

Rethinking Democratic Pluralism for a Warming Planet

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Abstract: The question of social and political pluralism takes on a new dimension in a planet that is increasingly affected by climate change. If an ecological transition towards a decarbonized society must be achieved, then there is reason to ask whether private choices that — once aggregated at a collective level — have public consequences can or should be curtailed. If climate change is to be mitigated, then, the political question of social pluralism comes to the fore. What behaviors and forms of life are permissible in a warming planet? Must pluralism be sacrificed or at least severely restricted in the name of survival? Or perhaps pluralism may be expected to flourish in post-growth societies that restrict their material output to achieve sustainability? In this paper, I argue that pluralism is an asset rather than a burden for governing democratic societies in the age of global warming. But pluralism will hardly be preserved in the kind of small communities advocated by degrowth theorists. On the contrary, a liberal-democratic approach to global sustainability is a better option for balancing individual autonomy and collective survival. Principles such as neutrality and autonomy are not to be abandoned, but rather refined in the face of climate change.

1. INTRODUCTION.

The anthropogenic disruption of the Earth system, which is often said to have ushered the Anthropocene or «human epoch», is one of the defining challenges of this century. Climate change, loss of biodiversity, ocean acidification, waste production, growing urbanization, and species relocation are arguably its main drivers (see Lewis and Maslin 2018, Zalasiewicz et al. 2021). The stakes are high: human beings must make sure that the Earth remains hospitable to them, as well as to the nonhuman world. And while it is a complex issue that can be approached in many ways, I will focus here on the relation between the urgent need to achieve global sustainability and the social pluralism that is typical of liberal democracies. My aim is to reflect upon the normative implications that derive from the claim that lifestyle pluralism — which derives from, but is not necessarily brought about by, value pluralism— plays a significant role in the disruption of the global environment.

How much pluralism can be preserved if it is agreed upon that climate change and other planetary disruptions in natural systems are to be tackled? 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? But also, conversely: can pluralism be preserved if material output is severely diminished in the name of sustainability? Moreover, does pluralism makes it more difficult for people to rally behind a single project of social change? My focus will be on liberal societies, because only they engage in a public conversation about what is best to do for securing the stability of Earth system. Yet it should be emphasized that what liberal democracies achieve might not matter much if developing countries, which are often autocracies, do not make enough.

The paper is organized as follows. The first section lays out the problem, exploring the potentially fraught relation between pluralism and sustainability, and sets 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 conflicting values and shows that a post-growth society curtails pluralism and empties out democracy itself. An alternative way of addressing the role and reach of pluralism in the Anthropocene is presented in the fourth section, which makes the case for an ecomodernist strategy for sustainability. Finally, the fifth section wraps up the argument and

ponders on whether the search for sustainability might provide liberal democracies with a common goal that creates greater political unity instead of contributing to the further polarization and division of the body politic.

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

Democratic pluralism can be seen as a particular interpretation of social diversity, one that sees the latter both as a *fact* to be faced and 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 wish 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. Conversely, pluralism is 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 — like the one spoused by radical environmentalism.

Pluralism is not tantamount to relativism (see Yumatle 2015). The pluralist does not claim that different values are *incomparable* just because they are *incommensurable*. On the contrary, they can be rationally justified and hierarchically ordered, even though any such attempt will always be tentative and provisional. The problem arises whenever 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 a democratic society rests upon the belief that ethical openness is both *inescapable* and *involuntary*. On top of that, 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 willingness to accept conflict and uncertainty. To be sure, it is a demanding ideal.

At the same time, though, diversity cannot be indefinitely expanded. Pluralism 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. Besides, 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. 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.

Arguably, a distinction can be made between *moral* pluralism and *lifestyle* pluralism. Moral pluralism refers to the variety of moral beliefs or worldviews held by different people; lifestyle pluralism describes the variety of lifestyles that can be found in each society as expressed in how people lead their lives. Moral pluralism is not necessarily translated into social practices (one can find abortion either permissible or objectionable without *doing* anything about it), but a lifestyle will often be the result of holding certain values or beliefs. On its part, a lifestyle is always a set of behaviors and habits, and it will leave a material trace behind it. But while it can be the outcome of moral reflection, people can adopt a lifestyle without reflecting upon it. That said, lifestyles can be frugal — they are not necessarily pervaded by materialistic values.

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 make 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 unreflective choices. 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.

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. Besides, there are different *degrees* of paternalism — depending on the 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). 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 vice versa.

The disruption of planetary systems caused by human action indicates 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, but the latter takes place when his actions are aggregated to those of other individuals.

An alternative possibility lies in singling out behaviors or actions whose accumulation over time produce a significant contribution to planetary change irrespective of the agent's *intention*. 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 be told what is permissible and what is not: in the name of a greater good, social pluralism would be curtailed. Wall (1998) argues that this can be done without using paternalistic measures, that is, 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 sustainability just a perfectionist goal? Does liberalism, committed as it is to state neutrality and the protection of pluralism, prevent us from steering the Earth system 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, environmentalists believe, liberalism would be 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, 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. More on this later.

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 wonders if cosmopolitan sentiments would survive under conditions of ecological scarcity — he is not certain.

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) believed necessary for ecological scarcity to be tackled. In a post-growth society, pluralism would be restricted by means other than state coercion — or so it is claimed.

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

Although degrowth and green republicanism are not the same thing, 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, both approach the relation between pluralism and sustainability in a similar vein, so that it makes sense to discuss them together. The reason why I focus on degrowth is that it represents the main alternative to liberal-democratic capitalism as a way to organize human society. It is presented 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). Of course, there are proposals to the effect that liberal capitalism must be made sustainable and less unequal — the New Green Deal is perhaps the most conspicuous. But they do not provide a radical departure from the existing order. Degrowth offers such an alternative, which helps to explain its popularity among environmental political theorists and activists, as well as its association to revamped versions of communism (see Saito 2022) or socialism (see Fernandes and Kallis 2022). The tension between making the Anthropocene sustainable and preserving a democratic and pluralistic society becomes apparent whenever these models for social organization are presented as the path to follow. Let us see why.

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. Growth is rejected on two grounds: it is *untenable*, because it does not care for natural limits, and it is *undesirable*, because it does not guarantee neither human flourishing nor the social cohesion of human communities (see Paulson, Kallis, D'Alisa & Demaria 2020).

In fact, degrowth literally stands for a reduction of society's throughput — 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. Life is to become more local and less mobile, as well as more equitable and sustainable, while supposedly remaining democratic (see Jackson 2009). There would be more spare time, more creative jobs, more fulfilling relationships (Princen 2005). Hence Barry's ingenious formula: «low-carbon, high quality of life» (Barry 2012: 11). On the face of it, this is a straightforward answer to Dobson's interrogation about the political theory that ecological scarcity asks for. Yet how is this to be achieved?

Both degrowth thinkers and green republicans reformulate an old argument: current hegemonic values prevent the kind of 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). 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). 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 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 about the desirability of degrowth — arguing that it provides a more fulfilling existence or that 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 gaining ground. For the sake of the argument, however, let us assume that degrowth is massively embraced. How democratic and pluralistic would the ensuing political community be?

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 a degrowth 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 inside which the number of permissible behaviors would be severely restricted. It follows that if ecological sustainability *and* spiritual fulfillment — the one associated to austere ways of life — become the cornerstone of political order, pluralism is to take a severe blow. Or, at least, lifestyle pluralism. Even if a degrowth society may accommodate a variety of moral or religious views, it will do so only on condition that those who

hold such values do lead a frugal existence. Albeit potentially compatible with a restricted version of moral pluralism, degrowth seems incompatible with lifestyle pluralism.

The reason is apparent: 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 most importantly: it is one thing to claim — *à la* Ophuls— that ecological scarcity *demand*s this kind of society, 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 argued earlier that green republicans and degrowthers do not have a convincing answer for the objection that theirs would be a non-pluralistic society in which the state — or the lesser political authority in charge — would adopt a strongly paternalistic attitude involving political perfectionism. Pinto (2021) admits that ecological limits will imply the significant reduction of individual options but adds that such «interferences» would not represent «domination by default» provided that the government issuing laws or policies is suitably controlled. The argument is tautological: those in power would agree with a strong reduction of available options, since otherwise those reductions would have never been established in the first place. 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 Castoridian 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 to begin with in the absence of strong perfectionist — or outright authoritarian — measures?

The tension between an ecologically constrained community and the contested politics advocated by green republicans is 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).

If that is the case, what is to be decided upon in the ensuing democratic process? 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; my emphasis). 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 communitarianism and contestation would go away if the right kind of citizen and political culture were in place (Cannavò 2016). To put it bluntly, there would be no such tension if everybody agreed upon the «right» set of values and goals — namely those of green republicanism itself.

The open-ended quality of democratic politics is thus implicitly suppressed, despite the repeated claim that a degrowth society would enjoy a vibrant political life. For Cannavò (2021), politics would deal with the actual specification of limits and vulnerabilities, since the latter are not purely

scientific but are amenable to democratic deliberation. But 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 frugal 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 themselves 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 lifestyle pluralism is severely reduced on behalf of ecological necessities 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 does not recognize the trade-offs involved in the move to smaller-scale societies. 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 context. However, 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 unsustainability. But what if they are wrong?

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

Degrowth's agenda can be criticized on several grounds. Regardless of the attraction that this utopian imaginary may possess, it should be regarded as a set of normative claims that are often made «in self-referential isolation» from the real world in which degrowth should take place (Weiss and Cattaneo 2017, Beeson 2019: 32). Hence the 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. It might turn out to be true. However, 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 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.

From a liberal standpoint, though, the question of pluralism remains to be answered. And while there are good normative reasons for protecting it, it is hard to deny that ecological sustainability

is not just another social good among many. If human societies ceased to be sustainable or the planet becomes less hospitable or downright uninhabitable, no social good could be enjoyed any longer. For liberalism, the conundrum seems 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). 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. The premise that such restriction should be limited derives from liberalism's commitment to the principle that it is up to the individual to decide what is a good life. In fact, liberals believe that it is good that individuals shape the lives they live, fearing that such process may be distorted by external coercion (Waldron 2018: 80). A commitment to state neutrality thus means that all conceptions of the good must be treated with respect — both those that are the result of careful reflection *and* those which are not (Jones 2018). 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. Several theoretical solutions have been offered to justify state action whenever it is deemed necessary, even if that means a partial 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. From this viewpoint, perfectionism is not associated 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, for instance, 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 involving *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, namely those regarding the meaning of life or how to lead it.

Sustainability should be considered one of the necessities Nagel is referring to. Both the unsustainability of socio-natural 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 should not lead to the suppression of reasonable disagreement nor to an undue restriction of social pluralism. From a liberal standpoint, then, environmental policies can be justified on two different but interrelated grounds: preserving the ecological conditions required for exercising personal autonomy *and* protecting 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. If the goal is to achieve a sustainable liberal society, Meyer (2011) would be wrong in saying that the key question is whether the liberal state must remain neutral between competing conceptions of the good. As a matter of fact, existing liberal societies are more committed to sustainability than ever. But if the goal is to leave liberal society behind and advance towards a post-growth society, that is an altogether different proposition.

Let us take Hannis' (2005) view that the kind of interventionist environmental policy 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 very specific conception of human flourishing. Yet 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. After all, liberalism has principles of its own. 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 requires the preservation of a significant amount of nonhuman world. But the state cannot, should not, go further. As Kymlicka (1989) cautions:

«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 that it perceives — so that socialist, anarchist, or even fascist political views are tolerated if they are not serious threats to the integrity of the liberal society. 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 — so that a liberal society in which the state is neutral regarding conceptions of the good can survive in the long run. But is unsustainability an existential threat to liberal society as well? If so, what does it involve? What is legitimate for the state to do in order to achieve sustainability in the face of climate change and other planetary risks?

5. SUSTAINABILITY, PLURALISM, AND POLITICAL UNITY.

The neutrality principle lies 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. It follows that 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 them — and yet sustainability 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, environmentalists do not have a 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 them have 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, and it certainly 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 their occurrence. Apart from being committed to ideological pluralism, liberal democracies are institutionally arranged so that new ideas and goals can be assimilated by the state. Liberal political institutions, in sum, are not impassive in the face of social change and the relative success of environmentalism attests to it. Hence Rawls' (1993) distinction between *political* liberalism and *comprehensive* liberalism: the former provides the framework for debating public issues and deciding upon them, while the latter is just another voice in such debate. 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.

Liberal commitment to pluralism, as well its rejection of epistemological utopias and closed models of society, do not however prevent liberal democracies from embracing strong conceptions of sustainability. There is a normatively conceived principle of sustainability, namely, a sustainability understood as an open principle towards which society is oriented without its content being determined in advance (see Arias-Maldonado 2016). While global environmental change is to be seriously addressed, nobody has a monopoly on establishing how, at which pace, or through which means. The particulars of sustainability must be collectively debated, negotiated, decided upon. Moreover, the state is not the only relevant actor in this process — there is also the civil society, firms, and individuals. In the absence of a massive popular support for radically transforming the current society, sustainability should be pursued in a way that does not threaten the integrity of liberal democracy itself.

The question of pluralism, though, still lingers. 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 seriously 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, suggesting 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).

Goods and services whose production or enjoyment requires greater emissions of CO₂ will presumably be on that list. But why stop there? It could be argued that all «luxuries» must 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, 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. Therefore, 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). The lack of an objective standard of overconsumption means that 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 to make private automobiles more expensive —by turning them into electric ones— to speed up the transition to a decarbonized society if that means harming those who are more disadvantaged. Interestingly, the much-maligned «global elite» (see Pogge 2002: 23) perform a key role in the development of emerging technologies for domestic consumption when acting as «early adopters» of them. Ironically, 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: insofar as emerging economies will continue to grow, searching for green technologies will be essential for achieving global sustainability, as the latter will be transferred to the former.

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. A minor restriction to the economic liberty of the global rich, for instance, might increase the autonomy of others — poorer people in the Global South might benefit from the ensuing redistribution.

Moreover, liberal societies do 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, restrain the kind of consumer goods that can be produced, setting 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. 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, goods and services can be banned when an evaluation of their contribution to planetary risks suggests that much. 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 — including the state— such as regulating production, subsidizing innovation, and nudging citizens towards the most benign environmental option. 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 on how it is to be pursued. On the contrary, the more it is claimed that such goal — sustainability and the stabilizing of the Earth system — can only be achieved by following a single path — degrowth in

any of its versions — the more polarized and hence ineffectual the body politic will be when confronting this task. Only an open conception of sustainability, in which pluralism is protected as much as possible, can deliver meaningful results. It should be noted that, as William Connolly (2005: 41) points out, the pluralist is not a relativist, since he claims that liberal-democratic values make pluralism possible and thus they must be protected against unitarian positions that wish to eliminate rival worldviews. For that reason, a closed conception of society — such as the one espoused by degrowthers and green republicans alike — could never be realized without damaging the material and institutional conditions that make pluralism possible in the first place.

To those who feel that the climate emergency is so urgent that it demands radical and immediate action, this conclusion will be disappointing. But their claim can be contested both on normative and empirical grounds: there is not just one way to deal with global environmental change and the pluralistic society is also a value to be protected. Still, green republicans and degrowthers have the chance to defend their views within liberal democracy. So far, they have mostly been implemented at the local level within small communities (see Arias-Maldonado 2022). But they present an alternative social imaginary and thus may 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. Individual behaviors can have a lasting environmental impact once their actions are collectively aggregated. In turn, this raises the question as to whether state interference with personal liberty is legitimate. To what extent can or should pluralism be curtailed in view of the need to advance towards environmental sustainability and planetary habitability?

I have outlined the position adopted by degrowthers and green republicans, for whom the problem lies in the liberal framework that allows such behaviors. They would like to achieve sustainability without liberalism. And they make two different claims: that liberalism cannot deliver sustainability *and* that a post-growth society is to be preferred on normative grounds as well. In a post-growth society, however, social diversity would be severely curtailed — the variety of lives that can be pursued in such small communities is obviously limited. Might value pluralism survive? One can certainly imagine that different religious beliefs could coexist in a post-growth society. Yet both religious and moral views would be attached to a frugal lifestyle, which in fact would become the civil religion of post-growth communities. It is thus artificial to separate *value* pluralism from *lifestyle* pluralism. Finally, there are reasons to believe that a post-growth society would be not only illiberal, but also undemocratic, since there would be nothing to be decided upon — politics would be ecologically suppressed.

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, or 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: while the liberal principle of state neutrality requires that the conditions for exerting personal autonomy are kept, 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 manner, pluralism is preserved. When behaviours are deemed too harmful, though, state interference is permissible. Otherwise, means other than prohibition is to be 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 key, since emerging

countries are not expected to give up economic growth and it would be hugely beneficial that they have access to new technologies that diminish the environmental impact of 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 to personal autonomy and the social pluralism that derives from it.

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