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THE ENERGY TRANSITION IS JUST THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG: CHANGES IN UNDERSTANDING MODERN DEMOCRACY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CLIMATE CRISIS

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At present, technology and the energy it requires are often taken for granted in the countries referred to as "the West," where the promise of a good life exists and public services display a certain level of prosperity. In these countries, it is often still assumed that life will get better because of technological progress and economic growth and that such progress will continue unabated in the future. This is the argument that thinkers such as Francis Fukuyama advanced after the fall of the Soviet Union and the adoption of Western solutions in many new states (Fukuyama 1992).

In this article, I will consider the liberal perspective and the degrowth perspective on capitalism, the climate crisis, and energy consumption, while taking into account the promise made by Western states to the effect that development is limitless and, through it, we will become increasingly happier and wealthier over time. I would like to highlight the problems associated with setting such goals: the energy required to achieve them, the difficulties of the energy transition, the feasibility of so-called liberal democracies due to the concentration of energy consumption and the exploitation of subordinated individuals, and, in a broader perspective, the maintenance of the capitalist order that has ultimately led to the climate

crisis. I will limit myself to the situation in Europe and to the most significant differences between the liberal approach and the stance of degrowth proponents, although I realise that my explanation will be a simplification and that not all the differences can be sufficiently discussed. Consequently, related topics such as postcolonialism, or the broader role of the Global South in this issue, will not be addressed. I am aware of the importance of these topics, but they require a more extensive discussion than can be included in this article.

In regard to the exact scope and aim of this text, I would like to add a few methodological remarks. Some readers might consider that its scope and goals are not sufficiently defined. This is because the text is not written in a foundational or, as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari would say, arborescent way (Deleuze & Guattari 2005: 5–25). The introduction of a multitude of perspectives, themes, and references, the showing how concepts work and relate to each other rather than substantially defining them, and the referencing of ideas from disparate-seeming fields (e.g., politics and science) is deliberate. This methodology refers directly to the works of Deleuze and Guattari, especially their book *A Thousand Plateaus* (2005), and to the texts of Bruno Latour (1988) and Baruch Spinoza (1954). It was chosen as an example of flat ontology (Bednarek 2014; Ceder 2018), which I have attempted to apply both to the topics under discussion and to the structure of the text itself. Later references in this article to the above-mentioned works (and many others) may therefore be understood not solely as the use of source material but also as precedents for a methodological paradigm – in particular, a paradigm associated with the rhizome concept and multitude concept (Deleuze & Guattari 2005: 3–25).

/// Problems with Energy Consumption

In the period since the end of the Second World War, citizens of Western Europe have become accustomed to a level of prosperity that includes owning a home and having access to running water, electricity, and other amenities. During the postwar period, Western countries adopted extensive social programmes and improved the quality and effectiveness of education, healthcare, and pension systems (Müller 2011: 125–170). After the era of welfare states, events have continuously enhanced the level of conveniences for Western citizens, while also increasing the energy cost of these solutions, with more televisions, cars, and mobile phones per household (Ritchie et al. 2019). Data indicates that over the past 100 years the

amount of goods produced, along with the energy and materials needed for their production, has increased multiple times (Hickel 2020). The problem is particularly noticeable in the wealthiest countries, where middle-class homes are filled with energy-intensive and sometimes unnecessary items – the result of effective marketing on the part of sellers, and the ever-growing need to acquire more on the part of buyers.

Several problems with the above situation can be indicated. First, the capitalism prevalent in Western countries is based on the infinite production and consumption of private property, which leads to inequalities and an overabundance of things. The prevailing inequalities are not limited to the rich having an excess of things while the poor have none, but often, regardless of everyone's needs, there is an overabundance. The footprint of the material produced points to an overproduction of superfluous things, which is the result of the greed of the wealthiest and a measure of the exploitation of those working for them.

Second, as researchers such as Jason Hickel and Timothy Mitchell have noted, the energy sources that are most needed and used, namely coal and oil, are expensive to extract and the costs are already several times higher than in the twentieth century due to difficulties in access (Hickel 2020; Malm 2016; Mitchell 2011: 231–235; Jackson 2009: 6–13). As Mitchell writes, due to the continuous exponential growth in the desire for energy, existing extraction platforms may eventually fail to meet the demand (Mitchell 2011: 231–254). Of course, it cannot be strictly determined when the supply of fossil fuels will be depleted, but nonetheless their extraction serves only the interests of the wealthiest and impacts the climate. The price of these fuels is not the only problem – what aggravates the issue is that in many economies and branches of industry they are still indispensable or difficult to replace.

Third, unlimited economic growth and its energy cost mean a constant increase in carbon dioxide emissions, which causes climate warming and the melting of the world's ice cover (IPCC 2023). The impact of human activity on the climate has been proven by climatologists (IPCC 2023). Two terms are used in the social sciences and the humanities to describe the epoch we live in: the Anthropocene or Capitalocene (Braidotti 2013: 66; Moore 2016; Bińczyk 2023: 78–80).

It might seem that the way to solve these three problems (the unequal distribution of goods and material footprint, expensive fossil fuels, and climate warming) is to abandon the use of harmful energy sources and the economic growth that serves to protect the privileges of the wealthiest,

and to distribute goods and energy based on the needs of the people rather than the continuous enrichment of the few. This view is presented by proponents of *degrowth* or *postgrowth* concepts, including Jason Hickel, Matthias Schmelzer, and Tim Jackson, among others (Hickel 2020; Schmelzer et al. 2022; Jackson 2009, 2021). Their perspective is inspired by, among other works, a report titled *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1972) and Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen's book *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process*, which discusses the problem of the limited amount of the Earth's resources and how the issue is related to capitalism (Georgescu-Roegen 1971). One of the most influential Polish scholars is perhaps Ewa Bińczyk, who adapts the discussion to local problems and circumstances (Bińczyk 2018, 2023).

One solution that is frequently discussed within international institutions or by politicians is that of the Green Deal and the associated idea of Green Growth. Both concepts refer to Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, and both are tied to the struggle for power and the realisation of specific group interests and a certain way of life. The European Green Deal, which I will describe further below, is essentially a project formulated within a liberal approach, as it favours certain liberal values: the modern belief in constant progress, a reliance on private investments, and the legal protection of individual property. In this perspective, the existence of capitalism and a specific version of growth and "liberal democracy" is often taken for granted as part of a cohesive whole. Even if particular parties within the liberal viewpoint differ in their reflections on the matter, the general perspective is similar – if more as a family resemblance than in terms of a strict, substantial definition (Wittgenstein 1986: 31–37). The liberal stance is nevertheless clearly distinguishable from other pro-growth viewpoints, such as the communist, nationalist, and so forth, most of all because of its hegemonic position in the West in the twenty-first century (Müller 2011: 236–241).

It can be said, therefore, that attitudes to the climate crisis are primarily a political matter – it is about who exercises power and whose needs are privileged. Second, the solution – whether it assumes maintaining growth or not – involves a change in the approach to energy use, which may influence the understanding of concepts such as capitalism or democracy. In this respect, the energy transition appears to be merely a harbinger of much deeper transformations – those that may change not only the ways in which nation-states function but also the everyday lives of ordinary citizens. Similar matters have already been discussed (Mitchell 2011: 1–42; Jackson 2021),

but I would like to consider a wider approach, encompassing the Western tradition of political ontology, which will be discussed later in the article.

/// Energy: An Instrument of Power or a Commodity?

In his most famous work, the seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes described what he believed "power" to be. In contemporary terms, it could be defined as authority. He argued that "the power of man […] is his present means, to obtain some future apparent Good," and such good is pleasure or some other object of desire (Hobbes 1965: 41–42, 56, 66–70). Hobbes asserted that the desire for power never wanes, and to this view other English intellectuals later added the ideas that people should formulate scientific knowledge in such a way as to dominate nature (Bacon 1902: 11, 99–100) and that increasing one's power by the appropriation of land and goods is morally and rationally justified (Locke 1988: 285–302).

The writings of these seventeenth-century philosophers (and many others) became a justification for the actions of European capitalists, colonisers, and other exploiters, leading to the development of methods for obtaining and maintaining entire systems of labour and energy, which allowed for unprecedented increases in power (Środa 2020: 67–85, 235–248; Bellamy & Diamanti 2018: 1–16). When Hobbes wrote that "The Sciences are small Power" because few people understand them, he could not foresee how much power they would allow Europeans to achieve in the following centuries. As Timothy Mitchell writes, "the industrialised world brought into being with the energy from coal was also a colonising world" (Mitchell 2011: 84) – industrialisation could not have occurred without the use of concentrated energy (Mitchell 2011: 15), and without energy, it would not have been possible to subjugate people, resources, and land on such a scale. Therefore, it can be said that the phenomena of industrialisation, colonialism, the building of hegemony by European countries and the United States, and their use of energy, are closely related (Said 1979: 284–295). Mitchell adds that without the use of energy on such a scale, contemporary parliamentary democracies would also be impossible (Mitchell 2011: 1–6). How can this be explained?

Early European democracies were not only governments of the people but some of them were also states striving to achieve or maintain hegemonic positions in Europe and the world (as was particularly evident in the nineteenth century). This dissonance between the ideals of freedom, equality, and justice, and the brutal subjugation of people and non-humans

is perhaps best seen when considering energy from two different points of view: the state's and the people's. If we assume that the goal of the modern state is to ensure the security of its citizens, then this is not possible without an energy level that ensures the functioning of the military, police, healthcare, and, currently, the operation of computers and public transport. Therefore, in accord with the logic of capitalism, states (to avoid dependence on others) have often sought exclusive energy sources at all costs, or have tried to control and monopolise access to existing ones (Mitchell 2011: 54–59; Fücks 2015). Caring for citizens, for instance, through reducing working hours, did not occur on the initiative of the state. Similarly, capitalists and colonisers did not invest in factories or ships that could cross oceans in order to develop social policies and care for the less fortunate. These goals had to be achieved by the wage workers themselves, and one of the reasons it was possible was that they controlled coal extraction (Mitchell 2011: 21–26). Social policies were also introduced as a conservative response to socialist demands, for example, in Bismarck's Germany (Król 2014: 65–120). Thus, it can be said that state care, and subsequently the promise of prosperity, arose from the (direct and indirect) initiative of the working class and the governed people, not the rulers and the wealthiest – for the latter, only profit and self-interest matter. This is well illustrated, for example, by the transition from a coal-based economy to one based on oil, which required less maintenance and made it harder for workers to force changes on capitalists (Mitchell 2011: 31–36). Processes and practices such as outsourcing, the use of tax havens, or operating within shadow economies, serve the same purpose: regaining control over capital, increasing one's power (as in Hobbes's theory), and therefore removing democratic rule from the people. In economies that are still based on coal (such as China or India), labour is often organised in such a way as to hinder unionisation or punish protesters (Hornby 2016). The coal mafia that existed in India played such a role (Venugopal Rao 1983: 10–12), and after the coal industry was privatised in 2019, international corporations were able to capitalise further on the commodity (Kumar 2020).

As Andreas Malm states, "the reappearing autonomy of labour has provided one incentive for the diversification, multiplication and expansion of the circuit of primitive accumulation: and wherever capital has gone, more fuels to burn have been uncovered" (Malm 2016). The phrase "diversification, multiplication, and expansion" aptly describes capitalism as a process seeking molecular lines of flight to achieve profit and fulfil the desire for power (Deleuze & Guattari 2005: 213–222). In other words,

within capitalism, things such as social dissatisfaction, strikes, unionisation, and many other circumstances are treated as temporary obstacles that can be mitigated to maintain the operation of the capitalist system.

On the other hand, citizens who have become habituated to a certain level of prosperity will want to maintain it at all costs. As subjects of contemporary liberal democracy and capitalism, they will protest against a loss of individual freedoms and private property (Althusser 1970). People are accustomed to amenities that are dependent on the concept of private property, and these amenities require a lot of energy to maintain and develop further. It will not be an easy task to change these tendencies, but as some scholars suggest, we need to expand our imagination to seek new ways of understanding what changes are necessary in our social and political life (Bińczyk 2023: 9–13, 132–136).

In other words, current ideas of democracy, freedom, and equality are founded on a history of violence and exploitation. In modern societies (above all in Western countries), we elect authorities who will maintain our growing energy consumption, even if it means destroying the natural environment or potentially worsening the situation of residents in other parts of the world (primarily the Global South). All this is to fulfil a desire for pleasure, convenience, or power and, on the other hand, the promise of prosperity, which requires economic growth powered by kinds of energy that are often derived from fossil fuels:

> Social participation in consumer societies […] depends to a large extent – also for the lower classes – on expressing identity, affiliation, lifestyle, and status through consumer goods and the symbolic language embedded in them. And modern welfare states basically function as growth states – across the entire political spectrum, the promise of welfare is based on growth raising the standard of living of poorer sections of the population and at the same time providing the financial means for welfare programmes via taxes. (Schmelzer et al. 2022: 102)

In this view, any change in energy use is significant for the social, political, and economic order. In a way, the rulers of European countries, the members of international organisations, and other representatives of the political class seem to have no choice but to maintain that the current status quo can be preserved. The changes from combustion-engine cars to electric ones, or from plastic straws to paper ones, are essentially only aesthetic

and will not affect people's quality of life. Thus, the climate crisis is not perceived as an event that can disrupt the functioning of liberal democracy and capitalism. What exactly does the liberal viewpoint entail?

/// The Liberal Solution

The authors of a 2008 report titled *A Green New Deal*, in addressing the connection between the economic, climate, and energy crises, present views that some neoliberals have considered to be overly interventionist in regard to the economy. However, this programme, which was presented more than fifteen years ago, was one of the earliest contributions on the subject. Unfortunately, it lacked some essential details. It discusses halting temperature increases, reducing social inequalities, and decreasing energy demand, but it does not mention the material footprint or the North's subjugation of countries of the Global South. The report's authors optimistically assume that prosperity can be preserved through a return to Keynesian economics and an energy transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources. Thus, they point to a promising path for changes in the future (Elliot et al. 2008: 16–17, 35–40).

A more contemporary project that introduces actual changes is the European Green Deal, which was announced by the European Union in December 2019 and is currently being applied. It was presented as "a new growth strategy that aims to transform the EU into a fair and prosperous society, with a modern, resource-efficient, and competitive economy" (European Commission 2019). Indeed, the importance of the economy and its competitiveness is emphasised in many sections of this document – disproportionately more often than the need to tax the wealthiest or the environmental costs of implementing renewable energy sources. Encouragements for private investors to fund "greener solutions" appear frequently, enabling the wealthiest to influence the changes and possibly shape them to achieve their own goals. It is even stated that "the private sector will be key to financing the green transition" (European Commission 2019). Therefore, it can be argued that the European Green Deal is not based on Keynesian economics, as the 2008 report was, but rather seeks to retain elements of the neoliberal order: faith in the self-regulation of the free market and the need for continuous investments to sustain the system.

The European Green Deal's avoidance of more progressive solutions is in line with the opinions of certain liberals who do not want to limit themselves in the face of climate change. They compare the sacrifices related to

environmental protection to an "ethics of constraints" that will ultimately do more harm than good – an uncertain and short-term solution at the cost of political polarisation and the possibility of introducing authoritarianism (Fücks 2023: 2). Instead, they propose turning to capitalist solutions, which means even more innovation and investment, even faster economic growth, and consequently the need for more energy to sustain it (Fücks 2015, 2023: 2–3; Norberg 2023). Ralf Fücks and Johan Norberg, who have been chosen to represent here the liberal stance on degrowth and climate change, may seem to differ at first glance: Fücks was a member of the German Green Party, which emphasised the role of the state in investing in infrastructure, while Norberg is a direct proponent of capitalism and is associated with the libertarian Cato Institute. However, they share key beliefs regarding economic growth and climate change.

First, they think that stopping economic growth is dangerous and unimaginable. Fücks writes that "in the face of a growing global population with all its needs, desires and ambitions, it is verging on escapism to dream of a postgrowth society" (Fücks 2015). Norberg echoes him in stating that degrowth "would be the worst thing we could do for the world" because it would surely lead to massive poverty and unemployment (Norberg 2023). In other words, the argument that these authors share is that rejecting growth would bring chaos and misery, and thus they adopt classic conservative arguments that can be applied to any change.

Second, liberals like Fücks and Norberg believe that solving the climate catastrophe is possible with the help of the free market, and indeed it is the only reasonable option. In this they resemble Friedrich Hayek, who stated that "capitalism as it exists today in consequence undeniably has many remediable defects that an intelligent policy of freedom ought to correct" (Hayek 1998: 136). When Fücks writes that "the combination of capitalism and democracy is an adaptive system" and the "ecological transformation of capitalism" is already underway, he does not differ much from Hayek (Fücks 2015). In other words, according to some liberals, intelligence, ingenuity, and resourcefulness will undoubtedly solve the climate crisis – just as previous challenges like slavery or colonialism were addressed. From this perspective, the climate crisis seems like another restriction on individual and market freedom, which liberals only reluctantly accept, if at all. The necessity is to look after one's own interests and self-development, not to take care of the planet and other people. The problem, according to liberals, is not the entire system – which over the centuries has led to countless wars, exploitation, slavery, and the subjugation of people, animals, and

things – but always individuals, their mistakes and imperfections. These can supposedly be corrected and perfected within the system. It could be said that all governments need to do is to train individuals to segregate waste and replace their current solutions and items with "green" alternatives.

Such a belief is tied to a third conviction characteristic of – and even essential to – these liberals: that economic growth can occur independently of nature's exploitation, or in other words, that GDP growth can be decoupled from the consumption of resources. A statement to this effect appears in the European Green Deal document (European Commission 2019), and Fücks makes similar suggestions in the "Modernizing Modernity" chapter of his book *Green Growth, Smart Growth* (Fücks 2015). Broad investment in green energy sources, such as photovoltaics, wind farms, or sometimes nuclear energy, is based on this assumption. It is believed that the system we live in can always be improved, for example, by finding other energy sources that will not harm the planet. Unfortunately, such an approach does not usually exclude the exploitation of people and other spheres of life – just as previously growth involved slavery, colonialism, or the use of fossil fuels (Dunlap 2018). If, as Hickel claims in reference to World Bank data, global agreement on the use of renewable energy sources could be reached, the problem would be the energy cost needed to build their entire infrastructure (Hickel 2020). Yes, perhaps in the future it will be possible to reduce coal and oil consumption to zero, but if we are still focused on profit in the meantime, wouldn't the environment be destroyed equally or even more than before by building infrastructure for renewable energy sources? Of course, this does not mean that we should not give up fossil fuels and focus on renewable energy, but the problem remains: how can change be introduced without worsening what we are trying to save?

The above summary indicates the response of many liberals and some European and global authorities to the problems mentioned earlier. Their attitude towards the unequal distribution of goods does not seem to have changed essentially since the Second World War, and in regard to taxation and public spending it has worsened with the growing popularity of neoliberalism. Henry C. Wallich summarised the situation in 1972: "Growth is a substitute for equality of income. As long as there is growth, there is hope, and that makes large income differentials tolerable" (Schmelzer et al. 2022: 46). The hope is for success, but also for prosperity and social advancement – without which, according to some liberals, a solid social structure built on the self-motivation to improve one's position is not possible. Success, in turn, requires its display to others – the surplus of things is a natural

consequence of such thinking. Needless to say, it is primarily the wealthiest and most privileged who benefit from growth – for them the lower status of others and their hope for social advancement are necessary to keep the status quo.

As has been stated, liberals want to solve the problems of expensive energy and rising temperatures by switching to renewable energy sources within the logic of capitalism. Thus, they try to eliminate fossil-fuel consumption while maintaining economic growth. Specific optimism is inherent in their worldview, and therefore the energy costs and material footprint of their approach, along with the potential social and infrastructural changes, are not always considered. Wind farms or nuclear power plants may require creating appropriate infrastructure and relocating large groups of people. Moreover, as energy sources, wind and sun power operate differently than coal or oil. In such cases, it is not possible simply to "add more" to maintain the energy level.

/// What if We Fail?

Five years have passed since the European Green Deal was introduced and some of its goals have already been achieved (e.g., waste organisation, carbon taxes), although the project has encountered additional difficulties in regard to energy and food prices, possible job losses, and the general attitude of the citizens in the member states. At the beginning of 2024, Europe saw massive farmers' protests, which were related not only to the war in Ukraine and the influx of Ukrainian grain, but primarily to the European Green Deal (Tanno & Liakos 2024). Some commentators believe the European Green Deal may have contributed to increased support for far-right political parties (Oltermann 2024). Such parties include Alternative for Germany and, in Poland, Confederation. These parties openly oppose the provisions of the European Green Deal and claim that climate change is not occurring or that it is not caused by humans (Bosak 2024; Alternative für Deutschland 2024). The European parliamentary elections in June 2024 confirmed the far right's popularity: far-right political parties achieved unprecedented results in many European countries (including France, Germany, and Poland). Many Europeans, particularly older citizens (including certain sceptical politicians), seem to share a similar opinion of the European Green Deal (Eurobarometer 2022). They do not want – or they are afraid – to accept scientific findings in this field. These

are additional problems that hinder optimism in regard to the possibility of an effective energy transition.

What possible consequences could an energy transition conducted by liberal enthusiasts such as Fücks or Norberg bring? Assuming the transition succeeds, it will likely maintain the belief that growth is infinite and that through it capitalism can solve manifold social and political problems. An attachment to – and belief in the universal validity of – prosperity do not allow for the consideration of alternatives. Capitalism thus becomes the only possible way of thinking about the world (Fisher 2009: 1–11). Maintaining faith in liberal democracy and capitalism, in turn, may lead to preserving the status quo, where inequalities may continue to grow over time, along with increasing capital income for the wealthiest, as happened along with the development of neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s (Piketty 2014: 244–270). If inequalities continue to grow, the wealthiest 10% will hold an increasing share of national and global capital and will create a globalised world elite able to travel freely and enjoy conveniences worldwide without restrictions, while the remaining 90% will become their wage-workers: cleaners, gardeners, nannies, doctors, drivers, etc., living in cheap, low-standard housing (Deneen 2018: 139–151). In this scenario, if global warming cannot be stopped in time, some geographical areas will likely end up underwater or become otherwise uninhabitable. Undoubtedly, the poorest will suffer the most. They will have to migrate to higher grounds – in the same way as migrants from the Middle East or Africa are currently trying to reach the European Union.

Perhaps the logic of capitalism poses the greatest challenge to solving the climate crisis, as it does not allow us to recognise issues that cannot be expressed in terms of GDP, self-interest, or clear definitions of what belongs to whom. There are economists who have taken note of the climate problem (Costanza 1992; Jackson 2021), but most economics textbooks still operate within the mainstream of classical liberalism, which favours profit and self-interest (Bińczyk 2023; Raworth 2017). Should caring for the elderly be a paid job? Is taking care of the planet a matter of self-interest? The current political status quo, which is based on capitalism, not only prevents consensus on these matters among the powers-that-be, workers in various industries, protesting youth, and the directors of the world's largest corporations, but also structurally obliges those participating in the system to passivity and conformity: "As individuals, we can do so little, and besides, it is convenient for us, so why should we make an effort to change anything?" Such a perspective, especially among politicians, prevents decisive action, whose

omission could lead not only to the flooding or drying of areas at risk, but also to cyclical heatwaves, difficulties accessing clean air and water, the emergence of currently unknown, deadly diseases, more frequent extreme weather events, mass migrations, hunger, the extinction of entire groups of plants and animals, armed conflicts, energy shortages, and many other dire consequences (WWF 2024; Figueres & Rivet-Carnac 2020; Klein 2019).

Will democracy be possible then? For many years, scholars have been saying that modern liberal democracies do not allow participation and that this has led to the decline of social capital, interpersonal bonds, and engagement in public affairs (Putnam 2000; Sowa 2019: 5–10). One of the most common ways to solve the problem is deliberative democracy (Willis et al. 2022). However, the inability to reach an agreement and develop a common position may lead to a situation in which it is easier and more convenient to delegate solving the climate crisis to international organisations without a democratic mandate. How can democracy be maintained when political parties may come to power that promise to solve the problem in exchange for the ability to suspend democratic principles, such as the separation of powers or term limits? Or that promise not to recognise the problem at all? How can democratic standards be preserved when necessary actions must be taken quickly and perhaps also in ways that are contrary to the convenience and habits of most citizens?

The above-mentioned problems may seem like a repetition of the anxieties of the 1920s and 1930s, when authoritarian regimes developed in many European countries, but the "affective relations" are entirely different (Deleuze & Guattari 2005: 208–231). Moreover, it is challenging to indicate exactly who was responsible for damaging the climate in the past. Blame would properly be widespread and extended in time, but the root of the problem is known – it is the desire for more wealth, power, and domination. We can only point to the entities that have most contributed to hindering changes related to the energy transition: according to many Europeans, the obstructors are corporations and energy companies (Chandèze et al. 2023). This leads us to following questions: if powerful economic entities are preventing an energy transition and the halting of climate warming, should the climate problem still be considered from the viewpoint of capitalism and the liberal state, which primarily focus on costs and benefits? Or would it be better to focus primarily on preserving life – in such a way that every element (human, plant, animal, and planet) is equally important, without a privileged position? Some people might say that such easy distinctions are too reductionist, and it is worth emphasising that the

European Green Deal is not essentially wrong and very far from degrowth ideas, apart from decoupling growth from resource consumption (Bińczyk 2023: 175–183). As many scholars from different perspectives have pointed out, it is growthism and the "business as usual" attitude regarding climate change that are the problems – in regard to these, our position should be unwavering (Hickel 2020; Jackson 2021; Bińczyk 2023: 119–140). Thinking about solving the climate problem in a way that does not lead (as in the liberal approach) to maintaining and perpetuating ideas that so easily divide the world into subordinate and dominating, beneficial and non-beneficial, is difficult. How can it even be done?

/// Post-Anthropocentrism

To answer at least some of the questions posed above, it is necessary to address the topic of political ontology, which is a field of research that can help us determine what exists, and within what structures, and how its organisation creates power relations between the elements (Bednarek 2014; Janik 2017: 10). Capitalism and liberal democracy seem to be founded on an anthropocentric view of the world. Thus, how might we understand power relations (such as ownership, the need for growth, or participation in democracy) if humans are not the privileged elements of the system? Would the issues described above still pertain in such a scenario?

In a book published in 2013, the philosopher Rosi Braidotti summarised a number of philosophical trends concerning humanism, materialism, and feminist and postcolonial studies, and pointed to a perspective she terms post-anthropocentrism (Braidotti 2013: 55–104). Braidotti associates this line of thinking with questions about understanding subjectivity after anthropocentrism (Braidotti 2013: 57–58).

Moving beyond anthropocentrism primarily means abandoning an understanding of the world in which humans as a species occupy a privileged position. Many epistemological projects of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries (including those mentioned earlier in this article) placed the white European male in a privileged position in regard to understanding, categorising, or appropriating the world. Changing this perspective has been possible at least since the seventeenth century (thanks to the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza), but only in the last few decades has an ontological turn (including in the social sciences) allowed it to happen (Nowak 2016; Kamiński 2022).

It is precisely this move beyond epistemology (in which the existence of a perceiving subject is necessary) to a flat ontology, based on the works of thinkers such as Spinoza, Deleuze, and Latour, that makes understanding the perspective of post-anthropocentrism possible. Braidotti describes her perspective as "vitalist materialism" and writes that

> The main idea is to overcome dialectical oppositions engendering non-dialectical understandings of materialism itself, as an alternative to the Hegelian scheme. The "Spinozist legacy" therefore consists in a very active concept of monism, which allowed these modern French philosophers [Althusser, Deleuze, Negri] to define matter as vital and self-organizing, thereby producing the staggering combination "vitalist materialism." (Braidotti 2013: 56)

How should this be understood? The ontological basis of such thinking can be associated with Spinoza's philosophy, in which power is the joint action of elements (*modes*) connected at the grassroots and is not understood as the hierarchical rule of rational humans over things, people, and the planet, or, as Hobbes described it, man's "present means, to obtain some future apparent Good" (Hobbes 1965: 41–42, 56, 66–70; Spinoza 1954: 47, 49, 137–138). For Spinoza, it is not humans, understood as subjects, that constitute the centre of the ontological order but substance, which is everything that exists, and every thing – every phenomenon, human, or animal – is its *mode*, a form of existence. In this way of thinking, power – the possibility of joint action – can only be achieved through connecting and assembling with other equal *modes*.

In regard to her project of vitalist materialism, Braidotti adds that, as a whole, it can be understood as radical immanence, in which the basic unit of consideration is not the individual, but the multitude viewed as a rhizome (Braidotti 2013: 56; Deleuze & Guattari 2005: 6–25). In this perspective, it becomes possible to assemble different forms of life, which Braidotti calls *zoe*, in contrast to the more defined *bios*: "*Zoe*-centered egalitarianism is, for me, the core of the post-anthropocentric turn: it is a materialist, secular, grounded, and unsentimental response to the opportunistic trans-species commodification of Life that is the logic of advanced capitalism" (Braidotti 2013: 60). Abandoning *bios* in favour of *zoe* is also connected with the idea of nomadism – formulating subjectivity that is always on the peripheries, has no defined characteristics, and thus how it acts is more important than how it is characterised (Braidotti 1994: 146–190; Deleuze & Guattari

2005: 351–423). Additionally, the nomad always stands in opposition to the state and capitalism, and dismantles its molar structures (Deleuze & Guattari 2005: 208–231).

To the rhizome analogy one can add the arguments of Latour, according to whom humans, animals, things, and phenomena can be connected in almost any way if the given assemblage works. It then turns out that expressions of power are "weaknesses," "entelechies," "monads," or more simply, "actants," which are relational and resolved within trials of strength and weakness (Latour 1993: 158–160). These trials are not about evolutionarily determining who is more powerful and who will survive, but rather about "an effort to select and organize good encounters, that is, encounters of modes that enter into composition with ours and inspire us with joyful passions" (Deleuze 1988: 55–56). It is these joyful passions that Deleuze mentions that determine how *modes* can assemble, cooperate, and build common grassroots power. Radical inclusivity is characteristic of this way of thinking: *modes* gain power only in joint action; thus few, isolated, and disagreeing elements will always remain weaker than the "joyful multitude."

Why is political ontology important in connection with climate change and the dominating liberal systems? If we assume that only self-interest, self-development, and seeking various ways to enrichment exist, it is indeed difficult to imagine a radically different world than the one we already know. These ontological boundaries also organise possible affective forms of involvement – if we are focused only on benefits for ourselves, then it is difficult to become a "joyful multitude." Instead, we may more regularly encounter the kind of passive emotions that are essential for liberal self-centredness and yet are often left unmentioned: doubt, jealousy, and suspicion.

Concepts involving common grassroots power and assemblages may evoke hope, but the abstract statements of political ontology are not yet ready-made solutions. How can Braidotti's philosophy, linked with the thoughts of Spinoza, Latour, and Deleuze, be translated into the issues of the energy transition, the climate crisis, and possible changes related to democracy and capitalism? What does energy become when we do not understand power as control over others, but as the grassroots joint action of a multitude? Inspired by vitalist materialism, can a different solution to the climate crisis be formulated than that presented by liberal Western politicians? How would democracy and social life be understood then? At least some of these questions can be answered using the concept of degrowth.

/// Degrowth: A Utopia or a Hope?

The idea of degrowth can be understood as a gradual or sudden departure from production and consumption (subordinated to economic growth) in favour of improving the lives of societies and protecting the planet on a global and local scale, now and in the long term. Some proponents add more democratic decision-making in regard to redistributing goods, drastic reducing of energy consumption, or ensuring social justice (Kallis et al. 2012; Schmelzer et al. 2022: 3, 191–193). Perhaps the most well-known scholar associated with this movement, Jason Hickel, adds that besides reducing energy consumption, it is also crucial to reduce the consumption of raw materials, which not only contribute to the release of carbon dioxide but also increase the material footprint (Hickel 2020). Thus, it can be said that proponents of the degrowth idea, in addition to addressing issues related to the climate crisis, often also point to solutions related to equality, social justice, and democratisation. Although the ideas of degrowth proponents vary, it is possible to distinguish their general stance from the liberal viewpoint. They oppose or are sceptical towards capitalism, seek new ways to organise communities without insisting on growth, and reject the privilege of the wealthiest. Obviously, there are multiple perspectives other than growth/degrowth – or even within this binary division – that could not be included in this article, as they would require a broader discussion, for example, Kate Raworth's work *Doughnut Economics* (2017) or Kohei Saito's idea of degrowth communism (2022).

What is the idea of degrowth in practice? How does protecting the planet relate to democratic demands? What does it mean for the contemporary understanding of democracy and capitalism? Hickel presented a series of proposals that aim to promote the well-being of broad groups, help mitigate global warming, and prevent the enrichment of the few. Among the most important are the nationalisation of public services (water and electricity, but also healthcare and education) to ensure sufficient and equal access for all; an end to the planned obsolescence of products; limiting advertising; shifting from exclusive ownership to more inclusive use; and restricting the activities of environmentally harmful industries (Hickel 2020). Other authors also point to the greater involvement of local communities in the common management of resources or decision-making. Solutions based on cooperativism, "communing," or various economies based on participation, solidarity, and democratisation, are already being introduced (Schmelzer et al. 2022: 215–224; Bollier & Helfrich 2019). Additionally,

issues of the fairer redistribution of goods and a basic income, democratically managed technologies, and international solidarity are emphasised (Schmelzer et al. 2022: 225–232, 244–249).

It is the broadly understood idea of democracy that constitutes the clearest common point between the idea of degrowth and the post-anthropocentric project (combining the philosophies of Braidotti, Spinoza, Deleuze, and Latour). Supporters of degrowth and other scholars working on similar concepts only sporadically refer to issues of political ontology (Richter 2019; Heikkurinen 2019; Demmer & Hummel 2017) and rarely combine the concepts of the above-mentioned authors (Fox 2023). It seems to me that democracy, understood as grassroots action – as a constant breaking down of distinctions between the governed and the governing, and simultaneously as a process that over time will assemble more elements – is a good reflection of the strategy of degrowth proponents. In both perspectives, what is most important are not individuals and their freedoms and privileges, but communities and their well-being and treatment, without the excluding divisions of culture/nature, human/non-human, or centre/periphery. This community consists of humans, animals, plants, technologies, and the balance connecting them, expressed in an understanding and compassionate way (Hickel 2020). For this reason, democracy – especially diverse and direct democracy – may be considered the best way for such systems to function (Spinoza 1958: 441–445; Latour 2004: 42, 69–71).

Supporters of degrowth therefore often understand democracy in a radical way – as democratising areas of life that have so far operated on other principles (e.g., capitalist ones). Hickel summarises this situation by stating that "if our struggle for a more ecological economy is to succeed, we must seek to expand democracy wherever possible" (Hickel 2020). Some scholars, who are not necessarily associated with degrowth ideas, describe this as an escape from the economy (Fournier 2008) or an attempt to create a post-capitalist politics (Mason 2016). Other analogous theories include those of an ecological economy (Costanza 1992) and economic democracy (Dahl 1985). A similar concept (although without direct references to degrowth) was also presented by a Polish sociologist, Jan Sowa, in the introduction to the collection *Solidarność 2.0., czyli demokracja jako forma życia*. In this short text, he notes that liberal democracies were an important step towards democratisation in their beginnings, but so far, they have constituted a compromise between the privileged class (once the aristocracy, now the political class) and the people. The development of technology, education,

and communication possibilities allows for another step forward in empowering and giving more agency to the people today (Sowa 2019: 5–39).

What unites these ideas is the belief that starting with local communities, decision-making should concern not only protection of the climate but also the redistribution of goods, ensuring a basic income, and a fairer division of labour. If we (the local community) do not do this, corporations, marketing firms, and other entities operating within the capitalist order will do so, while demanding payment and submission. However, the first step towards local decision-making should be made by those in power, not individuals (Klein 2019).

What are some examples of such local communities and their actions that reflect ideas of degrowth and democratisation? These groups differ around the world and emphasise various aspects of these ideas, from ecological sensitivity to cooperative action. Among the most notable groups are Socialist Self-Help Mühlheim (Sozialistische Selbsthilfe Mühlheim) in Germany, which works for "more humane, ecologically responsible urban policies" (Bollier & Helfrich 2015), and Cecosesola (Central Cooperativa de Servicios Sociales des Estado Lara) in Venezuela, in which healthcare, agriculture, and local trade are organised in a grassroots way (Cecosesola n.d.). Similar institutions operate in Catalonia under the Confederation of Cooperatives of Catalonia. They offer services such as agriculture, food distribution, or help with teaching, housing, and labour organising. All of the confederated cooperatives are set up in a democratic, transparent way, with attention to minority groups and a sustainable economy (COOPCAT n.d.).

These institutions grow over time, and some have been in operation for more than forty years – not for profit but for the well-being of the members of the community. Such organisations make it easier to use local products, which do not rely on global corporations and their trade routes. Democratic, joint decision-making on how to organise labour (and the distribution of food and services) helps avoid human and non-human exploitation and lessens inequalities.

A more rhizomatic approach to organising has been described in *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, in which Anna Tsing describes how the patterns in which the *matsutake* mushroom can grow are unpredictable and changing. Assemblages of *matsutake* gatherers, sellers, and the natural environment in Japan disrupt the operations of capitalism, forcing cooperation and empathy between these elements (Tsing 2015: 131–135). Perhaps it is not an intentional disruption, but the rhizomatic, entangled way in which

it happens is an important precedent in which local assemblages enable a more ecological and just organisation of human and non-human actants, independent of the growth principle.

As Matthias Schmelzer, Andrea Vetter, and Aaron Vansintjan write, "some see a potential for a degrowth economy in the combination of cooperative principles with digital platforms in order to counter the monopoly of commercial platform providers" (Schmelzer et al. 2022: 219). The use of IT systems in a way that goes beyond the logic of capitalism is a great hope for degrowth proponents and other left-wing thinkers, although today it is difficult to find "spaces" on the internet that have not been completely privatised and subordinated to profit (Świetlik et al. 2019: 183–204). The internet and the possibility of instant communication significantly increase the chances of the successful democratisation of public life, but using technology in an impartial and safe manner still poses a problem (Rehman 2019; Runciman 2018).

It can be stated, therefore, that the idea of degrowth is more than a utopia based on theoretical premises. Discussions of strategy, and of the capacity and scale at which degrowth should be implemented, have been taking place for more than a decade now (Barlow 2022: 74–76). Some theorists of this movement talk about "nowtopias," that is, projects in which solutions consistent with the idea of degrowth are implemented (Bollier & Helfrich 2019; Kallis et al. 2012; Petridis 2022) and become "emancipatory initiatives that not only *envision* but also *embody* an alternative model of societal organisation in practice" (Petridis 2022: 161).

According to Nathan Barlow, there is no consensus regarding state participation in applying degrowth ideas (Barlow 2022: 82–83). Panos Petridis argues that "the core of the 'degrowth' institutions that are envisioned will likely be derived from social movements and interstitial bottom-up solidarity economy initiatives that operate against the logic of capital" (Petridis 2022: 161). He suggests that a post-capitalist community would use the state in different ways than happens currently. Critics and sceptics may say that not everything can be achieved in a grassroots manner and without the participation of national governments, at least under current conditions. In their perspective, many proposals of degrowth can still be considered utopian – such as international solidarity or the implementation of this project on a larger scale. According to them, without the participation of the state it is difficult to organise the operation of power plants, communication, or other basic needs, or, to express the problem differently, it is difficult to manage them in a completely decentralised way. For example, it seems

that the modern state would be helpful in implementing projects such as basic income, which many degrowth proponents find valuable. Max Koch even argues that the state is necessary to achieve success for degrowth supporters, because "state and civil society are interconnected in myriad ways, that is, the internal structures and struggles within one are significantly co-produced by corresponding processes in the other" (Koch 2022).

Unfortunately, in Europe and in many wealthy countries elsewhere, numerous politicians still prefer to preserve economic growth and the capitalist order, and they rarely consider strategies not involving national states in their current form, probably due to their position of power. The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, could state that "the European Green New Deal is our new growth strategy" (von der Leyen 2019) because for the leaders of Western countries it seems to be a more palatable strategy than stopping economic growth. The income of corporations and energy companies appears to be more important than understanding the situation in which citizens may have to live in the future. This situation translates into the indecisiveness of governments and politicians regarding the actual adaptation of their countries to climate change.

For this reason, many degrowth supporters would solve the problems presented at the beginning of this article (the unequal distribution of goods and material footprints, expensive fossil fuels, climate change) in a way that completely alters our understanding of democracy, capitalism, citizenship, and the management of energy, resources, and wealth. According to many degrowth supporters, democracy would cease to be merely "a toy for a wealthy elite" (Sowa 2019: 19), and its functioning would create not only the *impression* of participation and influence on decisions but *actual involvement* in local and perhaps national affairs. This would mean more direct democracy, without clear differences between citizens and their representatives, and without distinctions between citizens' rights and human rights. The democratisation of the economy would dismantle the neoliberal order, which favours the richest and promotes the growth of social, material, and geopolitical inequalities (Global South). It would also transform resource management into a universal provision of well-being, rather than a system for the exploitation of workers by those who own the capital. Of course, energy sources would still need to be renewable, but due to diminished demand they would produce less energy and be managed democratically, not privately, as is likely to happen in applying the liberal solution. The idea of infinite growth would seem inappropriate and absurd (Bińczyk 2023: 187–194), and every community would know how much resource

consumption and energy it would need. Democratic resource management also seems like a better way to reduce our material footprint, our carbon footprint, and ultimately global warming, because the goal is not profit but maintaining the life of the community, which consists not only of humans but also of non-human elements: animals, plants, raw materials, the entire infrastructure, and the planet as a whole. In this way of thinking, energy ceases to be a commodity or an instrument of power but becomes a basic good that is guaranteed to everyone and from which everyone can benefit within set limits (Schmelzer et al. 2022: 225–228). These and further concepts and resolutions have already been discussed by other scholars (Hickel 2020; Bińczyk 2023: 194–197).

/// Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to show the possible problems with various liberal ideas on how to solve rising temperatures and energy consumption, and some of the greatest challenges in addressing the climate crisis within the framework of degrowth and post-anthropocentric thinking. In this short conclusion, I would like to summarise some of the most important problems in overcoming the current status quo: limitations in ontological imagination, lack of affective optimism, and governmental indecisiveness.

Governmental indecisiveness is often cited by respondents as the main obstacle to solving the climate crisis (Bailey 2023) and escaping the trap in which contemporary states find themselves, that is, the necessity of ensuring the well-being of their citizens while participating in the capitalist division of resources, energy, and other essential goods. How can Western governments apply the concept of degrowth when, since the end of the Second World War, one of the main arguments used by political parties to gain support has been the promise of continuous growth and a future where everything will constantly develop? How can a policy based on moderation and restraint rather than abundance and self-development be built?

The second significant constraint is the lack of affective optimism, that is, there seems to be a fear of cooperating, and doubt about the goodwill of other people. Neoliberalism has fostered and maintained pessimism and suspicion in regard to the actions of others, along with the belief that individual interests cannot be reconciled with the interests of other people (Hayek 1978: 71–84, 253–266). Hence, constructing cooperatives, democratising the economy, and organising demonstrations and strikes in opposition to the capitalist order requires courage at the level of rational

decision-making, and beyond this level – affective trust, and the ability to empathise. These are crucial in the post-anthropocentric project associated with the philosophies of Rosi Braidotti, Bruno Latour, Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari.

The third challenge is related to the above: the lack of ontological imagination (Nowak 2016; Bińczyk 2023: 9–13, 132–136), which concerns the possibility of conceiving of the social order in a non-hierarchical, inclusive, and socially just manner. Centuries of European philosophy, science, and other fields have taught Europeans to treat humans (or rather white, educated men) as privileged subjects, and this privilege creates a difference, a distance from those who do not share the advantage. This difference condemns others to be treated as inferior, subordinate, and inhuman, and prevents a change in how relationships between humans, animals, plants, things, and the entire planet are perceived.

In this article, I have attempted to outline, both from a liberal standpoint and from the perspective of degrowth proponents, the most significant changes that solving the climate crisis could entail. The solutions imply changes in the functioning of entire societies: how resources and energy are provided and managed, how democracy works, and how capitalism is perceived. Many further details in regard to, for instance, maintaining growth in countries of the Global South, setting energy consumption limits, or the principles for exchanging resources and assets within a democratic economy, could not be included. My aim was to outline the difference between certain liberal and degrowth solutions, at the political and ontological levels, in the hope of expanding the present ontological imagination, introducing some optimism, and therefore contributing – even if only slightly – to solving the climate crisis.

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/// Abstract

The aim of this article is to consider the liberal perspective and the degrowth perspective on capitalism, the climate crisis, and energy consumption. According to proponents of capitalism, solving the climate crisis needs to be done in terms of "green growth." More radical thinkers argue that the problem is not the source of energy but rather that its consumption is subordinated to economic growth. Therefore, they propose changing the energy consumption strategy from a model aimed at infinite profit to one focused on ensuring universal well-being.

This article outlines selected basic socio-political issues related to moving away from economic growth and the possibilities for redefining the understanding of democracy. Abandoning the concept of economic growth also presents an opportunity for transformations within political ontology – the possibility of viewing society as a multitude without the privileged position of the human. The article thus also shows the similarities between ontological resolutions and the changes that need to occur in understanding the climate crisis, and thereby depicts the need for changes that are far more complex than merely making capitalism "greener."

Keywords:
degrowth, post-anthropocentrism, climate crisis, multitude, ontology, neoliberalism

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