Democratic Pluralism and Political Unity in the Anthropocene

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Abstract: The question of social and political pluralism takes on a new dimension in the wider context of the Anthropocene. Keeping the planet hospitable for human beings requires a considerable social effort. To such end, the anthropogenic impact on natural systems must be reduced. How is this to be done? Individual actions acquire a systemic dimension once they are globally aggregated to others — private choices have public consequences. If the dangerous trend of the Earth system is to be corrected, then, the political question of social pluralism comes to the fore: what behaviors, identities and forms of life are permissible in the Anthropocene? Must pluralism be sacrificed on account of the need to survive as a species? Or perhaps pluralism may be expected to flourish in degrowth societies that restrict their material output? I will suggest that pluralism is an asset rather than a burden for governing the Anthropocene. But it will hardly be preserved in the kind of small communities advocated by degrowthers. I will argue that a liberal-democratic approach to global sustainability is a better option for balancing individual autonomy and collective survival. I will also ponder whether the danger of an uninhabitable planet may provide contemporary democratic societies a common goal, i.e., a motive around which some kind of collective understanding can be built up — or whether this subject will instead reinforce the polarization and division of the body politic.

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1. INTRODUCTION.

The term «Anthropocene» designates a historical — perhaps even a geological — epoch in which the state of socionatural relations has dramatically changed: the anthropogenic impact on natural systems seems to be changing the Earth's state, displacing the latter towards a new equilibrium which threatens to make life for humans more difficult if not outright unfeasible. Hence the need to keep the planet hospitable for our species, which is a challenging task that requires a huge social effort. Climate change is obviously the most pressing issue, although it is debatable whether the loss of biodiversity should not be considered more dangerous in the long run. Be that as it may, this complex issue can be approached in many different ways. In this paper, I will focus on social and political pluralism within liberal democracies, bringing attention to the role that the former plays in producing global unsustainability and wondering whether this calls for its curtailment.

How much pluralism can be preserved if it is agreed upon that the anthropogenic impact on natural systems is to be substantially reduced? What behaviors and forms of life are permissible in a warming planet in which private choices end up having public consequences? Can democracies afford to be pluralistic when their material conditions are at stake? And conversely: can pluralism be preserved if material output is severely diminished in the name of habitability? On the other hand, social pluralism seems to undermine the unity of purpose required for addressing the transition to a sustainable Anthropocene. In this sense, pluralism stands in the way of habitability — as beliefs and lifestyles proliferate in liberal societies, the resulting fragmentation makes it more difficult to rally behind a single project of social change.

That is why the late Bruno Latour claims that climate change asks for the emergence of a new «ecological class» able to offer new perspectives for action and mobilize the energies of those who want to move towards a degrowth society (see Latour and Schultz 2022). Likewise, Huber (2022) argues that we are witnessing a *power* struggle that must be understood as a *class* struggle over the ownership and control of production. According to them, consensus on this subject is unfeasible and liberalism cannot lead to sustainability. A different kind of society is required — one in which

material output is restricted either by political means or following a massive cultural change that spreads low-impact lifestyles.

For liberalism itself, the conundrum is obvious: any serious attempt to mitigate the harmful effects of climate change would place limitations on what individuals can do, thus restricting their liberty (Cripps 2011). Is there any path within liberalism that leads towards a legitimate restriction of liberty on ecological grounds? If so, which path is that and how can it be normatively grounded? Can pluralism and sustainability be achieved at the same time, or we do have to choose between being pluralistic but not sustainable and becoming sustainable without being pluralistic? It should be emphasized that what liberal democracies achieve might not matter much if developing countries, which are often autocracies, do not make enough — a proviso that is often overlooked. And yet I focus here on liberal societies, because only them engage in a public conversation about what is best to do for securing the Earth's habitability.

The first section lays out the problem, exploring the potentially fraught relation between pluralism and habitability, as well as setting out the conceptual terrain upon which the paper draws. The second section explains how green republicanism and degrowth theory aim to solve the conflict between these two conflicting values. An alternative, liberal-friendly way of addressing the role and reach of pluralism in the Anthropocene is presented in the third section. Finally, the fifth section wraps up the argument and ponders on whether the search for habitability might provide liberal democracies with a common goal that creates greater political unity instead of contributing to the polarization and division of the body politic.

2. PLURALISM AS AN ECOLOGICAL THREAT
AND THE ECOLOGICAL THREAT TO PLURALISM.

Pluralism can be seen as a particular interpretation of social diversity, namely one that sees the latter both as a *fact* to be faced and as a *value* to be preserved. Pluralists describe society as a place where different worldviews and lifestyles coexist or clash, but which cannot be unified by a greater conception of the good — unless homogeneity is enforced through coercion. Such diversity is typical of modern societies and liberal institutions wishes to protect it in the name of pluralism, which in turn is related to personal autonomy or the ability of the individual to decide how to live without unwarranted state interference. Weber (2004) had already characterized modernity as bringing about «value polytheism», while Rawls (1993) referred to the «fact of pluralism», arguing that diversity is the natural outcome of having liberal institutions that protect individual liberties. Pluralism is thus an obstacle for those who would like people to embrace a particular conception of the good, be it a religious doctrine or an ideological worldview. Hence the traditional view that diversity is an evil that hinders social harmony and political consensus — the biblical myth of the Babel Tower being an early account of the political dangers of diversity within the Western tradition (see Sloterdijk 1993).

Following Yumatle (2015), it should be pointed out that pluralism is not tantamount to relativism. The pluralist does not claim that different values are *incomparable* just because they are *incommensurable* — on the contrary, they can be rationally justified and even hierarchically ordered, even though any such attempt will always be tentative and provisional. To determine which criteria would allow for such distinctions is a different story, for there is no consensus among theorists as to which should they be. On the other hand, the problem arises when those values enter into conflict with each other and cannot be simultaneously fulfilled — hence the need to decide which ones are to prevail or how trade-offs are to be resolved. What interests me here is that a pluralistic view of society rests upon the belief that ethical openness is both inescapable and involuntary: most ethical dilemmas cannot be answered unambiguously, nor do we have access to such thing as an absolute truth. Nor even reason can provide for this, given the role that imagination or truthfulness play in ethical life (see Williams 2002). That is why Berlin (2000) refused political utopias and closed moral systems — different values are irreducible and thus cannot be exchanged nor compensated for. Navigating diversity with the compass provided by pluralism demands a

rejection of monist doctrines plus a disposition to accept conflict and uncertainty. It is a demanding ideal.

That said, diversity cannot be indefinitely expanded. Social orders need some limits if they are to be viable. As much as pluralism is a positive value when contemplated from the viewpoint of personal choice and collective openness, it can become a problem for democracies when there is too much fragmentation and this in turn results in aggressive confrontation among social or political groups. Moreover, there is a basic limit to pluralism — the endorsement of liberal democracy on the part of all citizens irrespective of their beliefs or lifestyles is the precondition of pluralism itself. It could be said that pluralism is a monist theory as far as the acceptance of diversity is concerned. But there are other limits to pluralism, as all citizens are forced to abide by the constitution and the laws, which means that they must respect other people's basic rights as well as to act within the boundaries of the permissible such as it has been defined through legislation in a given political community. Still, pluralism retains a general orientation towards the protection of diversity and therefore state interference should be kept at a minimum so that people can freely choose how to live.

Needless to say, neither pluralism nor the modern ideal of autonomy that underpins it are without critics. Most of them point out that neither endorsing a conception of the good nor adopting a particular lifestyle are choices that can be understood in isolation from the social context in which such choices are made (see Mouffe 1993). If such context is unequal or exploitative, for instance, respecting individual choices would made it impossible to challenge the status quo. On the other hand, how are we to make sure that people make *authentic* choices on how to live? They can be prevented from doing so if they suffer from material necessity or lack the access to viewpoints other than theirs. In short, people can live freely without exerting their autonomy — they can make choices without reflecting upon them. Hence the alternative view represented by *perfectionism*, according to which what is good for a person for its own sake does not depend on his own judgement but is outwardly fixed (Arneson 2000: 38). A perfectionist doctrine considers autonomy as just one value among others and claims that it can be outweighed if necessary.

Correspondingly, a perfectionist approach to politics is at odds with the principle of state neutrality, since it holds that the state should promote valuable conceptions of the good life (Wall 2021). A perfectionist state is also *paternalistic*, inasmuch as it tells citizens how they should live — or at least what particular choices are morally wrong or legally forbidden. As Arneson (2000: 42) cautions, perfectionism can be yoked to many different moral, metaphysical, and empirical claims. Consequently, there are different *degrees* of paternalism, depending on the kind and extent of the interference that is warranted in each case. For Arneson, only some combinations of those claims support illiberal governance. He is probably right: banning smoking in public places is not the same as prohibiting the selling of cigarettes. In fact, he believes that «when (if) paternalism succeeds in bringing about a greater human good that is fairly distributed, restriction of liberty is unobjectionable, call it illiberal if you like» (Arneson 2000: 63). But let us hold our judgement on the validity of this claim for now — let us first explain why pluralism can be an ecological threat and, conversely, how an ecological threat to pluralism may be in the making.

I pointed out above that the Anthropocene does not simply refer to the anthropogenic impact on natural systems, but rather to the *qualitative* effect that results from the *quantitative* accumulation of all kinds of impact as they are aggregated at the global level. This means that *individual* actions, such as driving a car or having a baby, do not only have an «episodic life» with no further consequences, but instead lead to «systemic» effects once they converge in global interconnected networks of causation (Jamieson and Di Paola 2016). Private choices that may contribute to the disruption of the Earth system thus abound. Most of them belong to the private realm of decision, which is taken in liberal theory to be that in which interference from others (including the state) requires special justification (see Okin 1989). Nevertheless, it is not easy to identify an agent as responsible for this kind of systemic harm — pinning down particular individuals, in fact, is rather

impossible (see Caney 2005). The individual does not *want* nor *plans* to produce harm, which only takes place when his or her actions are aggregated to those of others.

An alternative possibility lies in singling out behaviors or actions whose accumulation produce a significant contribution to climate change or the loss of biodiversity and try to tackle them irrespective of the *intention* of the agent. The next step would be to challenge such behaviors or actions — most of which will be tied to acts of consumption. For this challenge to be successful, though, *ethical* perfectionism would not be enough, since it might fail to persuade people — *political* perfectionism seems to be required. Individuals would then be told what is permissible and what is not: in the name of a greater good, social pluralism would then be curtailed. Wall (1998) argues that this can be done without using paternalistic measures and hence without resorting to illiberal government. But the clash with liberalism seems hard to avoid since, as Schramme (2011) points out, there is no such thing as a coherent objectivist theory of the good life in which restricted consumption is an element of human flourishing.

Should we keep on consuming then, even if that means the end of the world? Is securing habitability just a perfectionist goal? Does liberalism, committed as it is to state neutrality and the protection of pluralism, prevent us from steering the Anthropocene towards a safe destination? No wonder that environmentalism has always been reluctant to come to terms with liberalism, which is taken as a political doctrine *and* a set of institutions that cannot guarantee sustainability. By claiming that it is neutral regarding conceptions of the good, liberalism is trying to hide that it is itself a comprehensive moral view that does not permit the full realisation of any other moral view — environmentalism included. Although it does not try to impose a homogeneous morality, the neutrality promotes *de facto* a particular conception of freedom *as* the good life, thus generating a dynamic that favours some moral developments above others (Stephens 2001: 7). Therefore, liberalism is not so much a procedural principle that regulates the public dispute between rival conceptions of the good life, even though it portrays itself as such, but a particular conception of the good — one that is privileged by liberal principles and institutions.

I will come back to that. An altogether different view of the relation between liberalism and sustainability holds that the ecological conditions that made possible the historical development of the former are disappearing quickly. Drawing on the work of William Ophuls, Dobson (2013) has wondered whether liberalism depends on abundance to create and maintain an open society:

«What happens if and when the conditions that made liberal thinking possible no longer obtain? Are democracy, freedom, individualism, the liberal rule of law and so on, in some sense dependent on conditions of abundance? If these conditions disappear, can these liberal aspirations/achievements survive?» (Dobson 2013: 246).

More recently, Dobson has explored this subject again, suggesting that perhaps «the regulative ideal of autonomous, reasoning, disembodied minds that underpinned late Holocene notions of emancipation cannot survive the transition to the Anthropocene» (Dobson 2022). This leaves open the question about the kind of political theory that is needed now that we are supposedly entering a new era of scarcity. Ophuls (1992) himself believes that a sustainable society — or a habitable planet, for that matter — cannot be achieved on the basis of the voluntary cooperation of the members of the human species at this point in history. Its opposite is a closed society in which liberal aspirations would be challenged and less regarded than survival, so that production as well as consumption (or travel) would be heavily restricted lest natural limits are surpassed. Dobson's hope is that cosmopolitan sentiments survive under conditions of ecological scarcity, but of course he is uncertain about this.

Yet other thinkers claim that a sustainable society for the Anthropocene does not have to be an authoritarian one — disposing of liberalism does not necessarily leave us in a vacuum. Both degrowth theory and green republicanism challenge liberalism and put forward a social model in which sustainability is achieved without resorting to the «green Leviathan» that Ophuls (see 1977)

always believed necessary for ecological scarcity to be tackled. Pluralism is restricted by means other than state coercion, or so it is claimed. I will devote the next section to see whether this argument can be sustained.

3. ADDRESSING PLURALISM IN THE ANTHROPOCENE (i): DEGROWTH AND GREEN REPUBLICANISM.

Degrowth and green republicanism are not exactly the same thing, but their family resemblance is inescapable: whereas the political aspect of degrowth theory draws on green republicanism, the socioeconomic scheme favored by green republicanism looks like the one fostered by degrowth theory itself. Moreover, the relation between pluralism and sustainability is approached by both of them in a similar vein. Hence it makes sense to discuss them together.

On the one hand, degrowth is a normative and empirical critique of economic growth that presents a blueprint for society that significantly departs from the current one the implementation of which requires the adoption of a new cultural mindset (see Demaria et al 2013, Kallis 2019). Green republicanism, on its part, results from the conjoining of civic republicanism and green politics: it advocates a strong sense of the common good, which is pursued through civic engagement and open participation in decentralized communities where ecological sustainability serves as a foundation of political stability (see Cannavò 2016, Barry 2021). Both emphasize human flourishing and take the end of economic growth as a necessary precondition for creating the kind of political and social organization in which such flourishing can happen.

Degrowth literally stands for a reduction of society's throughput, so that the materials and energy extracted, processed, transported, distributed, consumed and finally turned into waste by a society must be significantly reduced (Kallis 2011: 874). Doing so requires the downsizing of economies *and* societies, a project that cannot be accomplished without limiting production, trade, travelling, and consumption. Degrowth's ideal society recalls the blueprints for sustainability outlined by radical environmentalism throughout the 70s and 80s (see De Geus 1999). In them, life is to become more local and less mobile, as well as more equitable and sustainable, while supposedly remaining democratic (see Jackson 2009). Economic growth is thus subjected to strong criticism on two different grounds: it is untenable, because it does not care for natural limits, as well as undesirable, because it does not guarantee human flourishing nor the social cohesion of human communities (see Paulson, Kallis, D'Alisa & Demaria 2020). And yet the ideology of growth hides the reality of a flawed way of life that happens to be ecologically unsustainable. Hence Barry's conclusion that

«If a sustainable future in the Anthropocene requires us to move beyond carbon and beyond growth, a green republican politics and associated post-growth political economy has much to offer in enabling a just energy/climate transition but also a trajectory towards deeper democratization as an integral part of the structural transformation of the economy (Barry 2021: 739).

Yet how to achieve this? Degrowth thinkers and green republicans reformulate the old green argument that current hegemonic values prevents the cultural change that might facilitate the overcoming of liberal democracy. In short, community-oriented attitudes cannot emerge within a liberal framework that shapes unsustainable individual and social preferences (Eckersley 2004: 96). Conversely, searching for «sustainable modes of being» is a challenge to liberal-democratic ways of determining the collective good (Davidson 2000: 34). Degrowthers put their hopes in a cultural shift that makes people embrace a «voluntary simplicity» that translates into «simple lifestyles that are inwardly rich» (Milbrath 1993: 261). People would not have *more* but *better* (Heinberg 2019) and hence Barry's ingenious formula: «low-carbon, high quality of life» (Barry 2012: 11). There would be more spare time, more creative jobs, more fulfilling relationships (Princen 2005). Degrowth introduces itself as a re-imagination of what it means to live well within modern societies: «a social imaginary guiding new political thinking for the Anthropocene» (Reichel and Perey 2018: 246-247). On the face of it, this is a straightforward answer to Dobson's

interrogation about the political theory that ecological scarcity asks for. However, I will discuss degrowth as a preventive response against predicted scarcity, i.e., as a deliberate and voluntary strategy for achieving sustainability. It should be distinguished from a degrowth society that is the result of an ecological breakdown of society, namely a *de facto* situation that is dealt with according to the degrowth blueprint for an ideal society.

But what if the cultural shift that degrowthers and green republicans expect does not take place after all? Can degrowth happens in the absence of such momentous transformation? Is there perhaps room for a strong version of state perfectionism that brings degrowth about? And if degrowth does happen, how democratic and pluralistic would the resulting political community be?

These are intriguing questions for which neither degrowthers nor green republicans give a convincing answer. To begin with, it is unclear how a voluntary and significant reduction of material living standards can obtain democratic support. Degrowthers and green republicans can try to persuade others than their ideal society is the right one, either because it provides a more fulfilling existence or because it is the only way out of unsustainability. But they could fail to convince them — and there are no signs that the argument is currently working, despite the hope placed by Latour and Huber in a reinvigorated class struggle. This seems to open up two scenarios: authoritarian degrowth or ecological collapse. Of course, a further possibility is that liberal democracies manage to avert ecological collapse in their own terms. I will present this argument in the next section. For now, the question is how democratic and pluralistic would be the political community envisioned by green republicans and degrowthers.

Now, it has been suggested that a post-growth social order would accommodate a greater variety of views of the good life (Barry 2012: 10). Yet it is hard to see why or how. Insofar as *sufficiency* is presented as the precondition for a higher quality of life for all members of society, this entails not so much a demand for justice as a *perfectionist* view of the good life (Kanschik 2016). State neutrality would be breached — or rejected in principle — on account of the superiority of a frugal existence within small communities where the number of permissible behaviors would be severely curtailed in practice. If ecological sustainability *and* the spiritual fulfillment that is associated to austere ways of life become the cornerstone of political order, pluralism is to take a severe blow. And obviously so: a downsized society in which travelling, consuming, or trading is severely restricted does not leave much room for personal projects or alternative lifestyles. Even if there is no such thing as a legal regulation against particular lifestyles or behaviors, living in a small community whose material output is kept at a minimum already make for an implicit form of paternalism: citizens might not be *told* how to live, but they would find themselves *forced* to live in particular ways. In other words, the conditions for exercising personal autonomy would be absent. And again: it is one thing to claim — *à la* Ophuls— that ecological scarcity *demands* this kind of society and quite another to argue that this is the most *desirable* model of society irrespective of whether it is the *only* way to avoid a bad Anthropocene.

I said above that green republicans and degrowthers do not have a convincing answer for the claim that theirs would be a non-pluralistic society in which the state — or the lesser political authority in charge — adopts a strongly paternalistic attitude involving political perfectionism. Pinto (2021) admits that ecological limits will imply the significant reduction of individual options, but such «interferences» would not represent in his view «domination by default» provided that the government issuing laws or policies is suitably controlled. The circularity of the argument is obvious: those who control the government would agree with a strong reduction of available options, since otherwise those reductions would have never been established in the first placed. Drawing on Castoriadis' view of democracy, Asara et al. (2013) give a similar answer when faced with the conflict between democratic self-determination and the frugal quality of degrowth. Even though a Castoriadian democracy «cannot have whatever content» as it is committed to degrowth, there would be no tension whatsoever with democracy or autonomy *because* an autonomous society implies «another culture in the most profound sense of this term». To put it differently:

there would be no need for state paternalism in a society that has already been fully transformed. But how can this transformation take place in the absence of strong perfectionist — or outright authoritarian — measures to begin with?

The tension between an ecologically constrained community and the contested politics advocated by green republicans is however acknowledged by Cannavò (2016, 2021), a green republican theorist himself. Such problem is already apparent in republicanism proper, in which an overriding collective good *constrains* political deliberation despite the parallel commitment to open-ended participation and deliberation. In the case of green republicanism, the overriding good is ecological sustainability — what constrains politics is the decision to pursue it through degrowth policies. Thus, Cannavò's contention that «the climate crisis would seem to demand that scientific conceptions of nature provide a thick set of a priori, substantive constraints and ends for politics, even a coercive green communitarianism and an overriding conception of the common good» (Cannavò 2016: 83). What is to be decided upon in the ensuing democratic process then? What room is there for pluralism and people's autonomy? If the climate crisis dictates an ecological agenda to politics, the conclusion seems inescapable: «In the face of this crisis, politics can only be open-ended to a certain degree» (Cannavò 2016: 83). And while Cannavò warns that local democratic empowerment does not necessarily yield green communal values, he resorts to the same kind of circular argument presented above: the tension between communitarism and contestation would go away if the right kind of citizen and political culture were already in place (Cannavò 2016). There would be no such tension if everybody agreed upon the «right» set of values and goals — those of green republicanism itself.

The open-ended quality of democratic politics is thus implicitly suppressed, despite the repeated claim that in a degrowth or post-growth society there would exist a vibrant political life. For Cannavò (2021), the latter would deal with the actual specification of limits and vulnerabilities since the latter are not purely scientific but are amenable to democratic deliberation. Are they? In a downsized society that does not wish to grow and favours a communal life in which flourishing derives from the enjoyment of collective values, such deliberation could only refer to the minor details of such specification. That is why Barry's (2021) republican vindication of democracy as «nonviolent disagreement and contestation» rings hollow — contestation of what? It is as though green republicans want to contest the current social order and hence defend the right to oppose liberal values, but at the same time see no need to allow for real disagreement and contestation within a post-growth social order in which the common good as defined by them would be happily endorsed by all.

Ultimately, you cannot have your cake and eat it: either a post-growth order translates into a tight political community in which pluralism is severely reduced on account of ecological or you do *not* get a post-growth order. If liberal values depend on permanent material and economic expansion, then so be it — such values would survive if scarcity became the new normal. As Quilley (2013) has argued, however, degrowth literature — and this applies to green republicanism as well — does not recognize the trade-offs involved in the move to smaller-scale societies. Yet the latter would be «politically and socially regressive», even though it is hard to know in advance which kind of behaviors would emerge in such radically new context. But the moral homogeneity espoused by degrowthers and green republicans would be hard to attain *without* some degree of coercion. Only a strong paternalistic state could reduce social diversity to the extent that is required by those who see a downsized human society as the only escape from global uninhabitability. But what if they are wrong?

4. ADDRESSING PLURALISM IN THE ANTHROPOCENE (ii): THE LIBERAL-DEMOCRATIC ALTERNATIVE.

The degrowth agenda can be criticized on several grounds, if only because it looks like a leap into the void. Regardless of the attraction that this utopian imaginary may possess for some theorists, it should be regarded as a set of normative claims (Weiss and Cattaneo 2017) that are often made

«in self-referential isolation» from the real world in which degrowth should take place (Beeson 2019: 32). Hence its lack of political realism: apart from overlooking the possibility that the scarcity produced by economic contraction might lead to more autocratic forms of governance (Crownshaw et al. 2018: 129), degrowthers seem to expect that those living in rich societies will peacefully make the journey to the welfare standards of Sierra Leone while those who belong to the Global South would give up any hope of reaching the level of welfare and dignity enjoyed by the rest of the world (Wissenburg 2021).

Still, degrowth supporters claim that reducing the size of current societies is the *only* path towards global sustainability. But there is just too much uncertainty about the future scenarios of the climate system and the causal factors at play — a radical transformation of human societies along the lines suggested by degrowthers is just not warranted, even less in the absence of popular support for it. Wissenburg (2021) has denounced the «epistocratic blindness» incurred by those who advocate a technocratic *or* radical response to the Anthropocene, even calling into question that attaining ecological harmony or sacrificing ourselves for the sake of future generations is self-evidently preferable to protecting individual liberty or pursuing a greater equality among members of humanity.

It should be noted that the ecomodernist response to climate change and the Anthropocene shows that there are paths to sustainability other than degrowth. Although it is routinely derided by environmentalists as a form of green-washing, ecomodernists claim that a flourishing humanity can thrive on Earth without generating vast inequalities between societies and within them, if only technological innovation and institutional design are steered in the right direction (see Asafu-Adjaye et al. 2015; Symons 2019). An ecomodernist perspective on the Anthropocene thus rejects the argument that degrowth is the only effective answer to global warming and other planetary challenges (see Karlsson 2013). They might be wrong, of course — but then again, they may be right. The question is whether political liberalism and liberal democracies can deliver the goods of sustainability and how is this supposed to impinge on pluralism as an ideal and as a practice.

On the other hand, as Freeden (2013: 272) has argued, failure is inherent to the political sphere and liberal political theory is better equipped to deal with it: skeptical about ultimate truths and thus persuaded of the value of pluralism, political liberalism is more tolerant to failure because it sees any success as a modest and ambiguous achievement in the direction of the gradual civilization of human societies. Failure must be understood literally, as the likelihood that both grand schemes and minor interventions on the part of the state end up producing unintended consequences — the greater a plan is, of course, the most harmful its failure can be. This is also a reason why Wall (2013) is wary of so-called «moral environmentalism», i.e., measures that are designed to discourage people from taking up bad options as defined by a paternalistic state: state officials may not be competent enough, there may be lasting unintended consequences, and there might be resistance on the part of citizens. Reasons of prudence thus recommend not resorting to moral environmentalism. Note that these arguments speak against social change that is not only radical and irreversible, but which also lacks the massive political consensus that would make it acceptable from a democratic viewpoint — although even in this case one can imagine a number of social transformations that remain unadvisable, given that a catastrophic failure that has been consented in advance is no much better than a catastrophic failure nobody asked for.

From a liberal standpoint, though, the question of pluralism remains to be answered. And while there are good reasons for protecting it, at the same time it is hard to deny that ecological sustainability cannot be considered just another social good among many. If human societies cease to be sustainable or the planet becomes less hospitable or downright uninhabitable, then no social good whatsoever could be enjoyed any longer. How is this dilemma to be dealt with?

On the one hand, neither political liberalism nor the constitutional design of existing liberal democracies prevent a *limited* restriction of pluralism in order to promote a greater social good. That the restriction must be limited obeys to the liberal preference for an individualistic account of

what makes for a conception of the good life, which is far from arbitrary: the liberal believes that it is good that individuals shape the lives they live and fears that such process may be distorted by external coercion (Waldron 2018: 80). As Jones (2018) cautions, a commitment to state neutrality means that all conceptions of the good must be treated with respect — both those forms of life that are the result of careful reflection *and* those which are not. In short, liberals have good reasons for opposing the interference of the state and the pressure of the community. But this is not tantamount to collective paralysis in the face of social problems. A number of theoretical solutions have been offered to justify state action whenever it is deemed necessary, even if that means a restriction to social pluralism.

While Raz's (1986) argument that a certain degree of state paternalism is granted when a self-inflicted harm is to be avoided retains a moralistic undertone, Dworkin (1978) sounds more convincing when saying that state interference is justified only to promote greater autonomy. As Hurka (1993) puts it, sometimes restricting a person's autonomy gives her more options in the future or increases her capacity to choose autonomously among the available alternatives. Perfectionism is not associated in this case to a particular conception of the good, but to the belief that being able to choose autonomously is a higher value — the realization of which merits a certain degree of state paternalism. Being neutral regarding conceptions of the good does not involve a state that is indifferent to principles of justice (see Rawls 1993). In this regard, Chan (2000) argues that a moderate *political* perfectionism does not necessarily lead to an oppressive use of state power that involves *philosophical* perfectionism. But there is the risk, as Kymlicka (1989) points out, that state perfectionism distorts the free evaluation of ways of life and excludes the aspirations of disadvantaged groups within a given community. Hence the superiority of Nagel's (1991) view that state perfectionism is to be opposed *unless* a principle of high-order unanimity can be applied, i.e., situations in which reasonable people *disagree* on how a problem should be resolved but nonetheless *agree* that the state should try to solve that problem. Nagel is referring to practical necessities, such as the national defense, warning that the resulting policies should not affect other basic decisions such as those regarding the meaning of life or how to lead it.

Sustainability is, quite obviously, one of the necessities Nagel is referring to. Both the unsustainability of socionatural relations and the potential uninhabitability of the planet in the long run *are* public concerns that reasonable people would like to see dealt with effectively. And yet there is a reasonable disagreement as to *how* should they be approached. Thus, state interference is warranted, but such interference cannot lead to the suppression of reasonable disagreement nor to an unduly restriction of social pluralism. From a liberal viewpoint, then, environmental policies can be justified on two different but interrelated grounds: the preservation of the ecological conditions required for exercising personal autonomy in the first place and the protection of the natural world for the sake of those whose conception of the good involves the enjoyment of it. This explains why Dobson (2003) came to the belief that liberal state neutrality *favors* environmental sustainability rather than the opposite. Being serious about neutrality demands an active role on the part of the state — liberal freedoms must be protected and environmentalism as a conception of the good life cannot be deprived of its object. More recently, Clark (2021) has applied this argument to future generations, suggesting that we have the moral duty to make sure that future people can participate in human pursuits involving the natural world.

However, protecting the chance of environmentalists to realize their conception of the good life does not mean — cannot mean — turning the liberal society into the kind of society that most environmentalists strive for. This is the heart of the matter. A post-growth society, as privileged by degrowthers and green republicans alike, means the end for the liberal society. Yet environmentalists can exert social criticism within liberal society and ask for the implementation of all kinds of environmental policies. If the goal is to advance towards the sustainability of the liberal society, then Meyer (2011) is wrong when saying that the question is whether or not the liberal state must remain neutral between competing conceptions of the good. In fact, existing liberal societies are now significantly more committed to sustainability than in the past. But if the

goal is to leave liberal society behind and advance towards a post-growth order according to the green republican blueprint, that is a different matter.

Let us take Hannis (2005) view that the kind of interventionist environmental policy that is required to achieve sustainability *must* be based on «meaningful normative principles» that take the ecological embeddedness of human beings into account. From the perspective of liberal neutrality, he goes on, it would be unjust to privilege the green conception of the good because such normative principles rest on a specific conception of human flourishing. But there is an alternative way to approach this subject, namely one that renders the search for sustainability as a legitimate task of the liberal state without having to resort to *those* meaningful normative principles. Liberalism has principles of its own and, as we have seen, sustainability can be incorporated into the principles of justice around which a well-ordered society is organized — just by invoking the preconditions of personal autonomy and the respect for those whose conception of the good cannot be realized in the absence of a significant amount of nonhuman world. What do environmentalists ask for? As Kymlicka (1989) puts it:

«every way of life would do better in a society designed to ensure that no one had conflicting preferences. That does not establish a legitimate grievance, since no one has the right that other people be socialized so as to best fit one's own way of life (other people are not resources to be distributed or molded so as to promote one's ends)» [Kymlicka 1989: 891].

That is also why Brinn (2022) strikes the wrong chord when he emphasizes how the liberal commitment to neutrality depends on the level of threat it perceives — so that socialist, anarchist, or even fascist political views are tolerated as long as they are not serious threats to the integrity of the liberal society. But how could it be otherwise? His counterexample, that of the use of propaganda and public policy to promote the survival of the liberal society during the second world war, shows how a liberal state must sometimes be interventionist in order to guarantee that a liberal society in which the state is neutral regarding conceptions of the good can survive in the long run. And the same goes for sustainability, which also counts as a potentially existential threat to liberal societies.

4. SUSTAINABILITY, PLURALISM, AND POLITICAL UNITY.

The neutrality principle is based on the premise that there is no such thing as a «true» conception of the good — the democratic society must be designed in a way that maximize the chances of its members to live according to their own life plan. Likewise, sustainability must be pursued *if possible* in a manner that is compatible with liberal democracy itself. Strong versions of sustainability, such as the ones advocated by degrowthers and green republicans, could only be implemented *if* most citizens come to endorse it — but then again it should not be implemented in a way that prevents further political debate about the future shape of society. While the liberal state has a duty to pursue sustainability right now, environmentalists do not have an exclusive right to define what a sustainable society is.

Yet none of this means that the liberal state is completely neutral — it is not. The fact is that liberal democracies gradually *incorporate* the outcome of socio-political debates on the good life and the good society. The principles of justice that govern liberal societies have thus changed with time: there is a safety net for the unemployed and the poor, minorities enjoy rights that protect them, domestic animals cannot be abused, industrial pollution is prohibited, and so forth. We can discuss whether this is enough, being careful not to forget that not all liberal democracies are the same — some work better than others. Admittedly, it can be argued that *liberals* have not been the ones fighting for these changes. That is surely unfair. Be it as it may, such changes have occurred *within* liberal democracies *because* liberal democracies are organized in a way that facilitate them.

Political liberalism does not only provide democracies with an institutional system grounded on the rule of law, the separation of powers, a representative government, and a civil service. It also creates the framework in which different moral and political doctrines debate about what is to be done

regarding particular problems. Hence Rawls' (1993) distinction between *political* liberalism and *comprehensive* liberalism: the former provides the framework and the latter is just another voice in the public debate — and in electoral competition. Those who endorse liberal democracy as a set of principles and institutions are liberals in the first sense, but not all of them are liberals in the second sense. And irrespective of whether environmentalists endorse political liberalism or not, they have been able to influence the course of public policies in Western democracies because the latter are normatively committed to ideological pluralism and are institutionally arranged so that new ideas or goals can be assimilated by the state in the form of new laws or administrative bodies. Liberal political institutions, in sum, are not impassive in the face of social change and the (relative) success of environmentalism attests to it.

However, the liberal commitment to pluralism, as well its rejection of epistemological utopias and of closed models of society, prevent liberal democracies from embracing strong conceptions of sustainability. Theirs is a normatively conceived principle of sustainability, namely, a sustainability understood as an open principle towards which society is oriented without its particular content being determined in advance. Climate change and the Anthropocene are to be seriously addressed, but nobody has a monopoly on establishing how, at which pace, or through which means. The particulars of sustainability must be collectively debated, negotiated, and decided upon. Moreover, the state is not the only relevant actor in this process — there is also civil society, firms, individuals. Absent a massive popular support for a radically different society, such as a post-growth one, sustainability should be pursued in a way that does not threaten the integrity of liberal democracy itself.

Still, the question of pluralism remains to be addressed. Are all individual behaviours equally permissible in a warming planet? The liberal position is *prima facie* against state interference: «People's needs — for company, children, food, technology, travel and trinkets — are private affairs; control, if possible at all, is impermissible» (Wissenburg 1998: 67). Yet the point is not the moral duty to respect other people's life-plans even if we fail to comprehend the value of, say, conspicuous consumption (Humphrey 2002: 59), but whether some behaviours or lifestyles are detrimental to sustainability. The latter is, after all, a precondition for pursuing *any* life-plan.

That said, it is unclear whether banning the consumption of particular goods in liberal democracies is the best solution at hand. Some believe it is: Menzel and Green (2013) claim that the concept of consumer sovereignty is incompatible with sustainability and suggest instead that certain goods must be made unavailable. In their view,

«non-market institutions and decision-systems need to be fostered that make it less likely that human activity alters the earth's systems in a way that jeopardizes its capacity to support wellbeing. (...) deliberation-based bodies should advise existing executive and legislative institutions in taking goods off the market» (Menzel and Green 2013: 68).

Those goods and services whose production or enjoyment requires greater emissions of CO2 will presumably be on that list, unless the criteria followed to ban them is a moral one — i.e., everything that can be considered a «luxury» should be forbidden. The difficulty is apparent: a weekend at the seashore, a new automobile, even an expensive jacket could be judged as *luxuries*. Who is to decide and according to which criteria? Following Schramme (2011), to challenge private choices means criticising them on normative grounds before they are sanctioned. And therein lies the problem, even if the Millian «harm principle» is invoked to justify state interference. On the one hand, it is impossible to pin down the impact of individual consumption — we might have to resort to cumulative effects. On the other, targeting overconsumption is problematic because almost all people overconsume in some way or another and thus to single out acts of consumption seems arbitrary. Schramme wonders how we can justify an idea of the good without relying on subjective preferences, concluding that «we simply do not seem to have an objective standard for deciding which consumer choices are preferable» (Schramme 2011: 347). In the absence of an objective

standard of overconsumption, then, setting a threshold would be both morally arbitrary and socially unfair.

Social unfairness should not be politically underestimated, as the French revolt of the so-called «yellow vests» back in 2018 come to show. Is it fair to raise the price of fuel or private automobiles in the transition to a decarbonized society in a way that makes it almost impossible for common people to buy them, even if they do not have an alternative to it for going to work or organize their everyday life? A collective move towards the electric car cannot be hurried without privileging those citizens who can afford both the automobile and the private parking space where a charger can be installed. Interestingly, the much-maligned «global elite» (see Pogge 2002: 23) perform a key role in the development of emerging technologies for domestic consumption when they act as their early adopters. Punishing them on account of their contribution to climate change — as Cripps (2011) suggests invoking a «collective harm principle» — might be detrimental to the task of turning a high-emission global society into a low-emission society. Crucially, this does not only apply to liberal societies themselves: insofar as China and the rest of the emerging economies will continue to grow, since they are not expected to stop their development on account of global warming unless the latter becomes *truly* catastrophic and defies adaptation efforts, searching for new green technologies in fields as massive as transportation or construction will be essential for achieving global sustainability.

Fortunately, prohibiting acts of private consumption is not the only available option. Schramme (2011) mentions the «green nudges» proposed by Thaler and Sunstein (2009), as well as the possibility of raising taxes to individuals who consume luxury goods. Moreover, it is not true that liberal societies do not possess the kind of «non-market institutions and decision-systems» demanded by Menzel and Green (2013). Governments and parliaments, together with state agencies and administrative bodies, do restrain the kind of consumer goods that can be produced and set up conditions — regarding their safety and environmental impact — for them. Additionally, strategic sectors are subject to public supervision and intervention. The pressure exerted on the automobile industry by the European Union is a good example of how public power can push an entire economic sector ahead. The same goes for energy provision: massive public funds are being employed in the EU to make firms and citizens greener despite the disruption caused by the Ukraine war. Some contradictions are apparent: political concerns about depopulation of rural areas seem to overlook the fact that concentrating people in cities is environmentally sound, while environmentalism's rejection of nuclear energy is not consistent with the claim that ecological collapse is about to happen — nor with the fact that filling seas and fields with windmills is harmful for the fauna and the landscape alike. Finally, regulatory powers can do more to push firms towards innovation, forcing them to find creative ways to become more sustainable and efficient. As for the counterargument that neither the liberal state nor private actors are up to the task, it can be retorted that transitioning to a peaceful, democratic, and harmonious post-growth society would be much more difficult.

What about pluralism? State interference is legitimate as long as it serves to make sure that socionatural relations are sustainable and the planet does not become uninhabitable. However, such interference must be kept at a minimum since it is unclear which behaviors or lifestyles should be banned or restricted. That said, particular goods and services can be banned when an evaluation of their contribution to the Anthropocene suggests so. Let us recall that the Montreal Protocol successfully regulated ozone depleting substance and places such as Venice and the Galapagos have restricted the number of tourists that they receive per year. It thus seems more reasonable to make a case-by-case evaluation, encouraging people to behave responsibly in the face of climate change and using indirect means for influencing individual and collective actors — the state included — such as regulating production, subsidizing innovation, and nudging citizens towards the most benign environmental options. Instead of targeting personal behavior in a moralistic manner, thus fostering the polarization of the public, both political actors and the media should emphasize that current societies face a problem that can only be solved by acting together in different ways

according to the diverging worldviews of each social group and ideological family. This is currently happening, albeit perhaps too slowly — we keep being distracted.

Political unity lies in the acceptance of a shared goal, not in forcing people to agree about how to pursue it. On the contrary, the more it is claimed that such goal — sustainability and the stabilization of the Earth system — can only be achieved by following one single path — like degrowth — the more polarized and hence ineffectual the body politic will be. Only an open conception of sustainability, in which pluralism is protected as much as possible, can do this. As William Connolly (2005: 41) points out, the pluralist is not a relativist since she claims that liberal-democratic values make pluralism possible and hence the latter must be protected against unitarian positions that wish to eliminate rival worldviews. The ideal pluralist is that who *might* colonize the public sphere but *would* refuse to do so even if such opportunity existed. Again, that is the reason why the closed conception of society espoused by green republicans could never be fully realized without damaging the conditions for pluralism — despite their claims to the contrary. Still, green republicans and degrowthers have the chance to defend their views within liberal democracy, fostering the social adoption of their values. Given their nature, they have so far been mostly implemented at the local level within small communities (see Arias-Maldonado 2022). But they present an alternative social imaginary and thus influence — how much is hard to quantify — the way some people see the world and inhabit it.

6. CONCLUSION.

In this paper, I have dealt with the question of pluralism in the face of climate change and the Anthropocene. To what extent can or should it be curtailed on account of the need to advance towards environmental sustainability and planetary habitability? Although the latter depends also — or mostly — on the environmental performance of emerging countries, the paper is about pluralism within liberal democracies, because it is only in liberal democracies that social diversity is considered a positive value and individual liberties are both recognized and protected. Individual behaviors can have a lasting environmental impact when they are collectively aggregated, and this raises the question as to whether state interference with personal liberty is legitimate.

I have outlined the position adopted by degrowthers and green republicans, for whom the problem lies in the very liberal framework in which such behaviors occur. They would like to achieve sustainability without liberalism — they claim that liberalism cannot deliver sustainability *and* they would rather live in a post-growth society for normative reasons of their own. In a post-growth society, social diversity would be severely curtailed, although green republicans either believe it will not be the case or argue that this would be a happy scenario insofar as everybody would embrace austerity in the name of the common good. However, there are reasons to believe that a post-growth society would be not only illiberal but also undemocratic. Tellingly, some environmentalists believe that liberalism can only lead to sustainability if it becomes not *more* but *less* liberal, namely, an «authoritarian liberalism» that resort to exception in the face of an emergency (Brinn 2022). This betrays the conviction that sustainability can only be reached by non-democratic means.

An alternative lies in the liberal path towards sustainability, which does not automatically sacrifice social pluralism to implement environmental policies. On the contrary, as the ecomodernist view comes to show, sustainability can be pursued without giving up the liberal state, personal freedoms, and democratic self-rule. Only an open conception of sustainability, in which the latter is not simply identified with the downsizing of current societies and the severe restriction of trade and mobility, makes environmental sustainability and political liberalism compatible. The normative foundation of such association is uncomplicated: the liberal principle of state neutrality requires that the conditions for exerting personal autonomy are kept, while the respect for different conceptions of the good — the environmentalist´s included — demands that the nonhuman world is sufficiently preserved.

In a liberal society that pursues sustainability in this way, pluralism is preserved. When particular behaviours are deemed too harmful, though, state interference is permissible. Otherwise, means other than prohibition is preferred: regulating production, setting higher taxes for harmful goods and services, financing research, nudging citizens towards ecologically benign behaviours, steering companies towards greater technological innovation. The latter is especially important, since emerging countries are not expected to give up economic growth and it would be hugely beneficial for securing habitability that they have access to new technologies that diminish the environmental impact of their socioeconomic development. Arguably, there is no guarantee that this path towards sustainability will be successful. However, it is more realistic and cautious than betting on the total transformation of human societies advocated by green republicans and degrowthers — as well as more respectful of personal autonomy and the social pluralism that derives from it.

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