse, which even allows contradictory

³⁸ As Kant's ninth thesis goes, «a philosophical attempt to work out a universal history according to a natural plan directed to achieving the civic union of the human race must be regarded as possible» (Kant 1963). «Nevertheless, if one may assume that Nature [...] works not without plan or purpose, this Idea could still be of use. [...] [t]his Idea may still serve as a guiding thread for presenting as a system, at least in broad outlines, what would otherwise be a planless conglomeration of human actions [...]. It can serve not only for clarifying the confused play of things human, and not only for the art of prophesying later political changes [...] but for giving a consoling view of the future [...] in which there will be exhibited in the distance how the human race finally achieves the condition in which all the seeds planted in it by Nature can fully develop and in which the destiny of the race can be fulfilled here on earth» (Kant, 1963).

³⁹ For a critical discussion of Kant's philosophy of history see Horn (2018).

ends to be pursued at the same time on the different axes of the temporal manifold. We do not need to attain the *Truth*, but rather to satisfy the performance-based criteria for an effective multi-temporality that allows us to efficiently respond to climate change.

A multi-layered narrative for the eco-multiverse would finally positively respond to Chakrabarty's challenge to reconcile the two sides of human agency: humankind as an agent of *human* history, and the human *species* as a geological force (hence, the Anthropocene as a geological era) (Chakrabarty, 2021).

Conclusions

Over the last few decades, transformations of global capitalism were supported by the view that a «planless conglomeration of human actions» (Kant, 1963) can effectively drive us, through the allegedly perfect algorithm of price and free markets, towards desirable social goals and prosperity, suspending historical time and “ending” history. What it did was rather, in the end, destroying much of the post-war social conquests in Western democracies and forcing other developmental paths to adopt a market-based model of development. In the meantime, it greatly contributed to warming our planet while disintegrating the possible political institutions and political imaginary that could allow us to manage our anthropogenic climate crisis. As we argued, the concept of “political temporality” has considerable explicatory power when it comes to the interaction between neoliberal capital, temporality, and politics. We thus need to understand neoliberal presentism and the end of history narrative better to go finally beyond them and to envision a multi-layered model of social temporalities (which we call an *eco-multiversum*) which is, at the same time, acceptable for everyone (pluralist) and does not oppose the very possibility of political praxis. The attempt we made in this respect is just a very broad sketch, and it would need much more imaginative and theoretical effort to be made coherent. Nevertheless, given our time's pressing challenges and desperate need for change, radical philosophical ideas – although presently much underdeveloped – may still be vital.

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