

Intergenerational justice through the rejection of Western heritage.

Materialistic values, depopulation and degrowth against extinction

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ABSTRACT This work intends to address the issue of intergenerational and climate justice in the context of a possible rejection, mainly at a socio-cultural level, of the Western heritage. Starting from the reflections on the theme of the Anthropocene and of a new conception of human responsibility, different from that primarily linked to individual freedom, here we propose to analyze three aspects of this possible rejection, which together can contribute to fostering the mitigation of climate change and a livable future for the new generations. The first aspect is cultural transition from post-materialistic to materialistic values, The second one concerns the issue of contrasting overpopulation, and the third one, to be pursued jointly with the others, is that of “degrowth”, above all in terms of consumption. All these aspects, which must be fostered both on a cultural and institutional level, make up a process that we consider to be already underway and which we believe will allow a sort of intergenerational justice and a planetary future far from the most extreme consequences for humanity, from lack of livability to extinction.

KEYWORDS Intergenerational justice; materialistic values; depopulation; degrowth; Western heritage.

RESUMO Este trabalho pretende abordar a questão da justiça intergeracional e climática no contexto de uma possível rejeição, sobretudo a nível sociocultural, da herança ocidental. Partindo das reflexões em torno do Antropoceno e de uma nova concepção de responsabilidade humana, distinta daquela tradicionalmente associada à liberdade individual, propõe-se aqui analisar três aspectos dessa possível rejeição, que, em conjunto, podem contribuir para promover a mitigação das alterações climáticas e um futuro habitável para as novas gerações. O primeiro aspecto diz respeito à transição cultural de valores pós-materialistas para valores materialistas; o segundo relaciona-se com a necessidade de contrariar a sobrepopulação; e o terceiro, a ser prosseguido em articulação com os anteriores, é o do “decrecimento”, sobretudo em termos de consumo. Todos estes aspectos, que devem ser incentivados tanto no plano cultural como no institucional, integram um processo que consideramos já em curso e que acreditamos poder permitir uma forma de justiça intergeracional e um futuro planetário afastado das consequências mais extremas para a humanidade, desde a perda de habitabilidade até à extinção.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE Justiça intergeracional; valores materialistas; despovoação; decrecimento; herança ocidental.

1 Introduction

In this article, we aim to address the issue of intergenerational justice, relating to the thematic of climate change, from the socio-cultural point of view of the rejection of a Western historical heritage, which has brought forward the value of individual freedom as primary. This trend, especially in recent times defined as postmodern or hypermodern (Bauman 1997; Lipovetsky 2006), has determined for authors such as Inglehart (1990; 2018) a widespread social shift from the primacy of materialistic values (survival, collectivism, embeddedness) to post-materialistic values (individualism, self-expression, autonomy). This shift, which increasingly characterizes the generations following the Second World War, arises in advanced Western societies¹ for a set of structural and cultural reasons, both in terms of economic well-being and existential security, and social and individual conceptions. In the present era, rightly defined as the Anthropocene due to the impact of human beings on the Earth's ecosystem (Hamilton 2017),² the collective threats relating to climate change and the set of corollary socio-political phenomena collide with this trend to ever greater individual freedom, generating an evident difficulty on the part of today's more or less advanced societies in facing or at least controlling the risks that have become global (Beck 1999; Author 2023).

Living conditions, even as result of a material well-being never achieved before, are questioned all over the world due to phenomena linked directly or indirectly to climate change (Masson-Delmotte et al. 2021), without the national and international human institutions being able to prevent or mitigate the exponentially problematic drift both for the

1 By this term, we refer to societies with a high Human Development Index (HDI), typically characterized by advanced technological infrastructures, complex institutional systems, and high levels of material well-being. Several labels have been employed to describe this category – such as “developed countries”, “Global North”, or others – each carrying its own set of conceptual and normative ambiguities. In this context, the notion of “advanced” is not meant to imply any form of moral or civilizational superiority, but merely refers to specific socio-economic indicators.

2 Although the original geological proposal of the Anthropocene – formulated by Crutzen and Stoermer in 2000 – was formally rejected in 2024 by a subgroup of the International Commission on Stratigraphy (amid considerable controversy, both substantive and procedural), the broader field of Earth system science has since produced a robust and growing body of evidence that justifies thinking of the Anthropocene in “systemic” terms, rather than merely stratigraphic ones. On the debate surrounding the rejection of the geological definition, see especially Carrington (2024), Voosen (2024), Witze (2024), and Zhong (2024). For key scientific contributions supporting a systemic understanding of the Anthropocene – encompassing critical processes such as biodiversity loss, ocean acidification, and others – see in particular the research on “planetary boundaries” (Rockström et al. 2009; Richardson et al. 2023) and “great acceleration” (Steffen et al. 2015).

natural and social ecosystem and for the human species itself (Richardson et al. 2011). The younger and future generations, as noted by Shue (2021), will suffer the greater damage the less the current generations manage to do right now in order to mitigate environmental and social “negative externalities”. The *Pivotal Generation* is precisely for Shue that of all the men and women alive at the moment, not only the young people to whom politicians mostly delegate the necessary practical and educational actions, and thus the responsibilities of an epochal change.

Rather, and here is the proposal of the present work, a possible way to avoid the definitive and extreme threat of future extinction – or even only of the very serious degradation of living conditions – would be for the *pivotal generation* to favor the socio-cultural rejection of the Western heritage aimed at individual freedom (Millefiorini 2015). In concrete terms this would mean, as we will try to explain during the paper, three different processes guided or fostered by political institutions and social realities:

1) Fostering the cultural shift from post-materialistic to materialistic values,³ thus a return to the primary themes of survival, collectivism and embeddedness as opposed to individualism, self-expression and autonomy. A phenomenon that is already partly being witnessed due to the renewed perception of social and existential insecurity, which according to Inglehart (2018) will lead to a regression in the process of advancement and maintenance of post-materialistic values. What Pellegrino and Di Paola (2018) noted in terms of abandonment of the “liberal neutrality”, which has characterized so much of the Western political tradition, also moves in this sense.

2) Fostering the process of global depopulation, which is already partially happening in many advanced societies (in Europe and East-Asia), mainly for socio-cultural reasons, or which has happened in other nations due to even dramatic political choices (India, China, Vietnam).

3 While the distinction between materialistic and post-materialistic values presented here follows Inglehart's sociological framework, it should not be confused with the materialist conception of history in Marxist thought. In Marx's historical materialism, “materialism” refers to the primacy of material (economic and productive) conditions in shaping social structures and ideologies. The shift to post-materialist values in Inglehart's sense –emphasizing autonomy and self-expression – might be read, from a Marxist perspective, as an ideological development reflecting specific stages of capitalist evolution, especially in societies experiencing high levels of affluence. Some Marxist and neo-Marxist authors (Marcuse 1964; Gorz 1980, 1989) have criticized such cultural shifts as forms of false consciousness or as stabilizers of capitalist hegemony, while others have explored how post-materialist values could open the way to alternative modes of production and life. In this article, however, the emphasis is placed not on the ideological critique but on the functional implications of these cultural shifts in the Anthropocene.

In fact, given the primary impact of widespread consumption and population increase on the mechanisms that favor both greenhouse gases emissions and the exploitation of resources, tending towards a decrease in population would favor both the process of mitigating climate change and the future difficulties for the next generations (Neurath 1994). This is true also when considering the distinction presented by Dworkin (1993) between the *incremental value* and the *sacred* or *inviolable value*, relative to the existing one, for which human existence falls into the second and not into the first.

3) Fostering the process of degrowth, in terms of decreasing production through the abandonment of fossil fuels (transition to renewables) and through the remodulation of consumption (transition to reuse) (Fioramonti 2017). Surely this third point is the most difficult to achieve in terms of socio-cultural acceptance, especially in a society that has transformed its mass consumption into hyper-consumption (Lipovetsky 2006) and therefore needs it in terms of individual pursuit of happiness. The attempt of a degrowth orientation by human institutions, both political and social (Latouche 2006), must therefore be favored in the meantime by the commitment on the two previous points, which alone can assist the change in the mentality of consumption and reduce unnecessary goods demanded by populations (Keucheyan 2019). The rejection of the Western heritage is therefore also manifested in this abandonment of the idea of constant growth and incremental progress, which have shown their limits in terms of environmental sustainability since the 1970s (Bardi and Pereira 2022).

As will become clear, these are converging paths in the broader project of overcoming the heritage of the West. However, our approach remains situated within the trajectory of contemporary social evolution, seeking to cultivate transformative processes already underway, rather than proposing abstract alternatives or purely speculative models. In this light, we argue that it is possible to reject certain postmodern Western values in the name of some modern and pre-modern materialistic principles; to challenge dominant Western views on population by drawing on forms of Eastern policies; and, conversely, to mobilize some postmodern sensibilities – such as the emphasis on happiness – against modern Western fetishes, notably economic and population growth.

This rejection, characterized by the above three steps (briefly defined here), can in our opinion represent an attempt at intergenerational justice that would be concretely useful (and perhaps not only feasible in

theory, given current trends), to leave future generations some more possibilities to face the environmental disaster that awaits them. All this obviously recognizing the theoretical impossibility of a “full” intergenerational justice, since, as Shue (2021) recalls, some generations happen by chance to have to face commitments and sacrifices from which other generations then derive well-being, and vice versa. On the other hand, we cannot complain about the times in which we live, but we can try to do everything possible in human terms, as an intergenerational duty and “pure fairness”. Or in the words of Tolkien (1954): «“I wish it need not have happened in my time,” said Frodo. “So do I,” said Gandalf, “and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us”.»

2 Anthropocene and post-materialistic society

In order to carry out the path briefly described in the introduction, we begin with the issue relating to the Anthropocene and the dominant post-materialistic values in today’s advanced societies. Without being able here to delve into the theme concerning the definition of the Anthropocene, for which we refer to extensive and recent works (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2015; Hamilton 2017), it is important to understand that it represents a way of identifying an epochal change in conceiving the existence of human beings as well as the planet. In fact, with Anthropocene we mean the epoch in which human beings and their civilization have come to function as a planetary force – comparable in impact to other major geophysical processes –capable of substantially modifying not only the surface of the globe (and its local ecosystems) but the entire systemic functioning of the Earth. Therefore, although the primary reference of the term is to the passing of the geological epoch of the Holocene (typical of a classification based on criteria other than the identification of a primary agent), what is meant by the Anthropocene is not limited to a scientific classification, but it has a backlash on the way of conceiving human existence and civilization.

The beginning of this epoch is mostly traced back to the end of the 18th century, in conjunction with the first industrial revolution, which modified both the productive and social systems of the most advanced civilizations, introducing humanity into what we define “modernity”.

Since then, the human species, through the process of industrialization based on fossil fuels and the extreme exploitation of natural resources, has begun to introduce with its own action much more significant changes than those occurred even on a terrestrial level with the birth of agriculture (Diamond 1997). In particular, with the novelty of bringing ever larger quantities of CO₂ compacted in the rocks over hundreds of millions of years back into the atmosphere (incrementally favoring the release of all the so-called “greenhouse gases”), in order to grow and progress the nineteenth-century production society first and the twentieth-century mass society afterwards (Revelle and Suess 1957). Yet this phenomenon of resource exploitation and natural deterioration, which certainly has become increasingly powerful with technological and socio-economic developments, has been discovered and understood in its danger only in the last 50 years (Meadows et al. 1972).

What kind of society is therefore the one that is facing the global risks of climate change and the depletion of natural resources, with the related health, socio-political and economic consequences? First of all, a society which, increasingly interconnected on a global level, has spread and carried forward to the extreme consequences the processes of liberation, individualization, competition and consumption typical of modern Western civilization. What Inglehart (2018) identifies, at least regarding the first two aspects, as a distinctive feature of the generations following the Second World War: the departure from materialistic values such as security, collectivism and embeddedness to postmaterialistic values such as individualism, self-expression and autonomy. This predominantly cultural development has emerged within a broader framework of economic and political changes, which have fostered – in terms of possibilities and existential security – both the aspect of competition (Rosa 2010), linked to social atomism primarily caused by neoliberalism (Sennett 1977; Han 2014), and that of consumption (Bauman 2005), which becomes personalized and constantly aimed at happiness (Lipovetsky 2006).

Without intending here to try and determine the primacy of one aspect over another, it is important to outline how the heritage of the West, both on a cultural and psycho-existential level, and on an economic and socio-political level, has led to a certain global orientation mainly focused on *individual freedom* (Millefiorini 2015). However, in the encounter between these developments in values and the global risks of the Anthropocene (Beck 1999), harmful dynamics have been activated, which, according to Hamilton (2017), threaten to destroy both

society and the human species. Elsewhere we have also defined this process as the constitution of different *egosystems* (instead of *ecosystems*) (Author 2023), such that they prevent the level of “cooperation” historically necessary for human beings to survive and develop themselves (not necessarily in that order) (Harari 2016).

The problem is therefore the one clearly identified by Pellegrino and Di Paola (2018), when they highlight the *collective*, *systematic* and *permanent* aspects required by the new interaction between humanity and nature. Exactly the opposite of those now widespread post-materialistic values that have been detected by Inglehart (2018) and exposed by various authors through dynamics of narcissism (Lasch 1979), consumerism (Bauman 2005) and “social acceleration”, which generally involves also superficiality and short-term choices (Rosa 2010). In the Anthropocene, therefore, the issue of environmentalist or *post-environmentalist* ethics (Shellenberger and Nodhaus 2011) does not only concern the new understanding of the relationship between culture and nature in their hybridization (Descola 2005; Latour 2017), from the moment in which the human being substantially modifies nature and nothing remains uncontaminated (generating guilt, loss, danger) (McKibben 1989). Rather it requires a shift in Western ethics in general, from the theme of responsibility and duties that come from *freedom* (mostly individual) to those that come from *necessity* (mostly collective) (Hamilton 2017).

In fact, at the very moment when humanity becomes a dominant natural force on the planet, it also realizes two things: 1) the negative consequences of its progress were not intended, although foreseeable in the most recent phases; 2) its ability to intervene in this process are severely limited, especially in individual terms. The new environmental ethics therefore requires a departure from the level of *morality* and individual rights to that of *prudence* towards nature and the human impact on it.⁴ While in the Anthropocene the “power” over the global

4 Some readers might object that liberal ethics, centred on individual freedom and rights, need not be abandoned in order to address the climate crisis, but only adapted to the scale of collective coordination it requires. This objection reflects the view, widely held in contemporary political theory, that the climate emergency is above all a problem of co-operation among free and equal individuals, which should be resolved through democratic deliberation, institutional innovation, and incentive structures (Gardiner 2011; Caney 2012). While I acknowledge the importance of such approaches, the argument developed here is that they remain insufficient in the Anthropocene context for at least two reasons. First, because the liberal paradigm is structurally unsuited to regulating the long-term, large-scale, and temporally deferred consequences of aggregate individual actions (Pellegrino and Di Paola 2018), which typically evade legal and moral attribution under a rights-based framework. Second, because the existential and ecological urgency of the current crisis exceeds the capacity of procedural liberalism to generate timely, effective, and enforceable collective constraints. Rather than relying solely on the self-limitation of atomized individuals,

ecosystem is in the hands of the human being, the same cannot be said about the “control” of this power and its consequences (Hamilton 2017).

What gets out of control is not only the material effect of global actions, but the same sociological self-interpretation of human civilization. To put it in the words of Giddens (1990): the “reflection” of modernity on itself, which questions hitherto dominant values, categories and institutions (above all of a Western nature). In fact, although the vast majority of experts and shrewd people are clear about the nefarious path that lies ahead (especially for the generations to come) and the drastic choices that should be made, it currently seems impossible to prevent the announced disaster (Marques 2020). This happens primarily because the concepts and tools of collective legitimacy developed in the last 300 years by the West, starting from the Enlightenment and liberal ideas up to democracy and widespread civil rights, are centered on the primary value of individual freedom and responsibility connected to it (Millefiorini 2015).

Therefore, in the Anthropocene, and particularly in the postmodern value developments identified by Inglehart (2018), the old way of understanding the repercussions of individual action is not suitable for those *collective*, *systematic* and *permanent* aspects that concern the new interaction between humanity and nature (Pellegrino and Di Paola 2018). When individuals as a whole and with daily actions, typical of the private sphere, cause systemic and permanent damage to the environment and thus indirectly to other individuals scattered around the globe – but above all damage to future generations – the liberal system struggles to identify a legal fault and certainly democracy struggles to identify a legal justification with which to prevent such behavior by limiting individual freedom. Faced with what Pellegrino and Di Paola (2018) define as a “loosening” of the individual responsibility’s relationships, in terms of actual personal impact and of space and time, both the capacity for action of liberal law and the rationality of choice are lost. Because for

this work advocates a cultural reorientation toward collective necessity as a primary value. A shift not simply theoretical but already underway, triggered by growing perceptions of insecurity and systemic failure.

As for how this transformation might occur, the answer cannot rely on idealist voluntarism or authoritarian imposition. Here we suggest that the shift from post-materialist to materialist values — and from individualism to embedded collectivism — is in part already taking place due to exogenous socio-ecological pressures. But this shift can and should be actively guided by public institutions, educational systems, and cultural discourses, which already play a central role in shaping preferences, expectations, and social imaginaries. Much like the historical construction of liberal individualism required centuries of intellectual and institutional mediation, the construction of a new ethical paradigm suitable to the Anthropocene must be fostered by similar channels (only with far less time).

the decision maker it is too simple and convenient to unload risks and “negative externalities” on a future that he will not live (Shue 2021).

Yet this is not an attitude to be ascribed ontologically to the individual, who conforms himself to the culture of society, tradition and time in which he lives. In the pre-modern age (but also in early modernity) there was certainly a value system that fostered, for example, the transmission of goods and possibilities to the new generations, thanks to much slower social times and socio-political systems more focused on the community. Think of the idea of planting a tree in one’s own land or of passing on objects to children and grandchildren. However, without wanting to make unjustified nostalgia, given the positive developments of modernity for the material well-being of people, we want to hypothesize here that the radicalization of post-materialist values – and thus of individual freedom – is a historically meritorious process that today has become dangerous and unsustainable (Author 2023). More still, the question is whether in the Anthropocene, in which such Western values have spread to almost every country through globalization, it is possible to reverse the process.

In fact, given the “need” – as a criterion of prudence even before that of morality towards the new generations – to think above all a *collective* responsibility instead of an individual one, materialistic values (security, collectivism, incorporation) seem much more suitable than post-materialistic values (individualism, self-expression, autonomy). This is not only because the latter are in fact *unlimited*, and therefore involve a continuous rush towards further acquisition (Lipovetsky 2006) which stimulates capitalism in its process of resource exploitation. But above all because, in the Anthropocene, humanity (or the privileged part of it) seems to no longer be able to afford them, even net of the psycho-existential suffering they entail (burnout, depression, addiction), if it wants to guarantee a decent future for the new generations.

This process of reversal is in fact a possibility already contemplated by Inglehart (2018), who notes how the postmodern cultural shift is linked to the increase in existential security and practical possibilities, even if only *perceived* and not real. In this way, having perhaps reached the apex of this development of material well-being and individual freedom, the new generations are presenting a change in this same perception, returning to some basic fears that humanity (at least in advanced societies) seemed to have mitigated. Thus, while crises have followed one another on a global level in the last 20 years (terrorism, economic

crisis, pandemic, war), some assessment indices of the world population begin to worsen after decades (see, among others, the risk of hunger in the world) (FAO et al. 2022).

The renewed existential insecurity is therefore in itself an engine that leads to an inverse cultural change. However, to avoid it being only a social collapse of expectations (linked to post-materialistic values), this shift must be guided by alternative socio-political action and conception. Pellegrino and Di Paola (2018) identify very well the *weakening of liberal neutrality* that characterizes both the trend and the need for national governments throughout the world (see also the case of Covid-19 and the protests that have occurred), with the risk of generating a tendency towards authoritarianism or even paternalism on the part of politics. However, while these authors try to preserve the theme of individual freedom within the Anthropocene scenario, which requires *collective* responsibilities, our proposal on this level is instead to reject this Western heritage in such an emergency. That is, fostering the process back to collective institutions and socially incorporated economies, in the name of the primary value of survival (also understood as psycho-existential serenity).

This obviously appears to be a difficult task, since, as Jameson (2003) recalls, it has always seemed easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. This process, however, is *already underway* (due to exogenous and dramatic factors) and requires, in addition to a boost from political activism, a “reflexive” rethinking of modernity by experts, which favors human institutions and values suitable for the new Anthropocene reality in every area. On the other hand, this aspect of values is not the only one on which we should work, according to the present proposal, in order to imagine a livable future for the new generations, linked to the rejection of Western heritage. In the next paragraphs we will try to outline the other aspects required, which must necessarily accompany the one just exposed, to constitute a profitable proposal in favor of intergenerational justice.

3 Overpopulation and depopulation

The problem of human overpopulation is one of the primary determinants about the present and future climate disaster.⁵ The question of

⁵ We are aware that the issue of depopulation raises delicate and multifaceted concerns, both in terms of ethical implications and long-term structural effects. Two important objec-

the possibilities of material and existential well-being concerning the next generations is therefore focused on it. Next generations to which, as has been said, binds us at least a moral criterion of “pure fairness” if not of full rationality and justice (Shue 2021). Therefore, if some scientists and sociologists define overpopulation as the primary global threat (Kuo 2012), and almost all recognize its great impact on the depletion of natural resources and the quality of human life (Hollingsworth 1996), we must consider what can be done to stop or even reverse this process over time. Also, regarding this, a way to do it has been hypothesized here starting from the rejection of modern Western heritage, with the help, however, of some postmodern evolutions.

We begin with the traditional position of the problem in the West, first presented by Malthus in his *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798). Here the question mainly concerned the relationship between the increase in population (geometric-exponential) and the increase in mainly food resources (arithmetic-linear), from which the *Malthusian law* is formulated: as population increases, both resources and wages decrease (since there is a greater workforce available) (Bonar 2013). This purely national logic has been partly balanced on a political level in the modern era with the increase in military strength and the consequent aggressiveness that the advanced societies of the nineteenth and partly twentieth century have poured on neighboring countries. But above all it has been deconstructed by technological and productive developments, mainly in the field of agriculture, which have allowed an exponential increase in the food and goods produced. In this way, although since the period of Malthus the world population has multiplied by almost eight times (and even more in advanced societies), the advancements – primarily agricultural but also techno-economic (industrialization) and socio-political (establishment of state subsistence forms) – had

tions deserve mention: first, that a shrinking population might reduce human capital available to deal with future problems; second, that such demographic trends could undermine social security systems and aggravate global inequalities. These are legitimate concerns. However, the hypothesis developed here does not aim to present depopulation as a standalone panacea, nor as a purely demographic engineering project. Rather, it is conceived as one of three converging cultural and institutional shifts (alongside value reorientation and degrowth) that, taken together, aim to reduce systemic pressure on planetary boundaries. The argument is not just that fewer people mean less problem, in a mechanical way, but that – in a global system still premised on high per capita consumption – reduced population levels, where already culturally underway, may ease the transition to a sustainable socio-economic paradigm. As such, redistribution, degrowth, and institutional innovation remain crucial, not alternative, to this path. A more detailed account of the social and economic implications of depopulation, including its interaction with inequality and care infrastructures, will require further elaboration in future work.

sufficiently compensated for the population increase (further favored by medical developments) (Coale and Hoover 1958).

Therefore, although Malthus could not have imagined such developments, and particularly the virtualization of capital by finance (which generates well-being without production) (Lapavistas 2013), the theme of the *Malthusian catastrophe* is still aired by some contemporary authors and movements, shifting the attention from secondary (produced) to primary (natural) resources (Frey 2011; Sinding 2016). Without being able to dwell on this, we note that the human population growth rate is currently still positive (although it has decreased compared to the last 50 years), and it is estimated that it will continue to grow even beyond 2050 (when the world population should reach 10 billion) (Population Reference Bureau 2011; United Nations 2022). This does not constitute, at least for advanced societies, much of a problem in terms of food and wages (which in any case afflicts poor or developing countries consequently), but certainly excessive exploitation of planetary natural resources and thus destruction of the environment and ecosystems (above all fauna and flora) (Pimentel 2012; Singh 2017).

The consumption of natural resources by humanity is today such that the Earth is unable to fully renew them in the course of a year and it is estimated that in 2050 consumption will completely exceed the annual renewal, so that each year will directly weigh on the following one in terms of environmental exploitation (Wackernagel and Pearce 2018; Global Footprint Network 2021). This favors the worst developments of climate change – instead of mitigating them – which in turn leads to corollary phenomena that mainly concern the countries most in difficulty (but not only): famine, drought, floods, pollution, disease, poverty, resource wars (Meadows et al. 1992; Beck 1999). Thus, the problem of overpopulation is now no longer a matter of a single nation, relating to its economy and livelihood, but the global threat concerning the depletion of natural resources necessary for the human species survival and the irreversible damage to their renewal process (Seifi 2019).

Here too we need to make a distinction that is both socio-political and about justice, between the more developed countries and the poorer or developing ones. Although the poorest countries (many of which African) contribute more to overpopulation, it is also true that the greater consumption of resources per person remains the prerogative of the more advanced countries (one US citizen consumes as much

as thirty Indians and fifty Kenyans) (Toth and Szigeti 2016). This obviously entails a difficulty on the part of the richest countries in convincing the poorest or developing countries to limit both their population and above all their emissions. The burden of pollution and exploitation of resources that today's most advanced societies must bear on their shoulders cannot simply be made to disappear, nor left unconsidered. Rather, starting from this acquired gain and "historical responsibility" (Shue 2021), it is necessary to work to foster the process of global wealth redistribution, especially towards the poorest countries and those with a higher population growth rate, since the phenomenon of overpopulation is always accompanied by that of poverty both in terms of goods and infrastructures and of education.

A commitment in this sense, aimed at the global decrease of the population over time, should be considered as a primary aspect of the attempt to foster the new generations in the fight against climate change. In fact, not only would future generations have fewer people to manage the increasingly scarce resources available (and greater psycho-physical well-being in relation to the preserved natural spaces), but they would inevitably start consuming less right away, without the need for a long process of changing customs.

In moral terms, this intervention must be considered from the perspective presented by Dworkin (1993), who distinguishes between *incremental value* and *sacred* or *inviolable value* (not understood in a religious sense). What we as humans value incrementally is what increases in value by increasing in quantity, for example knowledge. Otherwise, the sacred or inviolable value is mostly attributed to all those forms of life, human and non-human, which once existing it would be a sin and a loss to see disappear, but which do not increase in value in themselves by increasing in number (Pellegrino and Di Paola 2018). This is also true for the art objects, for which the loss of a Van Gogh is inestimable but we do not believe it would increase in value if there were more. The human being, in his individuality and collectivity, requires therefore to be preserved for his sacred and inviolable value, both against oppression and a disqualified life for the individual and against the threat of extinction as a species. However, according to this value, it is not required that the number be increased. So, while the death of a large number of people is a tragedy, the conscious non-conception of more human lives is morally indifferent (except perhaps for some religions).

The way then to try and reverse the process of overpopulation seems threefold: 1) socio-cultural; 2) economic-redistributive; 3) political-institutional. The first aspect concerns above all the rejection of the mainly modern Western tradition in terms of “growth”, also of the population. This rejection is already evident in advanced societies, fostered precisely by the process of individualization (Millefiorini 2015) and by widespread post-materialistic values (Inglehart 2018), which make less desirable for young couples to have children (or have more than one). Without being able to delve into the set of social and existential dynamics that have brought about a change in the conception of the family, women and children (Wyness 2015), it suffices to note that attention to the individual, to his freedom and expression, as well as the loss of force of cultural traditions and social ties, has made procreation a mostly autonomous choice and no longer a necessity or a duty. In this way, and due to the ongoing economic and social rights decline, in advanced societies there is an increasingly advanced age for women who give birth for the first time and a number of children often lower than the reproduction rate (Coale 1989; Aitken 2022).

The second aspect, the economic-redistributive one, requires that the heritage of the West be rejected in terms of global neoliberal competition, above all about resources and population. Given that capitalist competition and the natural exploitation that it requires leads to ever more impoverishment (human, material, natural) of numerous areas on the planet – and given that poverty in the era of medical developments leads to overpopulation – it is necessary to think about a redistribution of both profits and people. Without wanting to think of overthrowing capitalism tout court, which as has been said will accompany us to the end of the world, we need to integrate a mostly prudential perspective of balance and redistribution. This means, on one hand, that advanced countries should invest (or rather go back to investing since it was already done before the 1980s) in education and anti-poverty programs aimed at reversing overpopulation in the nations most prone to it (Bracke 2021). Consider, for example, that less than 2 dollars per person per year would be enough for the United States to provide the need for modern contraceptives for all women in underdeveloped countries (Bearak et al. 2022). On the other hand, conceive a management of migratory flows in a more systematic way (migration made increasingly dramatic by climate change) which is such as redistributing people globally, in order to balance both the human burden and the economic possibilities between the various realities of the planet.

Of course this must in turn lead, as will be seen in the next paragraph, to a decrease in consumption in the more advanced countries themselves, with the risk otherwise that the fifty Kenyans mentioned above will end up consuming all like the single US citizen. But this is precisely the pact to be developed between the various countries of the globe, and thus we arrive at the third aspect: the political-institutional one. In this case the Western model of population growth (mostly liberal) must take a step back, spontaneously and culturally as seen or through a political process, to give way to the Eastern model of conceiving state and collective management of births. Even with highly negative examples that characterized the “population control” of the nineteenth century – which also appeared in the twentieth century, for example in India (Connelly 2006) – some countries have institutionally experimented the birth limit with better (Vietnam, two children) or worse (China, one child) results. However, if in the Chinese case, given the narrowness of the measures, very important collateral negative consequences were found both on a social and psychological level (Scharping 2002; Ebenstein 2010), in the Vietnamese case the more permissive rule (even in the time of application) allowed to obtain the goal of improving material well-being through population reduction without serious individual or social problems (Pham et al. 2012).

This therefore – expressed very briefly – is the conceptual and practical passage necessary to imagine a future where overpopulation is not a further threat to the new generations, but rather its mitigation or actual depopulation contributes to foster an effective fight against climate change and the consumption of natural resources (Cafaro and Crist 2012; D'Alisa et al. 2014). This intervention, difficult but helped by the socio-cultural circumstances of postmodernity, is however not sufficient if not accompanied by a further aspect which is that of the “degrowth”, above all of consumption. In fact, however few the people who inhabit this planet may be, and however well redistributed at a socio-economic level, if each of them consumed as much as the current US citizen (or even more), the consequences of natural impoverishment will still be dramatic.

4 Degrowth and happiness

The two points addressed above are not enough, alone, to mitigate climate change and the exploitation of resources for future generations,

if a global process of growth reversal is not introduced, first of all in terms of consumption and then of production.⁶ The theme of “degrowth” concerns numerous aspects of today’s advanced societies (and those in the developing world): from energy supply to means of transportation, from the manufacture of objects to their reuse, from waste management to the protection of the natural territories (Latouche 2006; Fioramonti 2017).⁷ In short, it requires a rethinking of the entire socio-economic system – if not political and existential one – certainly very difficult to achieve in a single generation, but which can be achieved as an intergenerational process. The proposal that we want to make here to encourage it, always within the idea of a rejection of the Western heritage, is that of a cultural transformation (partly already underway) which restructures the social theme of *happiness*, no longer connected to progress, competition and acceleration.

Let’s start by briefly analyzing what kind of individual has been shaped in today’s advanced societies, according to the theme of production and

6 A recurrent objection to degrowth concerns its alleged incompatibility with the massive financial and technological investments required to confront climate change (Nordhaus 2015). The argument is that without sustained economic growth, advanced economies would lack the economic and political feasibility to mobilize the capital necessary both for the development of negative emission technologies and for the transfer of financial resources to the global South. This reasoning, however, is not convincing. First, as Shue (2021) has repeatedly stressed, the central issue is not the abstract availability of resources, but their allocation. The empirical evidence shows that growth, when it occurs, is rarely directed toward the structural transformation of energy systems or the support of climate-vulnerable societies. On the contrary, the bulk of public and private investment continues to be oriented toward activities that exacerbate the crisis – military expenditure being the most evident case. To assume that additional growth will automatically translate into decarbonisation and global solidarity is, therefore, a non sequitur. What is needed is not more growth, but a radical reorientation of existing resources and priorities. Second, the expectation that technological innovation alone will resolve the climate emergency underestimates both the time constraints and the systemic risks involved. Negative emission technologies remain uncertain, costly, and, in some cases, environmentally problematic (Hamilton 2017). Betting on future technological breakthroughs to justify present inaction perpetuates what Shue has called the “great moral failing” of delaying responsibility. Degrowth does not imply abandoning technology, but placing it within a framework where the measure of value is not expansion of production, but the safeguarding of the conditions of life. Finally, the ethical dimension cannot be ignored. The global South has historically contributed least to the climate crisis and yet suffers most from its consequences. To argue that their only chance of receiving support depends on the continued growth of the North risks reproducing the very asymmetries that degrowth seeks to overcome. A just transition requires redistribution, not expansion: a shift in priorities that is both economically feasible and morally urgent.

7 The present discussion on degrowth is primarily oriented toward the cultural and existential dimension of contemporary Western societies, and does not aim to exhaust the rich and contested philosophical literature on the subject. I am aware that several critical perspectives exist on degrowth, such as the concern that abandoning growth imperatives could hinder poverty reduction or human development goals in the Global South (Rose 2020; Roser 2021). These are serious objections that cannot be dismissed lightly. Nevertheless, my proposal is not to oppose growth in abstract or universal terms, but to foster a redefinition of well-being in affluent societies that have already surpassed thresholds of material sufficiency. In this regard, the work of authors such as Hickel (2020) and Parrique (2023) provides valuable arguments for why social and ecological flourishing might require abandoning GDP-centric policies, particularly in the Global North. From this perspective, global redistribution becomes not only compatible with degrowth, but its very condition of justice.

consumption. From the point of view of labor, according to some authors such as Han (2014), today's "neoliberal regime" has replaced the disciplinary and coercive dynamics (still typical of Foucaultian modernity) with libertarian and self-induced dynamics. In short, the dominant system of capitalism has transformed itself, in order to survive and develop further, into an internalized self-exploitation by individuals, understood as their own initiative, self-expression and freedom. In a similar way, although starting from other theoretical paradigms, Rosa (2010) in his theory of social acceleration identifies binding "temporal norms" – mostly structural and unrecognized – at the basis of the production and work processes of individuals in current societies, which are disguised as superstructures of freedom and autonomy. In short, production is no longer identified as coercive but as free, yet precisely because it is not seen as an obligation, that is all the more effective and enveloping in binding (because it lacks any possible resistance), although certainly not harmless and painless (as we will see shortly).

Other authors have focused attention on the theme of the consumer society, with respect to production, such as Baudrillard (1970) in terms of symbolic references, but above all more recently Bauman (2005) and Lipovetsky (2006). Lipovetsky, in particular, divided the era of consumption into three different phases: the early consumer society, the society of mass consumption and the hyper-consumption society (roughly from the 1990s onwards). Without being able to deal with the three steps here, it is useful to see how in the third phase the transformation of consumption (and of the consumer) is accompanied by the transition to the post-materialistic values identified by Inglehart (2018). In short, consumption, in the era of widespread and taken for granted material well-being, goes beyond the boundaries of mere functionality, social status and class uniformity ("ontology of difference" according to Beck [1999]), becoming mainly a personalized and psycho-emotional consumption, aimed at obtaining experiences rather than goods, and thus oriented towards *existential well-being* (Lipovetsky 2006). This type of well-being is sought not only because the material one seems to have already been obtained, but also because the "fragile" individual of late modernity (Millefiorini 2015) feels constantly threatened by the existential ill-being that seems to undermine any attempt to balance with himself.

It is no coincidence that a sociologist like Ehrenberg (1998) writes about the "pathologies of freedom" (first of all depression and addiction, but also burnout) as the essential counterpart for the

individual in postmodern development, beyond the modern disciplinary and conflictual society (Freud 1929; Foucault 1970). Furthermore, without dwelling on this aspect, these pathologies and illness seem to have for various authors a direct reference to the theme of *happiness*, which now appears as the only valid existential orientation and in some ways understood as “due” (given the numerous opportunities and possibilities today) (Ahmed 2010). However, the fact that happiness, as Lipovetsky (2006) recalls, does not involve a “possession” – unlike goods – demonstrates the difficulty for the individual to maintain it, even if temporarily achieved, and for the human institutions themselves to make it a socio-political project, not concerning only characteristics of resource distribution. Thus, post-materialistic values (individualism, self-expression, autonomy) contribute in the society of hyper-consumption to that individual search for new personalized experiences and increasingly intimate existential well-being, which is identified with happiness.

This constant search – without which the individual now devoid of shared ideological and social references risks falling into meaninglessness and ill-being – in turn stimulates the process of continuous “growth” and “acceleration” of today's advanced societies. Indeed, the primarily modern Western heritage is based on the central value attributed to *progress*, understood mainly as an increase in production, consumption, goods and technologies. The first post-materialistic generations, namely those of the so-called “economic boom”, still cannot conceive a different idea from this one, trusting precisely in human and technological progress (and indeed in greater “growth”), in order to contrast the effects of climate change. However, as Shue (2021) recalls, science alone will not be able to save future generations, since as far as we can trust it, every projection made shows that development times will be too long and the negative consequences already present and harmful. “We must produce more, not less”, “we must invest more in all fields”, is a widespread mantra among those who do not want to intervene in order to mitigate the environmental disaster. But it is a wrong or at best misleading proposition, given today's impossibility or enormous political difficulty to converge that greater production and investments precisely on the fight against climate change.

The youngest generations, on the other hand, seem to realize the impossibility of sustaining the continuous process of growth, especially at current levels. Because in fact they are the first generations who are suffering the negative effects of both the socio-economic dynamics

aimed at constant acceleration (Rosa 2010) and the repercussions it has on their health (including mental health) and on the environment (often the one in relation to the other) (Clayton et al. 2017). The myth of *progress* – pillar of the modern Western conception – seems therefore to be collapsing both for external forces, the so-called “negative externalities” of climate change, and for internal forces, the perceived socio-economic decline even of advanced Western societies, which are no longer able to guarantee the once widespread security and stability (or at least to satisfy ever higher expectations at an existential level).

There are therefore various conditions that seem to demonstrate the unsustainability over time of this social system inherited from Western modernity and developed – as well as widespread – throughout the world. The condition of *environmental sustainability* is certainly the main one, if we want to reserve a decent future for the new generations, but this has actually been known for fifty years and has not improved (Bardi and Pereira 2022). The condition of *economic sustainability* goes hand in hand with the depletion of resources and the appearance of new territorial realities on the global scene, no longer dominated only by the West, which involves continuous risks at the local level (Beck 1999). The condition of *political sustainability* (both national and international), with democracy never so widespread in the world yet never so in crisis, in the difficulty of keeping up with the new timescales, drastic choices and collective actions that the current era seems to require (Crouch 2020). With an aggravation of perceptible detachment between the ruling classes and the population (still demonstrated by abstentionism and populist movements) (Lasch 1995), which shows how much the legitimacy of the rulers and of the system itself is in danger, because it has always been based on consensus and well-being (Pellegrino and Di Paola 2018). The mostly authoritarian management of the Covid-19 pandemic, the peremptory resolutions on climatic events and finally the return to war also in Europe, only make it clear that there is a generalized global political crisis.

Finally, there is a condition of *existential sustainability* (psycho-emotional as well as physical), which seems to have presented itself in all its importance only in postmodernity. Basically, the impossibility of maintaining these rhythms of competition, performance, optimization, which the individual feels as exhausting and alienating for his existential well-being. What Rosa (2010) defines as the “time-famine”, which seems to force the current man or woman to chase new continuous

actions, experiences, purchases, self-expressions, possibilities. It is no coincidence that Lasch (1979) and Bauman (2005) have written respectively of “narcissistic syndrome” and “consumerist syndrome”, which affects every aspect of human life and from which it seems impossible to get out, because it is dominant at a social level (Keucheyan 2019). However, starting from this new understanding of time – and of well-being understood as existential happiness – we can hypothesize a change for the future.

First of all, we must remember what was already stated by Lübke (2009) as well as by Rosa (2010), namely how social acceleration has led to a *contraction of the present*, so that common cultural references (needs, experiences, expectations) in the postmodern era undergo changes that are no longer intergenerational (as in the pre-modern age) and not even generational (as in the modern age) but even *intragenerational*. If on one hand this accentuates that “fragility” of the late modern individual we had mentioned (Millefiorini 2015) – devoid of useful traditional references – on the other hand this favors the overcoming of a set of cultural and practical references, which have guaranteed over time the same Western heritage on the theme of growth and progress.

The key to unhinging this – facilitated by the new temporal dynamics – lies precisely in the theme of *happiness* as the only existential reference of the postmodern individual (by now increasingly weakened ideological, social and venal references). Fostering attention to happiness, in both cultural and institutional terms (measurement of this value more than others such as GDP), would involve a transition from a productive and then consumerist modernity to a more “reflexive” one. Already for a sociologist like Giddens (1990) this term indicated the thought of a future that can be realized in its anticipation, as *utopian realism*. The idea here is that this future becomes sustainable in overcoming a happiness still too tied to the frenzy of goods and consumption (even in terms of experiences), moving instead on the line of post-materialistic values increasingly towards a psycho-emotional and existential conquest.

In fact, in the renunciation of the purely individualistic aspects of these values – as shown in the second paragraph – and in the return to more incorporated dynamics, to a livable time and therefore to simple and calmed material achievements, there is the possibility of an even *intragenerational* change towards a happiness that is collectivistic and sustainable (in terms of production and consumption). Perhaps the only one that the new generations could not only appreciate, but will have to

appreciate, when this social system proves to be completely unsustainable both materially and existentially.

5 Moral issue and conclusion

The attempt to reject the heritage of the West, at least for the part that contributes to climate change and environmental disaster, is a task that proves very difficult in many respects. In addition to the socio-cultural issues mainly addressed here, there are purely political and economic aspects that seem to prevent greater commitment and drastic change. Shue (2021) showcases them in a timely manner, in an attempt to establish a valid moral position, first of all in terms of *justice*, which moves us to act immediately, in the most ambitious way possible, to mitigate the catastrophic consequences for future generations.

The primary question, briefly stated here, seems to concern the possibility of a process that attributes to the present generation (everybody currently alive) a burden of sacrifices aimed at counteracting the worsening (it is not known to what extent) of climate change. In the name of the supposed economic irrationality of this process, most of the world governments as well as the corporations (and in a certain way the citizens), show in fact that they are preferring a little commitment (or no commitment at all) in contrasting the environmental disaster in a broad sense.

This also happens because today humanity is faced with an unprecedented bet, which allows a part of it to think of “winning” without risking anything. The Anthropocene – started with industrialization but actually recognized only in the last fifty years – has in fact shown that human action now affects the Earth system (Hamilton 2017). Until now this new capacity has been used without hesitation, exploiting natural resources and polluting land, air and water for the socio-economic development of advanced countries, releasing enormous quantities of CO₂ into the atmosphere (the main cause of climate change with its effects). In recent years it has been unequivocally discovered that by continuing this process, the consequences for the actual ecosystems and humanity itself will be at least problematic (livability limits) and at most catastrophic (extinction) (Masson-Delmotte 2021; Bardi and Pereira 2022). The more this generation commits itself starting today to

mitigate this process, the less harmful (not harmless) these effects will be, without prejudice to the tipping points already passed (such as the melting of glaciers) (Shue 2021).

The bet then is the following: sacrificing part of one's current well-being and mitigate the negative effects (we don't know to what extent) for future generations or sacrificing nothing and not mitigate (or not mitigate sufficiently) those effects. This bet, which recalls the bad bet and the *maximin* theme (the parties choose the maximum of the minimums) in Rawls (1971), is analyzed by Shue in all its moral and practical problematics. Starting from this last aspect the response of the individual might seem obvious, for mere economic rationality or simple selfishness. However, we must first of all remember that the benefit of the second proposition (sacrificing nothing) is not distributed equally among the current global population, on the contrary it is mostly concentrated. Particularly in the hands of corporations or those who make a significant profit from fossil fuels (the main cause of both pollution and climate change), who have the option here to pass the entire cost of negative externalities to others.

Shue identifies these negative externalities in two ways: *spatial* (*sovereign*) *externalities* and *temporal externalities*. Briefly, the first concerns the possibility of rulers and corporations of advanced (or developing) countries to offload in various ways environmental costs on poor countries (and in part on the poor of the same territory): "pollution follows the poor", wrote Beck (1999). The second concerns the possibility of passing the costs and damages to future generations, who will have no way of retaliating, given that already today there is no recognition of the historical responsibility of emissions by advanced countries. Furthermore, politics itself – no longer fully endowed with the power of decision or simply interested in private and elite group goals (Lasch 1995) – favors these same fossil fuel companies by providing enormous subsidies. These subsidies make this energy system artificially competitive – first of all with respect to renewables – and allow poor countries themselves to invest in fossil fuels, while in those territories – without the constraints of a certain energy system – the direct leap to renewables should be financed, so as to completely go beyond the industrialization phase (Shue 2021).

We can read all these shortcomings of politics within a category proper to public policies, as subdivided by Wilson (1980), defined as *weak* or *distributive policy*. It is based on the scheme of "concentrated

benefits and diffused costs”, instead of what should be a *strong* or *redistributive policy* (useful in a broad sense to fight the environmental disaster) with “diffused benefits and concentrated costs”. Hence, the ones who actually benefit from the choice to not make any sacrifices (or little sacrifices) are not the set of global citizens – who instead suffer the widespread costs even though they are scattered over time and space – but the small part of the population that earns from fossil fuels and similar, for whom only this bet is always successful.

However, beyond the issue of mere economic rationality for this “winning” party – short-sighted in any case to the possible negative developments already current in socio-economic and health as well as environmental terms (or so rich as to think they can ignore them) – there is a moral issue that weighs on this bet. It concerns its asymmetry, which differentiates it from Rawls’s gamble and certainly makes it unjust. In the present case, in fact, one side can only win and the other can only lose, but what is more is that the one who has to decide whether or not to make this bet is the side that can only win. From being a “bad gamble” on the Rawls model it becomes a ruthless gamble, imposed on someone else who cannot win. “This structure, in which one party decides and potentially benefits itself, while another party is risk-exposed, is exploitative” (Shue 2021, 108).

However, if the moral issue of *exploitation* itself is not sufficient, the principle of *prudence* evoked by Hamilton (2017) seems to be perhaps the wisest in order to indicate a path of serious climate change mitigation (unaware as we are of the rapidity of the negative effects, still in place, as well as their gravity). Especially when, as Bostrom (2002) writes, faced with “extinction risk” as the worst outcome, we can no longer apply the Rawlsian criterion of the *maximin* – “choose the action that has the best worst-case outcome” – but rather his *maxipok*: “maximize the probability of an okay outcome, where an ‘okay outcome’ is any outcome that avoids existential disaster” (Bostrom 2002, 25).

In this way, given the moral injustices and prudential needs – but also given the enormous difficulties of political intervention in terms of supporting diffused benefits (both spatially and temporally) through concentrated costs – we return to insisting on what is proposed in this work. The rejection of the Western heritage – modulated in the aspects shown above, between modern and postmodern dynamics – seems to us to be a profitable path in view of intergenerational justice and the

protection of the environment (as well as humanity). This is so for at least three reasons. The first one, mainly concerns the socio-cultural dynamics of advanced societies. What we have described does not enter directly into conflict with the very strong political and economic interests now intertwined, rather it works on the margins of these with the change of values, depopulation and existential happiness. The second reason is that by introducing issues of a collectivist nature, both in cultural and institutional terms, we try to undermine the competitive idea of a “winning” bet to be sought at any cost. The third reason, perhaps the pivotal one, is that what we have presented turns out to be an *already ongoing process* – although not yet evident in all aspects – which therefore should be favored and implemented, but not started from scratch on the basis of wishes and hopes (certainly morally right but unfortunately still ineffective).

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