

## A Tentative Scenario of “Sustainable Degrowth Society”

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The era of linear growth has finally ended. Critical theory, and more specifically Adorno, stoutly refers to the concept of dominance, which concerns not only external nature, but both internal and social nature of the world. The author draws broad outline of the post-metaphysical philosophy of the history. The positive feedback of exponential growth is inescapably unsustainable. The desired transformation should result in a conversion to the new economic paradigm based on the concept of degrowth. This alternative represents one specific kind of homeostatic negative feedback being able to establish a balance based on negentropy.

*Key words:* Decommodification – Dominance – The cunning of reason – Emancipatory interest – Silent transformation – Feedback – Degrowth

The initial proposition is that the era of fetish of economic growth has come to an end. The statement that linear economic growth is unsustainable has become almost hackneyed. This paper is not to be an eco-philosophic treatise on sustainability. The point is that the demise of the era of specific western modernity, which K. Marx described as “capitalism” and J. Patočka termed “over-civilization”, is almost upon us. This situation is a source of social conflicts that seem unsolvable. At the dawn of the industrial era, the Luddites did not know what they were doing; they largely shielded themselves from the change in a way that could not be successful. The current class struggle against parasitic plutocratic oligarchy takes place in a wider and not merely economic context; in these battles, actors of commodification and decommodification are being defined. N. Fraser has introduced the term *boundary struggle*, by which she understands a conflictual process of defining social actors, who cannot be currently reduced to the owners of the

means of production; such condition is clearly social, political and environmental non-normativity (Fraser 2014, 68–69). Frazer’s transforming global economy on the one hand, and the formation of relocalised entrepreneurship at local and regional levels on the other. One can speak of a new way of wealth creation and, in more general terms, of a new economic paradigm.

Critical theory was the first to reveal that the concept of dominance does not only pertain to the external but also to the internal nature and the social world. An oppressed individual of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* acts as a passive victim in relation to the techniques of domination. Adorno was not merely disappointed over the collapse of the revolutionary hopes but, first and foremost, felt the horror of the catastrophic culmination of civilization. Relations of domination persist after the defeat of fascism because the progress of productive forces implies a continuous process of social regress. At first sight, Adorno’s stance clashes with the overall adoration of capitalism as a result of the unprecedented development of productive forces, as pointed out by the archenemy of capitalism – K. Marx. Yet, Adorno would have agreed with the young Marx that technology’s control over nature leads to the impoverishment of the workers, that the social dominance of the privileged class over the working class is an extension of the human dominance over external nature. According to Honneth, Adorno’s idea of nonconceptual approach to nature presents a normative interpretation of the conditions of freedom and social emancipation. A society is free only when its members are able to meet in a non-violent manner, such that they constitute part of Nature not in terms of its technological control but in terms of their preparedness for communicative survival. From a sociological point of view, Adorno’s postulate of total dominance can be considered a kind of reductionism (Honneth 1991, 65, 95–96). On the other hand, if our civilization is not to disappear through uncontrolled positive feedback, it must renounce the growth fetish, and that means re-evaluation of the attitude of civilization (culture) towards nature. In that sense, Adorno’s stance is timeless, transcending the shadow of his time.

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A major social conflict arises in the dispute over change, that is, over the way of transformation. The critical theory assumes that “things may be done in other ways, too” that change is possible and that a reflection on desirable futures is justified. The conflict is manifested in a dispute over a typical Enlightenment idea of social progress. What we call and extol in a given period as progress is actually the beginning of a successful trend that temporarily appears to be so unique and magnificent that it makes us overlook the negative externalities and ultimately ignore the society’s feedback on the environment. Who noticed the devastation of the biosphere when the era of smoking chimneys was on the rise? Hence, what

we call “progress” is something we invented at a given time to rationalise our conduct. Such rationalisation is always ideological. Every definition of an objective is ideological, and thus – as revealed by Adorno – is a “**socially necessary semblance**”: *unless the necessity has been recognized as a realized appearance and historic determination is known as metaphysical accident – only then will a critical social consciousness retain its freedom to think that things may be different someday* (Adorno 2006, 323). This means the end of the Hegelian cunning of reason, which serves as a favourite crutch to reformist intellectuals.

The philosophy of history, while teleological, has become a subject of either indifference or even contempt in intellectual circles, or if it does enjoy a certain kind of respect, then only at a price that implies faith. Naturally, the aforementioned also applies to the orthodox version of Marxism, as codified by Stalin. In the non-teleological philosophy of history what we call coincidence is actually a system postulate. A critic can identify social pathology or disregard only ex-post, against the background of some priorities to which Adorno’s postulate applies. According to Honneth, *moral progress is born out of the struggle for recognition. He himself called his concept teleological, however, this teleology is not of Kantian or Hegelian kind, but rather a normative definition of the telos, which does not exist in history in a hidden, unseen form, only to be revealed through the world spirit or the revolutionary subject* (Honneth 1991, 65, 95–96). Hrubec called the aforementioned “*emancipatory interest*”, which “*is not just a haphazard construction of intellectuals or a vital and inexorable force, but it operates and evolves on the basis of practical conduct of people in a structured society*” (Hrubec 2012, 199–200). Thus, the **post-metaphysical** philosophy of history cannot postulate a goal as something that is, but merely as something that should be at best. J. Patočka provides a devastating critique of the European metaphysics of history based on the objectivity of historical events, on the linear time, universal humanity and the immanent telos of human social life (Patočka 2002, 777–778). Paul Ricoeur objects to the dogmatic philosophy of history that one cannot resolve the problem of the unification of diverse layers of truth through history, since history is pluralised, as is the truth (Ricoeur 1993, 47). Despite this, or perhaps, because of this, the fragments of philosophy flicker in the form of visions or normative forecasts. The reverse holds as well: a visionary or forecaster should seek to grasp the purpose through the philosophy of history. Being a radical Enlightener, Marx was also a scientist (economist), who strove to vindicate his philosophy of history through the authority of science; as a philosopher, however, he was and still remains a visionary. W. Benjamin was aware of this: for this reason his “historical materialist determines the presence of messianic force in history” (Benjamin 1940, II).

In the context of social conflicts, which are inseparable from the processes of transformation, I was impressed by a theorem of the historian-archaeologist Ian Morris (inspired by the famous science fiction author Robert Heinlein): *Change is*

*caused by lazy, greedy, frightened people looking for easier, more profitable and safer ways to do things. And they rarely know what they are doing* (Morris 2011, 28; Heinlein 1995, 60–61). Hence, humans wish to cope with uncertainty in the least painful manner. Apparently, this is why the socialist movement tragically paid the price for Marx’s illusion of the time of the historical necessity and transformation of the proletariat into a conscious revolutionary party. Change takes place under pressure, it is enforced in a way, it has to encounter opposition; revolution exhausts itself by the suppression of opposition and, as a rule, fails to reach the set objectives. Transformation must be self-correctable, it does not go according to a plan made in advance; Popper was right here. Thus, we need visions and normative forecasts. One way of how not to obstruct change or head-on resistance is the concept of *silent transformation*, inspired by Chinese mindset. According to F. Julien, *Silent transformations deflect step by step without warning, without announcement – to the point of causing everything to topple over into its opposite without anyone having noticed* (Julien 2011). Revolution pushes the situation to its extreme point, intending to break forcefully with the established order; it fights, or rather struggles, in a space of forces which have been declared and have become rivals; every revolution is followed by restorations which take more or less time to arrive. The silent transformation does not use force, it does not fight, but makes its way, infiltrates, spreads, branches out and becomes pervasive; this is also why it is silent because it does not give rise to any resistance to it.

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A radically new means of creating wealth is coming into the world, if we do not descend to barbarity. One alternative to the linear economic growth until recently neglected is the concept of “degrowth” postulated by Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen<sup>1</sup>. This mathematician economist showed that economic process is irreversible, bringing a permanent cumulative change of the environment: valuable resources (low entropy) are converted into valueless waste (high entropy). The second law of thermodynamics explains the emergence of shortage because, if this law did not hold, and the transformation of energy was reversible, heat could be converted into work indefinitely. Hence, it follows that natural resources are finite and irreplaceable (Georgescu-Roegen 1971, 306–307). Hans Jonas and Gilles Deleuze introduced the term “living future”, meaning that living organisms have to cope with uncertainty, which is a constitutive moment of creating the new without the predestined ultimate goal (Groves 2006). Organisms are kept active and alive by withdrawing negentropy from their environment and accumulating

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<sup>1</sup> Mathematician and economist Nicolas Georgescu-Roegen (1906–1994) died ignored by mainstream of political economy, what has changed only recently.

it through the exchange of substances. The founders of the cognitive biology H. Maturana and F. Varela have used Aristotle’s term “autopoiesis” implicated in biology, cognition, language, and human societies. Businesses and institutions behave like living organisms: variations in the external environment such as new innovations or regulations result in the changes in the internal structure of the organization for the sake of its survival. Systems with **positive feedback** are plunging headlong into an explosion, such as the population explosion or long-term economic growth reinforced by globalization. In a **negative feedback**, Georgescu-Roegen outlines two scenarios. In one case, the system gradually converges from *within* to some equilibrium without destructive effects. In the other case of *exceeding the boundaries* (overshooting), the growth process is limited by the pressure on the other systems, which are incapable of generating the necessary resources or which have reached the critical state, thereby limiting the progress of the main system. The unsustainable positive feedback of exponential growth must be transformed into a specific negative feedback without cyclical crises (Bonaiuti 2011, 172–173). This means not only “sustainability” invoked by the Greens, but a functioning negative feedback that prevents the growing entropy by maintaining homeostasis.

Meanwhile, exponential growth is accompanied by rapid and sudden collapse or “cumulative decay” (Streeck 2014). Gradual transition to sustainable parameters assumes negative feedback of the first type. Negative feedback that takes place through cyclical fluctuations is what we call **change**. Positive feedback means collapse. Negative feedback capable of maintaining homeostasis is actually a gradual revolutionary transformation or transformational revolution, which can be designated as “**silent transformation**”, however, inherently more revolutionary than a **radical change**. Nevertheless, the new fourth wave of technological revolution, existing in an embryonic form of 3D printers, is in line with a “new normal” of degrowth<sup>2</sup> in the horizon of 2030.

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The task of the critical theory today is to prove that there is a plurality of options; that transformation constitutes a mesh of visions of the potential future, which are just beginning to form. Desirable future lies in diversity, variety, spontaneity, informality, in self-organisation and self-regulation, in the uniqueness of individuality and creativity, in the absence of duplication and non-standard nature, in minimization and more aesthetisation etc. In simple terms, it will be the exact opposite of domination, hierarchisation, totalisation, maximisation and ma-

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<sup>2</sup> About the concept of degrowth see also review “Giacomo D’Alema – Federico Demaria – Giorgos Kalis (eds.): *De-Growth. A Vocabulary for a New Era*” on pp. 81–85 in this issue.

chine-like standardization typical of the industrial era. By contrast, current technological advancements allow the extreme extent of social control, global fascism in the form of an unprecedented rule of plutocratic oligarchy coupled with the restoration of feudal and even slave-like relations of domination. We can only hope with Adorno and Horkheimer that *Enlightenment itself, having mastered itself and assumed its own power, could break through the limits of Enlightenment* (Adorno – Horkheimer 1997, 208).

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