https://doi.org/10.51196/srz.26.11

THE ALTERNATIVES WE DESPERATELY NEED

EWA BIŃCZYK, *USPOŁECZNIANIE ANTROPOCENU. EKOWERWA I EKOLOGIZOWANIE EKONOMII*

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A year-end summary of climate change in 2024 would not be uplifting. The global mean temperature for the span of January to September 2024 reached 1.54°C, making 2024 the first year to surpass the 1.5°C guideline of the 2016 Paris Agreement (WMO 2024a: 1), a threshold already mourned in various media outlets. Extreme weather events occurred all over the world, striking the Global South disproportionately heavily yet again. Severe flooding in East Africa killed hundreds and affected close to one million people; the region buckled under a rainy season amplified by El Niño and exacerbated by Cyclones Hidaya and Ialy. Record-breaking heatwaves rolled through Asia – from Lebanon to the Philippines – and caused numerous fatalities, with heat indexes soaring above 50°C. Wildfires hit Chile in February, burning 64,326 hectares, killing 134 people, and destroying thousands of homes (Pearce & Ware 2024; UNICEF 2024). The Global North was not spared either. Hurricanes and storms swept through the southern United States, causing widespread floods, wind damage, and severely disrupting power infrastructure. In the first nine months of 2024, wildfires ravaged 370,000 hectares of European forests, and – right after the hottest summer on record – the continent was hit with severe floods. The latter were particularly devastating in Central Europe, where two million people were affected in September alone, and in the Spanish region of Valencia, where flash floods killed 230 people. One weather station in

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Spain recorded 491 l/m² of rainfall – the equivalent of a year's worth – in eight hours (EEA 2024; WMO 2024b). Finally, as I write this review, catastrophic wildfires are raging in California.

One might think that the constantly rising temperatures and the steadily growing proliferation of extreme weather events would cause increasing social alarm and spur the ruling class to much-needed action. Well, one would be wrong. Emissions from fossil fuels increased yet again with the projected figure for 2024 estimated at 41.6 billion tonnes of emitted CO_2 (GCB 2024). Environmentally harmful subsidies reached $2.6 trillion, including continued subsidies to fossil capital that continues to roll in profits (Koplow & Steenblik 2024) while keeping to its plans to pursue further upstream investments (Milman & Lakhani 2024; Malm & Carton 2024). State repressions of climate activists are considerably on the rise, especially in the United Kingdom and Australia (Berglund et. al. 2024), and COP 29 turned out to be yet another lip-service failure, as testified to by the attendance of over 1,700 oil and gas lobbyists (KBPO 2024). At the rate of current policies, we are on track to reach 3.1°C of warming by 2100 (UNEP 2024: xvii). This is a course set for ecological and social catastrophe, and our ruling class is firmly choosing to ignore it.

It is not easy to write on climate change within a society that seems hellbent on its own destruction. As bad news keeps rolling in, the allure of despair grows ever more attractive to many of us. In some places this sentiment will only be strengthened by widespread repression, which can cause those pursuing such work to feel as if they were becoming psychotic, as if this enormous socio-natural problem were merely a fantasy. Poland is, in my opinion, one such place. Here the discourse on climate change exists mostly symbolically – the problem seems largely unconcerning to the media and politicians. This is reflected by the absolute inactivity of the new coalition government, which has failed to fulfil any of its environmental pledges (Józefiak 2024); by the widespread outbursts of public figures directed at the – extremely non-radical – actions of the Polish wing of the Last Generation, which have been variously deemed to be "hooliganism" or "climate hysteria" (a real example of the irony of projection) (Jurowski 2024); by the obstinacy of mainstream Polish economists who have spoken against the existence of physical barriers to economic growth (Bińczyk 2023: 226); and by the stranger-than-fiction declaration of a war on beavers made by the prime minister, Donald Tusk, who deemed the animals to be the culprits behind the severe flooding this autumn (Körömi 2024). It takes resilience to attempt to make a dent here, to shift this discursive

field towards a debate on possible solutions to the problem and analyses of its social nature.

In my estimation these are precisely the stakes of Ewa Bińczyk's 2023 book, *Uspołecznianie antropocenu. Ekowerwa i ekologizowanie ekonomii*. While her previous work – *Epoka człowieka. Retoryka i marazm antropocenu* – focused on an analysis of the various forms of rhetoric present in discourses on climate change, *Uspołecznianie antropocenu* demands a "decisive socialisation of the debate on the planetary environmental crisis" (Bińczyk 2023: 11)[1] and turns to an overview of the ways in which our society can be remade, and why that is necessary to safekeep human and non-human lives. I understand that the author's most important goal here is to open up a discursive field for social debate on the necessary "complex of deep, pro-environmental, socio-cultural changes to the logic and foundations of the management of human life on planet Earth" by providing Polish readers with an "accessible and attractive" introduction to the "'grammar' of the ecological economics of prosperity" (Bińczyk 2023: 14, 15). The metaphor of grammar is indeed apt here, insofar as the book introduces the readers to what, in the face of the prevalent status quo, amounts to a wholly different language in which to think of socio-economic change aiming to address both environmental and social issues.

This is certainly a laudable goal, insofar as ecological economics function within the wider Polish discursive field only on its very outskirts, while many living here associate pro-environmental changes with anything but prosperity: they are often seen as synonymous with painful sacrifices, with austerity, and a lowered standard of living. While this form of anxiety can be said to be misled, it is also not unfounded in a semi-peripheral country where, in 2023, 6.6% of the population lived in severe poverty and 46% found themselves below the social minimum (Szarfenberg 2024: 13). Moreover, after the brutal process of economic transformation carried out in the 1990s – which was simultaneously the process of dismantling any opposition to neoliberal dogma and its concomitant order of desires – the social imaginary of prosperity in Poland is firmly attached to the capitalist fantasy of a self-made bourgeois, who lives in a mansion and is surrounded by expensive commodities. Many here hold to this fantasy desperately, even now, when it is falling apart in the face of the cost-of-living crisis, the housing bubble driven by speculation, and rising poverty. But they are also just holding onto their living standards, which they always feel on the verge of losing – an experience unfortunately shared by many here.

[1] Unless stated otherwise, all translations are my own.

By firmly linking ecological economics to alternative forms of prosperity, Bińczyk offers a very attractive way for Poles to approach the issue of a socio-economic, pro-environmental transformation. She introduces her readers to a different economic rationality, in which prosperity does not need to be predicated on collecting ever more commodities, nor on self-interest and the brutality of competition. Prosperity could mean free time, freedom of self-expression and self-realisation, actual democratic practices, and redistributive policies that guarantee a life of dignity to all members of our societies. But most importantly, at this moment, it could mean freedom from a historical trajectory that promises planetary catastrophe.

The introduction to this rationality plays out in three parts. Part 1, "Arranging Survival," is devoted entirely to presenting various strains of ecological economics, including those closer to the economic mainstream and those firmly outside it. Part 2, "Safekeeping the Future," analyses the social status of the future, both conceptually and in regard to concrete challenges ahead and possibilities. Part 3, "Ecoverve and the Boycott of Torpor," concludes the volume with an argument for maintaining ambitious thinking about moving beyond the stagnation of the status quo, and looks at the possibility of future tipping points – moments ripe with potential for social change and shifts in the social status quo. Bińczyk considers these within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. She also includes a very personal annex in the form of a letter to future generations, placed immediately after the summary. I will revisit the annex later. For now, let's discuss each of the three parts of the volume, as there is a lot to unpack here, and Bińczyk's writing deserves close attention.

Bińczyk opens "Arranging Survival" with a chapter that serves as a general introduction to the grammar of ecological economics. She describes the field as a "transdisciplinary discipline that encompasses the social sciences, knowledge from the humanities, and natural sciences," and its point of departure for rethinking economics is the acceptance of the "existence of limits to economic growth" (Bińczyk 2023: 26, 27). These limits are, of course, physical, and stem from the assertion that the human economy is predicated on the non-human biosphere, which cannot be exploited without impacting its capacity for regeneration. The various strains of ecological economics – described by Bińczyk as belonging to a "post-growth" school of thought – are therefore critical not of any single measure of growth but rather of the fetishism of the "idea of infinite economic growth on a finite planet" (Bińczyk 2023: 31, 32). It is important to clarify that this critique targets an idea of growth that is, in essence,

a blind, continuous accumulation of profit that does not take into account whether growth comes from weapons manufacturing or the production of low-quality commodities destined for the landfill a month after purchase. What ecological economists demand is therefore the "limitation of growth in chosen areas, such as resource use, energy consumption, water usage, the destruction of habitats of other life forms, land use, or population," coupled with an increase in growth in "the quality and longevity of human life, social justice, safety for all members of society, the quality of the environment, human welfare, and literacy" (Bińczyk 2023: 38). An ecologically stable society would still develop, make new inventions, and build its infrastructure, but its growth should occur where it improves the quality of human and non-human life, not where it serves destruction and profit. Especially since, as Bińczyk points out, it is impossible to decouple an ever-increasing accumulation of profit from the increasing exploitation of the planet, particularly in terms of CO_2 emissions. Decoupling emissions from economic growth in absolute terms has not been achieved, and in relative terms, it is often just a "fiction of measurements" (Bińczyk 2023: 41).

What we need in the Anthropocene can therefore be found in "new types of [economic] reflection," based on a "new 'grammar' that takes into account planetary limitations, a new pro-climate dictionary, one full of verve and justice" (Bińczyk 2023: 42). We must depart from "narrations of austerity […] and the continuation of the accumulation of wealth by the privileged." As Bińczyk states, "we will not be saved by green growth or the rhetoric of decoupling growth from planetary destruction," both of which primarily serve the continuation of the status quo (Bińczyk 2023: 43). The economic and political status quo has failed – miserably. It is time to move away from it and try something different, because only a qualitative shift in social metabolism can stop this crisis and improve the quality of human life and the welfare of our shared environment. This general introduction is well-reasoned, comprehensive, and clearly presents the stakes of the debate. Moreover, it is refreshing to see such an intervention in the Polish discourse: one that clearly speaks out against ecological austerity – or any austerity policies for that matter – and the practices of placing environmental guilt on individual citizens.

The five chapters that follow present something akin to a small atlas of alternatives. Bińczyk reaches into various strains of ecological economics – encompassing different periods and disciplines, including economics proper, philosophy, science and technology studies, and sociology – to further sketch out the discipline. Readers are introduced to the thought of

Tim Jackson, Kate Raworth, Herbert Marcuse, Jonathan Symons, and Alf Hornborg, with supporting figures invoked at various points. This provides a diverse look at how different thinkers conceptualise alternatives to our present social metabolism and critique various aspects of the status quo. We move from Jackson's critique of "growthism ideology" and his call for a "symbiotic balance" within a flow economy, through Raworth's donut economics, centred on the understanding of economics not as a "science of getting richer, but of the Greek *oikos*," that is, a science of conscious economic management of our economies; Marcuse's late eco-socialist critique of capitalism, in which "ecological issues reveal the internal contradictions of the status quo," which Bińczyk presents in tandem with Jason W. Moore's Marxist critique of capitalism's reliance on cheap nature; Symon's eco-modernist approach, centred on low-emissions technologies and state intervention; and we end with Hornborg's anthropological critique of the function of money and technologies in contemporary economies, and his approach to a "metabolic correction" based on an alternative to existing technological and monetary infrastructures (Bińczyk 2023: 47, 51, 55, 74, 90, 112).

In line with Bińczyk's reliance on linguistic concepts, this is a diverse dictionary that readers can use to understand various approaches to critiquing the philosophical, ideological, political, and economic underpinnings of the social nature of our environmental crisis. Moreover, we are presented here with a wealth of already conceptualised alternatives. Against the obstinacy of the ruling class, it becomes clear that we do have choices and that there are different ways of approaching and actually addressing our current predicament. And none of them rely on austerity measures aimed at the average citizen, nor on denying developing countries the right to raise their standards of living. This is also, to underscore my previous points, important in local terms, as many of these authors and their alternative politico-economic proposals are not well known – or at all known – in Poland, and thus the introduction is very valuable in terms of the Polish discursive field. However, there are drawbacks to this approach, two of which should be noted here. First, while "post-growth" and "ecological economics" are useful umbrella terms for discussing these various authors, they can at times make differing ideas less distinct. While the authors' goals are often similar, they would certainly not subscribe to certain of their interlocutors' proposals: Marcuse's eco-socialism, for example, is wildly incompatible with Symon's eco-modernism, due to the former's reliance on a Marxian critique of political economy and his heavy criticism of capitalism's use of technology, while Hornborg came into direct conflict with

Moore due to divergent stances on political economy and post-humanism (Moore 2000; Hornborg 2020). These are not mere differences in detail, but rather philosophical and political conflicts of considerable substance. Second, the author as a subject disappears to some degree in this gallery of figures, and even though points of criticism and affirmation are raised, we do not really know which ways of getting there, so to speak, Bińczyk would prefer. I must admit that, after the introductory critique of techno-fixes and green growth, I was surprised to see Symon discussed here, as his ideas – and especially his affirmative stance on geoengineering – do not really diverge from those heard from representatives of the ruling class. I understand that these issues are partly related to accessibility and the desire to avoid the charge of didacticism, but they remain present, and I would even go so far as to say that a lack of guidance as to what we should choose could lead to confusion among readers who are not well acquainted with the problems of some of the presented approaches. Even so, the value of the first part of *Uspołecznianie antropocenu* remains high, and it is likely that every reader will find something compelling in this atlas of alternatives.

Here we transition to Part 2, which feels a bit like waking up from a somewhat pleasant dream to brutal reality. Part 2, "Safekeeping the Future," opens with a fundamental question: is what is happening not calling into question our entire ingrained imaginary connected with the concept of linear progress? Is it not impacting our "contemporary reflection about the future?" (Bińczyk 2023: 120). As Bińczyk states, the "[p]aradox of the Anthropocene is based on the fact that the results of humanity's drive to dominate and control are spinning out of control" and that our "hyperagency" also serves as a "testament to our multidimensional helplessness and impotence" (Bińczyk 2023: 21). The task here is to think beyond those barriers, to "expose, from a philosophical perspective, the possible shapes of the relationship of humanity to the future in the age of the Anthropocene" (Bińczyk 2023: 26). The author moves to interrogate various discourses surrounding the Anthropocene, investigating how the reality of loss – and the possibility of a future – are being repressed through rhetoric and political inaction. She is right to observe that every year of inaction only "paralyses" and strengthens what she calls the "torpor of the Anthropocene" – our state of "inertia and stupor" (Bińczyk 2023: 129). By destroying Earth's biosphere – ravaging species, polluting, and pushing ever more emissions into the atmosphere – we are destroying our own future, which is inextricably tied to it. Without a stable climate, there is no human society, only a fall into barbarism. The author is therefore right

to criticise the strategy of pursuing business as usual, which she describes as a "guarantee of civilisational collapse" (Bińczyk 2023: 130). With a catastrophe on the horizon, our ruling class is beholden to the "Drill, baby, drill" imperative, even if it does not state it aloud or proclaims the contrary while handing out permits. The necessity of transforming the "energetic, economic, and political" status quo is constantly repressed in discourse and practice, and "[w]e are unable to open up to alternative solutions" – in a "sense we have already lost the future by placing our bets on an endless repetition of the present" (Bińczyk 2023: 131, 133).

For Bińczyk, our imaginaries focus only on copies of the present, whether as images of its continuation or its collapse. Moreover, we fetishise the catastrophe, clinging to the belief that it is already too late to act, and we are – unconsciously – enamoured with the apocalypse. This is a poorly chosen object of desire, and we need to wake up to the fact that it is not too late. As Andreas Malm and Wim Carton powerfully argued recently, it will not be too late at 1.5°C, 1.75°C, or 2.0°C (Malm & Carton 2024). The goals and forms of the struggle will need to adapt, but it will, and has to, continue. It is, after all, not just about stopping the crisis, but also about protecting human and non-human lifeforms from its effects. This will not be possible without confronting the "historical and political processes" that are inseparable from the "degradation of the environment, which follows from the pursuit of economic growth and unequal distribution of resources" (Bińczyk 2023: 136). For that, we must open up to "hope and belief in the possibility of a future," to solutions that seem unimaginable from "the vantage point of the dominating paradigm of a pro-market pursuit of profit," and to the possibility of a "good Anthropocene" that is not based on technofixes (Bińczyk 2023: 137, 138). Bińczyk forcefully argues that what we need, here and now, are constructive, transdisciplinary projects that address the crisis by building alternative forms of social existence within the failing present.

The rest of Part 2 of *Uspołecznianie antropocenu* is dedicated to an overview of three such projects and their promises. First, the author reflects on the role of the academic community in the Anthropocene. She rightly argues that scholarly reflection on the climate crisis should be transdisciplinary and that academia can play a crucial role in addressing our predicament: it can "locate catalysts for change and for social tipping points as humanity moves towards green deals and decarbonisation" (Bińczyk 2023: 142). Thus, Bińczyk rightly asserts that the most important "axiological challenge" for academia is to "undertake a transdisciplinary reflection on

the potential conditions for mass agency, taking into account the planet's metabolism, the agency of non-human factors, and technological infrastructures" – to seek "concepts that could strengthen an eco-utopian impulse – what I call ecoverve" (Bińczyk 2023: 158). Both academic practices and theories must be rebuilt in response to the climate crisis, and the commodification of universities and knowledge must be challenged. This is a much-needed reflection on the role academics can play in stopping the crisis. There is a need for education that confronts wider society with the facts of the crisis by disseminating science-based knowledge, combating disinformation, and building hope by insisting on the viability of alternative forms of social existence.

Bińczyk then moves on to a chapter on planetary social thought, which serves as an example of alternative academic practices and extends the introductory discussion on ecological economics. Here, the author introduces a mode of thinking that "understands social formations as geosocial formations and history as geohistory," revealing the feedbacks between social changes and reorganisations of the planet's system (Bińczyk 2023: 165). She builds on this methodological approach to show how ecological economics understands human society as grounded in the planet's conditions. The claim that "selective degrowth" is necessary to "achieve economic restraint and stabilise the metabolism of a given society" can therefore be shown to stem from a transdisciplinary assessment of the natural boundaries to human economies (Bińczyk 2023: 172, 171). This is followed by an overview of degrowth policy recommendations, which helpfully introduce readers to ways in which the broader concepts of this approach can be translated into concrete proposals. While this chapter does, in some respects, repeat points made in Part 1, it nonetheless provides a useful introduction to how a different mode of thinking about the relationship between human society and nature leads to positing the necessity of a radical transformation of our socio-economic systems.

The third reflection on alternatives, which concludes Part 2, is perhaps the most concrete. In Chapter 10, Bińczyk analyses the European Green Deal (EGD), approved in 2020, and asks whether the EU could play the role of an avant-garde in climate-change adaptation and socio-economic transformation. She turns from the postulates of various experts to consider six areas – from decarbonisation to a departure from infinite economic growth – and to show that, hey, they translate into the reality of the EGD. This is a helpful overview of the document and delves into many of its details, showing how economic changes, environmental

regulations, international integration, and democratic inclusion can and should be linked together to create a unified programme to confront the crisis on various fronts. Bińczyk does not attempt to present the EGD as perfect, but as a large step in the right direction, a reason to be optimistic.

However, I believe that this optimism might be misplaced. In my view, the EGD does not conform to the author's own call for "uncompromising novelty and the courage to create a dictionary of a new rationality" (Bińczyk 2023: 181). Various researchers have pointed out that the EGD continues to follow the same economic rationality that led us to our current predicament, and that it is premised on uneven exchange, market-driven technological innovation, non-existent carbon-removal technologies, and hydrogen promoted by the fossil-fuel lobby, as well as on carbon trading (Čavoški 2022; Almeida et al. 2023; Balanyá 2020). Additionally, the plan for net neutrality by 2050 is far too modest, and it was weakened due to pressures from Exxon Mobil, as Bińczyk herself notes (Bińczyk 2023: 191). That is not to say that the EGD should be discarded entirely; it should still be seen as a positive development, but it must also be criticised for what it is: capitalist climate governance.

While I understand why Bińczyk chose to focus on the EU and the EGD – since the Polish readership can readily relate to the issue – I would argue that a much stronger candidate for being the avant-garde of climate-change adaptation, especially in reducing emissions through renewable energy, is China. This is not to champion its politics, but it is quite noteworthy that this single country has developed renewable energy so rapidly that it is set to account for 60% of global capacity by 2030, achieving its goals years ahead of schedule and with a projection that its emissions will soon become negative (IEA 2024; Willige 2024). Brett Christophers has outlined very well why we could learn more from China's efforts than from any other country (Christophers 2024a). Yes, China's renewable expansion is not a multidimensional plan addressing all aspects of the climate and environmental crisis – no mistake here – but if other countries followed its rapid action to reduce emissions, perhaps we would not be in as dire a state as we are. Therefore, I find this particular chapter a tad problematic, even if I understand the reasoning behind it.

Let us now turn to Part 3 of *Uspołecznianie antropocenu*, which consists of shorter, impassioned chapters that clearly articulate the stakes of our present situation and argue forcefully for the necessity of pursuing radical alternatives to capitalist climate governance. Bińczyk begins the first chapter with a thought experiment, asking readers to imagine a future defined

by "ecoverve in the economy or biobalance in resource management [*gospodarowaniu*]" (Bińczyk 2023: 187). She invites us to view our situation from the perspective of a possible future, where the "times of increasingly difficult relations between man and nature," driven by "the pursuit of profit and economic growth," seem absurd (Bińczyk 2023: 188). In this way, she leads us towards her concept of ecoverve, which she defines as "a system of radical, constructive proposals aimed at restoring lost ecosystems, creating resilient economies with guaranteed basic income, and ensuring a just distribution of resources," coupled with a "decisive boycott of the torpor of the Anthropocene" (Bińczyk 2023: 188). This is what we could call "ecoreason," an alternative rationality aimed at protection and reconstruction.

Here the author raises two crucial questions: is survival profitable? Is it rational? Given the actions of capitalists and politicians, which are guiding us towards the worst-case scenario, we must ask, "[w]hat is truly reasonable, and what is stupidity and irrationality?" (Bińczyk 2023: 191). Bińczyk is correct on this point, which echoes the Frankfurt School's critique of capitalist rationality. The dominant rationality is profoundly broken and must be demolished and rebuilt if we are to move beyond the obsession with business as usual – the "unhealthy blindness" that represses everything that does not conform to the profit motive. What follows is a vigorous criticism of business as usual, which links ecological and social devastation. Bińczyk supports her argument with concrete data and strengthens it further by juxtaposing business as usual with the rationality of ecoverve, which underscores the leading question of what is truly rational.

The title of Chapter 12 makes the importance of Bińczyk's leading argument clear: "Without Turning Ambitious Dreams into Reality, There Will Be No Future" (Bińczyk 2023: 199). In this chapter, the author follows the reasoning of the previous one, and attempts to answer an implied question: is all this not too ambitious? The answer is yes, what ecological economics proposes is indeed very ambitious. But these "ambitious social changes need to happen," as it is "highly unlikely that the current capitalist, free-market socio-economic context will allow us to implement the necessary decarbonising reforms" (Bińczyk 2023: 202). This social context must be radically transformed, as "the spectrum of necessary reforms […] seems uniquely wide" (Bińczyk 2023: 202). Bińczyk points out that we've already seen such a transformation in the shift to a Keynesian consensus during the so-called golden age of capitalism. Thus, ambitious and wide reforms are possible – they have just been blocked by an impossibly inert status quo, which fails to recognise that, without change, we risk ending not only an

era of immense economic progress but also the era of planetary stability. Without this stability, we may not be able to retain what we call civilisation (Bińczyk 2023: 202). This is a brief chapter, but its impassioned call to reason is well worth hearing. On the other hand, there is a certain problem inherent in its line of reasoning, to which I will return later.

The next two chapters point to two situations from recent history where the possibility of change briefly became tangible. Chapter 13 offers a short analysis of what occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic. When the pandemic struck, it suddenly became clear that what had seemed impossible – any change in the functioning of our socio-economic system – was, in fact, "possible, and even relatively easy to accomplish" (Bińczyk 2023: 205). It was possible to implement quarantine, put societies and economies into hibernation – to put "business as usual, at last, on hold, even if only for a brief moment" (Bińczyk 2023: 205). Bińczyk acknowledges that this is not to say that no one suffered. However, she highlights several significant occurrences, such as the temporary nationalisation of hospitals or the implementation of redistributive policies. Bińczyk points here also to something that could be even more important: perhaps the shared experience of pain could allow us to shake off our torpor and recognise the need for "economies that prioritise resilience over the pursuit of GDP growth," since crises like pandemics have a global and universal reach (Bińczyk 2023: 207).

However, this possibility was complicated by the class conflict that played out during the pandemic: some were able to work from their mansions, while others risked their health working in hospitals, factories, or grocery stores – often becoming infected and dying from a lack of care, as the public health service was not able to keep up after decades of budget cuts. It is crucial to recognise that the "free market does not protect our lives and health" – it only protects the lives of some, while others are left to witness their loved ones being buried in mass graves, as occurred even in the Global North during the pandemic (Bińczyk 2023: 209). When the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic passed, we returned to the "normal" we knew, as if nothing had happened. Nevertheless, during the pandemic, there was a palpable, shared sense that what we have does not work. For Bińczyk, this represents a crucial possibility: a moment when, instead of going back to the status quo, we may choose to redefine what "normal" means.

Chapter 14 offers another approach to this problem as the author, together with doctoral students from her seminar, considers social change in relation to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Bińczyk reflects here on the concept of social tipping points – an "accumulation of changes, processes,

and events that cause the system to suddenly and irreversibly enter a new state" – and proposes that Putin's war can be seen as an event that "discredits the system based on fossil fuels and inequality" (Bińczyk 2023: 217). She highlights contemporary Russia as an example of a state rooted solely in resource extraction, enabling it to grow economically without regard for the well-being of its society (which is undeniably true). The economic benefits of this extractivist model flow primarily to the elites, while the broader population is relegated to the role of a cheap, impoverished labour force.

For Bińczyk, the global solidarity in opposing Russia's aggression and the care shown to those fleeing Ukraine reveals the potential for a "spiritual tipping point." She suggests that we may also witness here a "cultural tipping point" in the growing discreditation of Russian oligarchs and the support for sanctioning them (Bińczyk 2023: 219). This distaste for the corrupt super-rich, she argues, could catalyse broader social change that extends to those within our own countries who profit from the suffering of others – those who, for example, continue to invest in fossil fuel extraction.

Moreover, the author observes, the war in Ukraine has forced various European politicians to admit that dependence on Russian fossil fuels was not a wise strategy, and has pushed Europe to pursue decarbonisation as a means of achieving energy independence. In spite of the monstrosity of the war, the pandemic, and the torpor that has held society in its grip, Bińczyk contends that such moments of crisis could potentially become the social tipping points needed to provoke wider and deeper changes in our socio-economic system. The main body of the book thus ends with an attempt to maintain optimism, however minimal, in the face of our current crises – an optimism we must cultivate if we are to move forward.

I think this is a courageous argument to make, and to a degree, I find myself in agreement with the author. The shared sense of existential pain – the flash of recognition that this system does not work for us – is, in fact, important to social change. As Adorno argued in his lecture on progress, the naked appearance of domination can spur a reaction to it, a need to be free from it that occurs dialectically in response to a crisis of legitimacy of the status quo (Adorno 2005). The climate crisis itself could be, in my opinion, an occurrence that could force resistance into existence, as it is forcibly making clear the damage that an unrestricted domination of nature is doing both to the biosphere and to us. But, as Ståle Holgersen recently argued very persuasively, we should be very careful in treating moments of more immediate, direct, short-term crises as moments of possibility if no alternative policy to stop them is prepared beforehand

(Holgersen 2024). Without such a prepared answer, there is only pain during immediate disasters, as capitalism offsets the costs onto the poorest and most vulnerable, while being only as flexible as it needs to be to allow the economic status quo to survive, and buying time to solve the crisis on its own terms. The possibility of empathy birthed by the pain of the pandemic evaporated as politicians and business owners forced the working class back to their workplaces while the virus was still raging – openly stating that some would have to be sacrificed for the good of the economy or the nation – and when pharmaceutical corporations refused to release their vaccine patents, effectively putting profit over countless lives in the Global South. Similarly, the solidarity with Ukraine fractured very quickly as the global far-right did not wait long to align itself with Russia's interests, and the hard anti-immigrant rhetoric of the far right started to target Ukrainian refugees. For all the talk of EU officials, it turns out that dependence on Russian fossil fuels did not end either, as Europe is presently importing gas from Russia at record levels (Niranjan 2025). Nothing changed fundamentally, and our society seems to be worse off now than it was before either the pandemic or the war, with all the contradictions stitched shut in the most dangerous ways. This does not take away from very real moments of on-the-ground solidarity during those crises, but it shows that they can be swallowed by systemic inertia. Thus, I agree with Bińczyk's argument, but I think it has to be supplemented with the statement that we should not expect immediate crises and pain to bring an alternative into existence by themselves: an alternative has to be present beforehand, and a movement has to forcefully assert that this crisis can be solved on terms not dictated by the status quo. Ecological economics should thus be politically ready both to help stop the next immediate crisis and to resolve it on terms in line with their proposals. Now, before I move towards the end, I want to remark briefly on the annex to the book.

The annex itself takes a form that is rarely encountered in writing of this sort. It is titled "A Letter to Those Born on 5 October 2021: About How Magical Was the Time in a Garden in Bory Tucholskie, while the Planet's Systems Were Becoming Destabilised," and takes the form of a diaristic letter to future generations. What I find particularly compelling in Bińczyk's writing here, and in the inclusion of this piece in the book, is the attempt to connect the academic and the personal, the affective and the scholarly. The author describes her and her partner's stay in the Polish countryside during the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021, month by month, detailing its hardships as well as the beauty of reconnecting with

nature and of being included in the small community of her village. Yet, all these experiences are coloured by the impossibility of disconnecting from what is happening globally, by wondering "how to save your generation [that of those born in 2021] from the barbarism of growing inequalities. Is that even possible?" (Bińczyk 2023: 231). Bińczyk very honestly testifies to her emotional states, to the feeling that it is impossible to watch yet another piece of bad news on TV – to see, for instance, the charred remains of animals that died during a wildfire – and to the despair felt when hearing of the continuous climate inaction.

All the beauties she discovered in her new life in the countryside are real. They show how reconnecting with nature can feel, regardless of the problems and hardships. But again, they pale in comparison to the state she finds herself in when she comes to the point of writing the letter we are reading, when she closes this brief annex with the following words: "To those who will be born in a few months. I write with a pang in my heart. Because of the world we are preparing for you" (Bińczyk 2023: 233). This annex might be brief, but it reveals the reality of the affective experience of those of us who work in any field related to climate change. The honesty of abandoning the academic, dispassionate stance to allow a very real expression of despair is almost shocking, and it underscores the stakes of this debate, the very real feelings of dread felt when thinking about the future, as well as the affective labour required to prevent oneself from being consumed by despair. I truly believe that we, as academics, should allow ourselves more of these moments in our writing. Our situation is not one that calls for dispassion and impersonality, no matter how much our institutions and inherited standards might demand it.

Now, before concluding, I want to offer a point of sympathetic criticism. While the atlas of alternative ways of approaching the problem of climate and environmental crises presented by Bińczyk is indeed broad, there is a certain gap within the field she demarcates. Namely, and I admit to a certain bias on my part since I work within this particular approach, I was somewhat surprised to observe a lack of deeper engagement with the eco-Marxist critique of capitalism, which has been very productive since the 1960s. While we are indeed introduced to the theories of Moore and Marcuse – I am not including Hornborg in this tradition, as he views himself only tangentially related to it at best, and is deeply critical of the basic tenets of eco-socialist theory (Hornborg 2019) – they are presented without a discussion of how these two thinkers analyse the structural impossibility of moving beyond the blind domination of nature under

capitalism, and why they see it as a necessity to move to a wholly different social synthesis.

I view this lack as a problem, because in my eyes the book leaves unexamined a critical question: is it possible to address the planetary environmental crisis within the social framework of capitalism? Bińczyk is surely deeply critical of capitalism and criticises it at various points throughout the book, especially when she analyses the status quo. She even refers to concepts produced within the Marxist tradition, such as fossil fuel capitalism (Bińczyk 2023: 102), or points out the connection between class, wealth accumulation, and climate change (Bińczyk 2023: 214). Yet, she often resorts to the ambivalent statement that we need a "radical corrective to capitalism," and, as we have seen, refers to Keynesian reforms when writing of the real possibility of implementing an alternative social system (Bińczyk 2023: 158). Thus, I want to ask: Is this a corrective in the sense of a replacement, or of an attempt to repair the current system? Are the alternatives found in ecological economics meant to create a new social system, or an eco-conscious capitalism?

I do not rule out the possibility that an entirely new social system could come into existence on the basis of the reforms proposed by ecological economics. But I view the answer to these questions as important for two reasons. First, there is the aforementioned issue of the structural conditions that drive ecological devastation under capitalism. As many scholars have shown, growth is an expression of the deeper social structures of the capitalist mode of production and its imperative of value accumulation. It is highly questionable whether this system is even capable of functioning without growth, or whether that would be desirable in the first place (Postone 1993; Blauwhof 2012; Holgersen 2024). This does not mean that nature could only be dominated under capitalism, but that there are structural reasons for this domination – ones that would be very hard, if not impossible, to transcend within the system, given how entrenched they have become (Saito 2023; Pineault 2022; Hanieh 2024). These structural issues also affect other aspects of environmental politics, such as the much-too-slow development of renewable energy capacity in Western countries, which is driven by considerations of profitability (Christophers 2024b), or the continued investment in fossil-fuel extractivism, motivated by the high- profit rates in this sector (Malm & Carton 2024). After the fossil-fuel profit boom of recent years, all lip service to green energy and divestment evaporated, and investment groups and banks are again pouring money into the fossil-fuel industry, often under the guise of funds with ESG labels (Inman 2023).

By not delving into higher levels of abstraction in their analyses of political economy, ecological economists often miss the structural reasons driving such occurrences. On the other hand, if the author disagrees with those analyses, it would be helpful to learn the reasons for this as well.

Second, at this point it seems moot to discuss ecological transformation without addressing class power. What must be discussed is the class warfare from above, waged by capital against ecological transformation. The lobbying, financing of climate denialism and far-right politicians, greenwashing, and targeting of activists are not expressions of ignorance, but of naked class self-interest. Capitalists can profit from devastating the Earth, and they can profit from the devastation itself because adaptation and rebuilding efforts will represent new opportunities for investment and expansion. Is it short-sighted? Yes. But it is still profit, and more than likely, those driven by it will not be the ones to die from dehydration or wet-bulb temperatures, at least not for a long time. What is profitable will be pursued and defended, which has severe implications for green politics. Consider this, for example: can we imagine fossil capital simply swallowing the fact of stranded assets if we were to ban fossil fuels as soon as it is actually necessary? As Malm and Carton point out, such a ban would represent losses in high trillions for the sector, and it is highly unlikely that those involved would accept the deprivation amicably (Malm & Carton 2024). The change must be forced through by a popular movement and, most likely, by the state, and it will not happen without disposing with the central considerations of the capitalist economy. Moreover, to effectively resist counter-strategies and force through change, states would need to be profoundly disconnected from the capitalist class, to which they are currently absurdly closely tied. By abstracting from class power, ecological economists miss the fact that we are already in the midst of a class war as regards ecology, though it is being waged primarily from one side. While I understand the tactical reasons for focusing on the existing positive programmes of alternatives, I must admit that, in my view, by not incorporating the above considerations, we miss the reasons why those programmes are not being implemented, or why they are being implemented only partially and symbolically, without interfering with the status quo.

While the above considerations may be a point of contention for me, or rather reasons to engage in a well-intentioned polemical dialogue, I would not hesitate to recommend *Uspołecznianie antropocenu* widely. It is a well-written book that represents years of valuable transdisciplinary research, which

was expertly used to explore a wide range of considerations related to the gravest issue human civilisation has ever faced. Bińczyk skilfully builds links between philosophy, economics, and the social and natural sciences. Her arguments are easy to follow, convincing, and well-structured, and her honest and passionate tone ensures that there is no trace of condescension or aloofness in the book. Moreover, it is worth noting that while my review may seem exhaustive, it is far from that in reality. There is a wealth of interesting concepts and arguments within the book that I could not analyse due to considerations of space, and these are aspects that future readers of the book will have to discover for themselves.

Furthermore, precisely because of the book's breadth, its transdisciplinary nature, and Bińczyk's style of writing, *Uspołecznianie antropocenu* serves as an excellent, multidimensional introduction to the topic of ecological economics and the idea of an alternative to capitalist rationality. Regardless of one's background, it is not possible to come away from this volume without having learned something new or having had one's established views challenged. I also find it highly valuable that this is a book that can easily be recommended to both academics and general readers. It is neither too shallow for specialists nor alienating to lay readers. It reflects Bińczyk's own call for academia to step beyond its traditional boundaries and reach beyond discussions with other experts without losing its theoretical ambitions. For this reason, it is also, as I remarked above, a much-needed intervention in the Polish discursive field. Against both local and global torpor and inertia, Bińczyk makes a very convincing, multifaceted argument for not treating anti-growth environmental politics as "utopias" or "science fiction" but as "programmes that are firmly empirically grounded and brutally realistic" (Bińczyk 2023: 225) – programmes that we can have and that we desperately need, if we are to address social and environmental crises that are spinning out of control.

To return to the linguistic metaphor and in reference to Bińczyk's closing words, I find the book to be a successful attempt at building a "new dictionary" that can counteract various knee-jerk reactions in the public sphere and help in turn to "build a path for ecoverve and a peaceful, just arranging of survival" (Bińczyk 2023: 226). I hope that we will see more writing like this on the environment and society in Poland, as it is desperately needed.

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