POLIDEMOS

CRISTINA BON (ed.)

UTOPIAN VISIONS, DYSTOPIC REALITIES

Multidisciplinary Reflections on Contemporary Challenges

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Multidisciplinary Reflections on Contemporary Challenges

EDITED BY
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Polidemos (Center for the study of democracy and political change) of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart promotes and carries out research on changes in democratic systems, on transformations in conceptions of democracy, and on the international dimension of democracy. **Polidemos** promotes the discussion of democracy by operating at multiple levels: at the level of academic research, through original research on the subject of democratic change, considered from different disciplinary perspectives and with a multi-interdisciplinary perspective; at the level of public discussion, through editorial products and public events; and at the level of the broadest discussion, disseminating the results of their research through initiatives aimed at civil society organizations, teachers and interested citizens.

Summary

Introduction. A Look at the Contemporary Age through the Lenses of Utopia and Dystopia

CRISTINA BON[1]

The disruptive effects of climate change and its consequences on our daily lives; the crisis of neoliberal economic theories, with their absolute trust in the market and its ability to create global peace and order; the decline of the Western model of international cooperation and the redefinition of international order; the mounting distrust of democratic institutions, strongly linked to the intensification of social fractures and electoral polarisation; and, last but not least, the almost unbelievable short- and long-term effects of the Covid-19 global pandemic. All the aforementioned phenomena represent just some of the main issues currently at stake.

The more we look at them, the more they resemble the failure of an entire set of values and policies, deeply rooted in modern Western culture and progressively exported globally over the course of the 20th century, along with a rise in U.S. hegemony. It is as though we (the Western people) have been awakened from a deep sleep, during which we deluded ourselves that history was over (Fukuyama, 1996). Indeed, as it has

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been recently noted, "In the thirty years that followed the Cold War, the West has never really stopped living at the 'end of history'. In our Western eyes, the 'ideological evolution' of the human race is truly over, while progress seems to have found its 'definitive' political form in liberal democracy" (Palano, 2022, p. 16)[2]. This illusion started to crack shortly before the start of the 21st century, when China's entry into the World Trade Organisation was coupled with the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Since then, the Washington consensus – and related international Western order – has been deeply challenged, and is now on the verge of collapse (Grewal, 2023, pp. 53-62)[3].

Given this general picture, it is not so surprising to note a revival of dystopian narratives in the literature, TV series, filmmaking and a variety of other cultural products. This issue has recently been the focus of a broad interdisciplinary research project, coordinated by the Director of the Department of Political Science at the Catholic University of Milan, Professor Damiano Palano, and entitled: *The Clash of Narratives. A Representation of the Future in Popular Culture and Traditional Media and its Political Use*. Two of the goals of *The Clash of Narratives* project were to account for the penetration of dystopian narratives in the 21st century's collective imagery, and to analyse the political role played by dystopias in current times. In this respect, the studies promoted by *The Clash of Narratives* have highlighted how the public fascination with dystopias evident in the 21st century is "connected to our perception of the future", a perception that, since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, has undergone "a radical reorientation with respect to the 20th century". In the early 1990s, the collapse of the Soviet Union

[2] Original text in Italian.

[3] For a broad overview of the key flaws of the Twentieth Century Global Order see the essays published in *Limes*, 4 (2023).

represented the defeat of the socialist ideology of progress – namely "the first utopia that tried to enter history" (Bobbio, 1989, p. 1) – and the global victory of the Western liberal-democratic model. Hence, over the past thirty years, Western liberal democracies have built their own Utopia on the ashes of the socialist failure, regardless of the numerous warning signs coming from a significant number of crises and emergencies. It took a war on the border of the European Union to spark public debate on the belief in both liberal democracies and the neo-liberal globalisation they have created, pushing not only academics but also the public at large to acknowledge the epochal turning point that liberal democratic systems are now living through. It may be argued that, after two hundred years of existence, Western democracies are coming to terms with the exhaustion of the "utopian pretensions of [their] legislated foundations [which have been] absolutely essential to the transcendent justification for the state's right to rule" (Bensel, 2022, p. 12).

This multidisciplinary collective work fits neatly into the discussion of the Western political order crisis, and has two main objectives. The first is to broaden the investigation into the cultural and economic concepts that have respectively supported the development policies, international cooperation, and environmental sustainability projects promoted by Western democracies throughout the 20th century. The second is to reflect on several alternative and competing models of economic development and political-institutional order that were consolidated over the course of the 21st century by nation-States, presenting themselves as credible competitors.

Each of the topics analysed, namely the theory and politics of environmental management, the concept of development in the contemporary age, and the focus on affirming alternative political-institutional systems versus traditional representative

democracies, is interpreted through the prisms of utopia and dystopia, which prove to be extremely effective conceptual tools for describing the power of political imagination, as well as its respective limits.

The authors of the seven essays included in this collective work are a group of young, promising doctoral students from the Doctoral School in Politics and Institutions at the Catholic University of Sacred Heart of Milan. In the 2021-2022 academic year, as required by the doctoral programme, they attended a cycle of seminars (*Workshop of History 2021-2022*) on "Utopias, Dystopias and Diachronies in Contemporary State-building", sponsored by the Department of Political Science under the "The Clash of Narratives" project. The *Workshop of History 2021-2022* aimed to look at the great constitutional architectures of the contemporary age, interpreting them as they would any utopian project, and as such, seeing them often contradicted, disregarded or even shipwrecked in political and institutional practice.

Indeed, if we can picture a written constitution as the embodiment of a utopia (Ventura, 2020), we must admit that even the most authoritarian and dictatorial regimes may be drawn from utopian ideals of 'good government' and specific visions of the future.

Consequently, by reflecting upon different case-studies, from Isis to Iran and from Italian Fascism to the American "Far-Right", the seminars investigated the traditional dialectical binomials that began with Platonic and Aristotelian political philosophy (good governance – bad governance; Monarchy – tyranny; Democracy – demagoguery), suggesting that the same binomials may be redefined in the antithetical conceptual categories of utopia and dystopia. Under the lens of the Workshop's guest speakers, was the disconnect between the real and material constitution: the codified principles and powers on

the one hand and their historical interpretation (or even degeneration) on the other; the constitutional theory and its practice[4].

As already mentioned, the *Workshop of History* directly engaged the doctoral students who authored this book. More specifically, after attending the seminars and contributing to the discussions, they were asked to write a paper on contemporary utopian grand projects and ideas, indicating whether these belonged to the realm of political theory, nation building narratives, economic thought or any other field in the humanities. Whenever feasible, they were also asked to reflect upon the possible dystopian outcomes produced by said utopian projects. In answering the call for essays, each doctoral student interpreted the topic in their respective field of study. The final result is a kaleidoscope of our contemporary age as the outcome of past and present utopic visions and their impact on both civil society and the environment.

Marco De Nigris investigates the utopian and dystopian views that have characterised the theories and practices of natural resources management since the first industrial revolution. According to De Nigris, over the past two centuries and a half, two main schools of thought have guided the management of natural resources. The first was the invisible hand of utopia, based on the strong belief in the market as an instrument of endlessly increasing wealth; the second was a Malthusian dystopia, directly addressing the issue of natural resource

[4] A special thank you goes to all the guest speakers involved in the seminars, namely: Farkhad Alimukamedov (Science Po Toulouse), Giovanni Borgognone (Università degli Studi di Torino), Federico Donelli (Università degli Studi di Genova), Paolo Maggiolini (Università Cattolica di Milano), Giorgia Perletta (Università Cattolica di Milano), Andrea Plebani (Università Cattolica di Milano), Massimiliano Trentin (Università degli Studi di Bologna), Valentina Villa (Università Cattolica di Milano).

scarcity against demographic development and imagining a gloomy scenario of scarcity and famine. Indeed, as the author notes, we are still witnessing today to "an ongoing debate between the dystopian view of unmanageable population growth and resource scarcity, and the utopian view of perfect and unlimited efficiency that will always grant growth and abundance to an increasing population" [p. 41]. One of the latest utopian visions is based on the theories of the circular economy, which strongly believe in the possibility to foster both technological development and economic growth, while the neo-Malthusian advocates of happy degrowth discard any possibility of reducing resource consumption without coupling technological advancement to an actual reduction in consumption. Any discourse on the circular economy is inevitably intertwined with the concepts of sustainable development and human development, which respectively envision the need for constant economic growth in parallel with environmental sustainability, and a major push to decouple economic growth from material consumption.

While only partially addressed by De Nigris, the concept of development is fully taken up by Valeria Strusi, who explores its historical evolution through the unique lenses of utopia and governance since the Second World War. She emphasises the inherent contradictions between the ambitious theoretical goals set by the most influential schools of development studies, and a reality comprising socio-economic systems constrained by rational and circumscribed governance structures. One clear example is represented by the controversial aspects of the modernisation theories of the 1950s and 1960s, more specifically, the contrast between the utopian vision conveyed by the official development discourse based on capitalism, industrialism and centralised bureaucracy, and the reality of a Western-controlled process of development aimed at imposing

Western relations of production while "serving the strategic priorities of industrialised nations" [p. 50]. Upon careful reading, it looks like most of the contemporary theories of development conceived in the past seventy years fall within the model of a Western oriented utopianism "centred around the belief that development is tied to market expansion, the establishment of well-defined institutions (most especially, private property rights systems) and national income growth" [p. 58]. A partial deviation from the aforementioned model has been represented by the concept of human development, which posited the need of "disassociating the concept of development from purely economic growth and personal utility, and emphasising the importance of incorporating social development and human empowerment into the development discourse" [p. 59]. In spite of the extremely innovative perspective conveyed, however, even this human-centred approach is based, as are the other development theories, on the key role played by a specific agent, the State, in protecting and enhancing human well-being according to good governance parameters inherent to Western societies.

These reflections take on a particular meaning in our current times, which see the values and institutional frameworks of the Western World facing two critical challenges. The first is the rise of populist movements in a number of historically consolidated representative democracies, which marks a clear sign of long-standing citizen distrust in the democratic institutions. The second is the spread of authoritarian regimes around the world and the collapse of the Washington consensus following the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war, which are eroding belief in the international order that was built after the Second World War and further consolidated in the early 1990s following the fall of the Soviet Union.

While Valeria Strusi focuses on Western-oriented development theories and their political failure, we may contend that not all contemporary models of development were conceived by Western thinkers and Statesmen. An historical case in point is the Chinese model, conceived by Mao Tse-Tung as a more innovative and effective socialist system with respect to the Soviet Union experience. During the first ten years of the People's Republic of China, Tse-Tung cherished a true utopian project based on two goals at odds with one another: a planned State economy and, simultaneously, the successful entry into international trade competition with the major world powers. Indeed, between 1958 and 1961, "The Great Leap Forward" promoted by Mao aimed at increasing industrialisation and modernising the agricultural system through a set of coercive policies imposed by the State. By focusing on both the theoretical premises of the reform as well as on its social outcomes, Leonardo Cherici shows how the great utopian Maoist project met its dystopian nemesis in one of the worst famines in contemporary history. Indeed, within the span of a few years, this grand utopian project proved impracticable and crashed under the weight of its own limitations, turning reality into a sort of social dystopia made up of famine, death, censorship, political repression and a State Propaganda aimed at relieving the central government of any responsibility. Furthermore, despite the policies introduced in 1958 being abandoned around 1961-62, the Chinese Famine ignited long-lasting macro-social, individual and psychological effects. As Cherici notes, recent studies have shown the co-relationship between the famine and the present-day socio-economic phenomena observed at both a macro level and a more individual and psychological level.

Considering the emergence of China's economic and military power over the past twenty years, we should look back at the failure of Mao's utopian economy with renewed historical

interest. In the Maoist Great Leap Forward's attempt to find a third way between Soviet socialism and Western capitalism we may detect the deep roots of what is now called "the China model" (Bell, 2015); this is founded on the concept of political meritocracy, in other words, the idea that leaders be selected according to their virtue and abilities rather than the democratic principle of "one man one vote"[5]. The China model is certainly not the only current competitor of traditional Western representative democracies. Samuele Abrami and Pier Paolo Raimondi invite us to look at two alternative models that have gained ground in recent years: the Turkish competitive authoritarian regime under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Persian Gulf countries' Visions. While, over the past twenty years, Turkey has undertaken an innovative political project based on a renewed concept of "nation" (the *Yeni Türkiye* – the New Turkey), the Persian Gulf countries have worked on broad ambitious projects – significantly called "Visions" – aimed at transforming the economy, the society and, consequently, the social contract.

As Abrami points out, when the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) came to power in 2002, it introduced the concept of a New Turkey, which aimed at reviving the Ottoman cultural heritage within the national narrative after a long period of obliteration under the secular Kemalist regime. While claiming to be representative of a moderate religious majority that had been barred from decision-making by the Kemalist elites, the AKP promoted a brand-new conception of the Turkish State-society that could combine Islam, democracy and liberal

[5] We may also note that the value of merit, understood as a set of essential skills for access to the bureaucratic class, is an aspect present in Chinese history since the modern age and particularly emphasised under the Qing dynasty (1644-1905). See Skocpol (1979, pp. 38-39).

economics. During a time of rising Islamist threats, the Turkish model was warmly welcomed by Western countries. However, as Abrami argues, in the long run, the project of a "conservative democratic" [p. 101] system based on a neo-Ottoman national narrative proved to be a sort of utopia, which rapidly morphed into an autocratic regime.

While the Turkish model has already sacrificed its most innovative features to a more centralised, autocratic and pyramidal regime seeking to reclaim its historical roots, over the past ten years the Persian Gulf countries – also commonly called rentiers States (Mahdavy, 1970; Beblawi-Luciani, 1987) – have been dealing with the potential impact of the energy transition on their social and political systems. The issue of energy transition has become more urgent due to both domestic and international pressures. On the one hand, there stands a future scenario of lower oil and gas demand due to mounting political consensus for a global energy transition less reliant on fossil fuels; on the other, there is the need to reduce energy subsidies in the face of a growing domestic energy demand that is eroding the governments' main income source, namely oil exports. The aforementioned challenges have forced the Gulf countries "to imagine a new future for their economies and societies apart from their hydrocarbon resources" [p. 137]. In particular, since the oil price collapse of 2014, each country has launched its own "Vision", i.e., set of ambitious initiatives to finally diversify their economies and transform them from resource-based to knowledge-based. As Raimondi observes, "By doing so, the ruling elites are also imagining a new type of State and a new relationship with their citizens. However, [...] given the profound interplay of oil, politics and economics in the hydrocarbon-producing countries, the transformations envisaged in the Visions demand significant reforms in multiple fields" [pp. 137-138]. As is clear, the most delicate matter is the

potential impact of a full energy transition on their existent social contracts (based upon three main components: no representation in exchange for no taxation, public jobs and energy subsidies) and, consequently, on their political systems. According to Raimondi, whose essay provides an insightful analysis of the potential consequences of energy transformation, "The final outcome [of these utopian futures] is still uncertain" [p. 138].

In the past four years, international pressure for an energy transition aimed at sharply reducing the demand for oil and gas has been significantly boosted by two events. The first was the adoption of the European Green Deal by the European Commission in 2019, followed in 2020 by the Next Generation EU funds, an economic recovery tool introduced to restore the losses incurred during the Covid-19 pandemic. The second was the outbreak of the Russia-Ukrainian war and the sanctions imposed by Western countries on Russia. While the former represented a European industrial recovery plan strongly based on an ecological transition and the development of renewable energies, the latter spurred an unprecedented geo-political crisis that decisively affected the price of gas. The skyrocketing prices of energy triggered the debate on a possible reform of the outdated and highly inefficient European electricity market. In her essay, Francesca Giuliano takes on the issue and explains the paradoxical pricing mechanisms of the electricity market that have come to negatively affect the cost advantage of renewables. She then goes on to focus more specifically on the historical evolution of the Italian electricity market and growing role of renewable energy sources (RES) within the national energy mix, investigating also the need to overcome the energy market limitations and paradoxes that hinder the electricity sector's potential as a source of renewable and sustainable clean energy transition. According to Giuliano, "the current

crisis may further stimulate the use of renewable and low-emission energy sources. Thus, as indicated by the Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development (ASVIS) spokesperson, Enrico Giovannini, a 100% renewable future may not be a mere utopia (Giovannini, 2018)" [p. 160-161].

As has been mentioned, European political efforts towards an energy transition and the search for renewable sources were significantly boosted by the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and subsequent Russian retaliation on gas supplies to Western powers. The escalation of international competition over energy sources was just one of the worrying consequences of a conflict that, from a military point of view, has been characterised by an unprecedented use of drones. Compared to the remote warfare mostly adopted by the Western powers in previous asymmetrical and counter-insurgency wars (such as the Global War on Terror), the Russian-Ukrainian war stands as a true outlier. Indeed, the extension and configuration of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict as a truly "symmetrical" and inter-State war make it the first large-scale and high-intensity war in which both belligerents have made wide use of military and commercial drones[6].

To close this multidisciplinary work on the utopias and dystopias of the contemporary world, Alessandra Russo addresses the utopia of a "painless, bloodless warfare by means of military technology" [p. 166]. This is a dream that has been cherished by all humanity "from the moment the first stone was thrown" [p. 167] and which has been almost achieved with the advancement of unmanned technology and its seemingly natural progression toward AI-driven autonomy, ever since the Global War on Terror launched by the United States following the

[6] An overview of the unique aspects of the Russian-Ukrainian War is offered by Harding, 2022.

September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. From its military campaigns of 2001 and 2003 in Afghanistan and Iraq, to its operations in Libya and the fight against ISIS, the United States has constantly resorted to armed drones, mainly employed in carrying out targeted killings. According to Russo, this extensive use of drones has ended up embodying "a democratic zeitgeist, in which the political and economic idea of no-casualty warfare has replaced the somewhat stale ideal of heroic sacrifice in battle that had served a central purpose in the industrial interstate warfare of the first half of the century" [p. 172]. From this perspective, drones and precision weaponry should sound like the ultimate ethical weapon "that finally makes warfare less violent and more humane". However, against this utopian picture stand the many controversial side effects and paradoxes generated by the idea of risk-free warfare, above all, the crisis of the very notion of war. Indeed, as Alessandra Russo puts it, "drone warfare ushered in the emergence of a new ethical and political norm for war that is neither war as we know, nor peace" [p. 176] Furthermore, remote warfare displays a complete transfer of risk to the enemy who, deprived of the chance to respond in just war-sanctioned ways, may not see any other option than to retaliate with terrorism, to the point of blurring the boundaries between war and peace.

I suspect that, having perused this multidisciplinary assessment of the contemporary age and its related challenges through the lenses of utopia and dystopia, many readers may feel discouraged by the notion that even the most genuine theoretical efforts to address the many crises of our time may produce unforeseen and even dystopic circumstances. However, I also believe that the historical perspective included in each essay, in particular the account of the long-term impact of utopian thought over time, will convince anyone of the importance of keeping our political imagination alive.

Acknowledgments

This book comes at the end of a ten-year teaching experience for the doctoral School of Politics and Institutions at the Catholic University of Milan. Due to the multidisciplinary vocation of the school, over the past decade I have had the pleasure to meet several classes of doctoral students and appreciate a wide range of research projects, disciplinary perspectives and methodologies. Consequently, including an historical module for scholars in economics, international law, strategic studies, political theory or political quantitative analysis would have presented a true challenge. Hence, after extensive talks with several colleagues and friends in the Department of Political Science and thanks to the support of the Coordinator of the Doctoral School, Paolo Colombo, it was agreed to turn a traditional teaching module in History into a *Workshop of History*, with the aim of actively engaging the doctoral students in a variety of broad topics, that could transcend the historical analysis and be interpreted from different disciplinary perspectives. Without the *Workshop*, this book would not have been possible: over the past years, I have been assisted by a number of colleagues who put their time and energy into providing academic contacts, arranging the seminars and, occasionally, chairing them or even participating as discussants. Among them, I would like to thank in particular Valentina Villa, Luca Falciola, Arianna Arisi Rota, Paolo M.C. Maggiolini and Andrea Plebani.

Since the 2013-2014 academic year, the *Workshop of History* has touched on a range of diverse issues which, interpreted mainly from a historical perspective, were also able to ignite various disciplinary interests. These have included: the politics of consensus and dissent; the ideological and institutional drifts in contemporary political systems; the dynamics of the decision-making processes; the management of crises; and, last

but not least, the utopian and dystopian sides of the contemporary State and nation-building processes.

In order to properly address the wide variety of topics involved, a substantial effort was made to attract a number of national and international scholars, who turned the Workshop into an extremely lively laboratory. None of this would have been possible without the precious financial support of the Catholic University's Postgraduate Education & Research Service as well as the backing of the Department of Political Science. I am particularly grateful to Roberto Brambilla (Head of the Postgraduate Education & Research Service at Catholic University of Milan) for sponsoring the Workshop activities over the years and to the Director of the Department of Political Science, Professor Damiano Palano, for the opportunity to join the "Clash of Narratives" project and to fund this collective work.

Although this book does not represent the first *Workshop* spin-off[7], it is the only published monograph written by the doctoral students. To them, and the enthusiasm they brought to this editorial project, I extend my true gratitude.

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[7] The first collective work gathered together a number of papers that had been presented at the Workshop of History held in the 2018-2019 academic year, and resulted in the single subject issue of the Italian Journal, Memorie e Ricerca. See Bon C. and Rota, 2020.

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Natural resources in the industrial world: from malthusian dystopia to circular economy utopia

MARCO DE NIGRIS[1]

Abstract

This essay addresses the main historical steps of natural resource management, starting from the consolidation of the first industrial revolution, and pays particular attention to the utopian and dystopian views that have characterised the issue since its appearance within the academic and political debate. Starting from the well-known dystopian work of Thomas Robert Malthus (1798), this essay will provide the reader with a list and chronological order of some of the most successful and shared political economy perspectives, considering how they were influenced by technological, scientific and social advancements. It will show the presence of common trends of thought over the last 250 years and how historical events have affected such trends, pushing towards either utopian or dystopian views and expectations. Finally, the utopian vision of an entirely circular economy model is addressed, represented by a full efficiency in resource management, and considering its main innovative aspects and intrinsic limits.

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Keywords: Resources management, Efficiency, Sustainable Development, Environment, Circular Economy

1. *Methodological preamble*

In the Middle Ages, England enjoyed a great availability of fertile common areas identified as 'open lands'. From the Renaissance onwards, the social class known as yeomanry (small landowners) gradually took ownership of such lands. The monarchy initially reacted against this move, but the Crown finally had to withdraw the issue after the English Civil War (1642-1651). This favoured a more capitalistic approach to land management, driven by the aristocratic class and in contrast to other countries where a less entrepreneurial approach was favoured. It also saw a large exodus of the workforce to the cities, comprising unemployed farmers leaving the countryside (Moore, 1966). The insular nature of the country made it generally more protected from wars within its own borders, allowing England to focus more on its economic development in a context of relative security. Even more importantly, the United Kingdom had availability of and access to coal, as well as the innovation in its use that saw the invention of the steam engine; it was this very technology that would push the development of a growing industrial branch alongside the traditional agricultural one (Jevons, 1865, p. 13). The first industrial revolution deeply transformed the United Kingdom, turning it from an economy dominated by agriculture, small-scale manufacturing and trade into the first industrial nation. The process was then replicated in the rest of Europe and, in due course, in most of the world. Consequently, mankind passed from managing a high percentage of organic (plant- and animal-based) renewable resources to dealing with a growing amount of inorganic

and non-renewable resources. This is the case in the output of production, which has seen a consistently proportional increase in inorganic materials (minerals, metals), energy and heat sources, requiring a consistent transition from wood and water mills (renewable energy sources) to coal (which is non-renewable) (Jevons, 1865, pp. 74-97). At the same time, the gradual increase in wealth in the cities and the facilitated access to services led to reduced mortality rates and increased life expectancy; this, in turn, saw a consistent increase in population and a consequent higher demand for further resource extraction and consumption (Malthus, 1798, 12-38). This sparked a focus on the scarcity of resources and the related long-term consequences; not just non-renewable resources (for self-explanatory reasons), but also renewable ones, where the subject of analysis is the comparison between their reproduction rate and consumption trends. In both cases, humans had to face the issue of large-scale resource use sustainability (Jevons, 1865, pp. 19-29). The first industrial revolution also witnessed substantial political as well as academic speculation around the management of natural resources. Some went so far as to envisage a variety of utopian and dystopian scenarios. By analysing some of the most successful and shared utopian and dystopian politico-economic perspectives, it is thus possible to single out the common trends of the core debate on efficient resource management, its main theoretical bases, and foreseeable prospects. From a chronological point of view, the first industrial revolution represents the starting point of this analysis, since this phenomenon changed both the quantity and quality of natural resources managed by man (Jevons, 1865, pp. 119-144); by inserting both the pre-industrial and industrial world in the same analysis, a bias might be created due to the significant basic differences between the two scenarios.

While there is no historically recognised year taken as the beginning of the industrial revolution, with specific regard to politico-economic thinking, it is reasonable to locate the theoretical origins of the phenomenon in the publishing of Adam Smith's 'The Wealth of Nations' in 1776, a book universally recognised as the founder of classic political economy. Using this as the historical starting point of the analysis, this essay will focus on some of the most well-known works on the management of natural resources and related approaches. While the popularity of a publication is not necessarily correlated to its quality, it is a good indicator of its influence on creating new lines of thought and its ability to represent commonly recognised approaches. This essay will look at the main traits that constitute the macro models for natural resource management and their chronological inclusion in the analysis since 1776, and will highlight the connected dystopian/utopian views and related trends and perspectives.

2. *The eighteenth century: birth of classic political economy, the invisible hand utopia and malthusian dystopia*

In 1776, the philosopher Adam Smith published the book which saw him recognised as the father of classic political economy. With 'The Wealth of Nations', Smith qualitatively evaluated the significant effectiveness of private interest against public coercion and financial incentives in the management of available resources. Despite the acceptance of some exceptions where the State is expected to intervene in the economic system in order to grant national security, the book claims that seemingly uncoordinated individual interest is generally the best available solution for efficient resource management and related exchanges at a local and international level. Such

efficiency and general effectiveness are granted by an abstract coordinator, the invisible hand, whose implicit guidelines automatically regulate very fragmented and diversified interests towards the common good (Smith, 1776, pp. 54-84).

Throughout his analysis, Smith develops interesting considerations regarding the relationship between currency, the natural resources from which it is made (gold and silver) and its exclusive ability to be exchanged for any other resources, in determining the effective wealth of a nation or region (Smith, 1776, pp. 20-53). However, the essay does not directly address natural resources in terms of their availability and collection. It does not address potential limitations of wealth due to natural resource scarcity, nor the role of population and its related growth in determining their demand. According to Hardin (1968, p. 1244), Smith's invisible hand might be referred to as the protagonist of a utopian scenario where unchecked private and individual interests are the precursors to endless increasing wealth.

Some twenty years later, in 1798, Thomas Robert Malthus published one of the most well-known political economy books ever written, with his ''An Essay on the Principle of the Population'' (Malthus, 1798). In the essay, he presented the basic principles of population growth and its relationship with land and food, representing most of society's managed resources, with the Industrial Revolution still being in its early stages. Indeed, even though the industrial revolution was moved by non-renewable limited resources (especially coal and iron) and related production, the only limits addressed by the essay are in the management of organic renewable resources[2]. Although

[2] Actually, limits in the management of non-renewable resources (especially coal) had already been addressed before Malthus. John Williams' 1789 essay,

plant- and animal-based resources are potentially unlimited in the long run (except in the case of total extinction of the species concerned), their reproduction rate is referred to as unable to cope with the population growth rate. According to Malthus, while population grows exponentially, resource production tends to grow linearly. Indeed, all available land was already occupied in the United Kingdom at the end of the 18th century, which was also one of the factors pushing workers towards cities (Moore, 1966). Hence, the increasing number of people could not be employed on new lands to be cultivated, but only in intensifying production on the already available ones. As intensification was limited by the quality and size of land, food stocks would have only grown linearly and would have not coped with an exponential increase in demand. As both the agricultural and industrial sectors ultimately depended on food for their survival, when work intensification on land eventually exhausted its capability, both food production and population would have dropped (Malthus, 1798, p. 20).

The essay was a great inspiration for many thinkers and academics that followed, both in the social and natural sciences, and it could be argued that it implicitly contradicts Smith's optimism regarding the individual's initiative for self-interest (Hardin, 1968, pp. 1243-1244). Malthus adds that the resources sought by individuals for greater wealth are limited. When they are no longer able to sustain subsistence levels of consumption for all, mortality rates will surpass birth rates and bring the system back to balance, but at the cost of high levels

'Natural History of the Mineral Kingdom', specifically addressed the question. Yet, a detailed analysis of the relevance and dependency of the industrial society on fossil fuels will be better addressed from the nineteenth century onwards (Jevons, 1865, p. 19).

of suffering and death. Malthus' theory does not strictly contradict the presence of an effective invisible coordinator; indeed, it could be taken to be the one regulating birth and death rates as a way to achieve long term balance. This implies that, should such a coordinator be left unchecked, the outcome could still be balance, but not wealth (Malthus, 1798, pp. 129-137; 146-154).

It is evident that, with reference to the management of global natural resources, Smith and Malthus held two opposing views. On the one hand, we have a consistent faith in individual initiative without a recognised need for artificial control. On the other, we have a consistent pessimism regarding the long-term consequences of unchecked initiative by and for individual interests (Hardin, 1968, p. 1244). Since the late 18th Century, this dichotomy has been a constant in any debate over the future of natural resource management: on the utopian side stand those authors who posit a never-ending growth whose potential obstacles are readily overcome by mankind's ingenuity; on the dystopic side stand, in contrast, those who foresee that such growth will force us, willingly or not, to put into action a drastic reshaping of our economic expectations, usually accompanied by visions of scarcity and famine (Sabin, 2013).

3. *The nineteenth century: the rising domain of non-renewable resources*

Malthus' work focused on organic renewable resources. However, it is not this branch of resources that the industrial expansion and technological development in the nineteenth century would depend on. Coal and iron were the main protagonists of this process (Jevons, 1865, p. 13). The introduction of fossil fuels and minerals as major players had two main implications.

First, because of their finite nature, non-renewable resources could not be integrated with renewable ones under a common variable, their trends and perspectives being characterised by a different approach and logical considerations. Second, while there had always been an inherent dependency of the industrial sector on the agricultural sector, with food representing the basis of survival, the opposite gradually became true. The increased population could not be sustained without the technological development that allowed greater efficiency and productivity in the countryside, along with the facilitated movement of food via ship and rail that are sometimes essential for survival. As these developments are ultimately dependent on iron and coal, we now see an important interdependence between renewable and non-renewable resource management (Jevons, 1865, p. 16).

The effects of the industrial revolution progressed through the decades, pushing a consistent increase both in population and industrial output, the two variables that also represented the main drivers of growth (Meadows et al., 1972, 63-71). Regarding the former, the trend has been estimated to be more than exponential throughout this century (Jevons, 1865, pp. 104-105; Meadows et al., 1972, p. 63). Not only did the number of people in the UK grow by a percentage instead of a fixed amount every year, as Malthus had theorised; the percentage grew when compared to previous centuries, because of an increase in both births and life expectancy (Table 1). A similar trend was also seen in industrial output: this did not only grow more than exponentially following the increasing number of people demanding goods, but was also affected by an increase of per-capita demand. As most production in the UK this century was driven by coal, the trends of coal use might be a useful representative of production trends in the country. Jevons (1865, pp. 136-140) estimated an average of approximately

40% growth per decade from 1781 to 1851 in the fuel's consumption, compared to an average population growth of about 13% per decade (Jevons, pp. 104-105). Assuming these estimates are correct, coal consumption has grown about three times faster than the population (Table 1).

Year	*Population (millions)*	*Average population growth rate per decade*	*Coal consumption (million tons)*
1570	4.16	/	NA
1670	5.77	3.40%	NA
1771	7.15	1.60%	NA
1781	7.57	6.00%	5.13
1791	8.25	9.00%	7.24
1801	9.19	11.00%	10.22
1811	10.46	14.00%	14.42
1821	12.19	18.00%	20.34
1831	14.07	16.00%	28.7
1841	16.05	14.00%	40.48
1851	18.1	13.00%	57.1
1861	20.28	12.00%	83.6

Table 1: Extrapolation and elaboration of data from Jevons (1865, pp. 104-105; pp. 136-140)

The economic and population growth have been accompanied by a consistent technological progress, involving – among other things – the increasing efficiency of the steam engine

and, partly connected to this, the invention of the locomotive and improvement of sea travel (Jevons, 1865, p. 86). All this, along with other forms of innovation, would contribute to the development of the second industrial revolution and a consistent improvement in the size and structure of the first industrial system. Clearly, the century did not see the availability limits of renewable resources identified by Malthus' theory. Increased efficiency in productivity allowed a parallel rise in both population and per-capita consumption, even of agricultural products (Jevons, 1865, pp. 119-133). Moreover, technological enhancement, in the form of shipping and railroads, allowed for the facilitated and rapid movement of goods from one region to another, hence preventing localised shortages and consequent famine.

From a theoretical perspective, it might be argued that the basics of Malthus' model take root once it is properly integrated with non-renewable resources. The per-capita subsistence level of food should be integrated with the subsistence need for the non-renewable resources necessary for the maintaining of a growing agricultural output that can cope with population growth and the related availability of non-renewable resources. However, there is a qualitative difference in the analysis of food and non-renewable resource subsistence levels. It is expected that the former will not consistently change over time, as the individual basic need for food is not affected by economic or technological factors, but by the much more rigid and slower biological ones. Consequently, the food subsistence level can be referred to as a constant (Malthus, 1798, pp. 12-17). On the contrary, the non-renewable resource subsistence level is not fixed, and it could be argued that it may be consistently reduced by efficiency and technological development, especially in coal's energy productivity (Jevons, 1865, p. 74). Still, as mentioned above, the increasing efficiency in coal use did

not correlate with a reduction in the per-capita consumption of fuel. On the contrary, both absolute and per-capita consumption rapidly increased between 1770 and 1860 (Table 1). The matter was analysed in detail by the economist and logician William Stanley Jevons, in his most well-known essay, 'The Coal Question' (1865), in which he elaborated the theory of the 'rebound effect', or 'Jevons' paradox'. The essay shows that coal use efficiency increased more than fourteen-fold between 1770 and 1860 (Jevons, 1865, pp. 76-77). Yet, coal consumption in the UK increased twelve-fold in the same period, from roughly 5 million to about 60 million tons (Jevons, 1865, p. 139), suggesting a relevant positive causal relationship between the two variables. The idea underlying the theory is that when the use of a resource is at its beginning and therefore relatively inefficient, it is also expensive and relatively less competitive in comparison with traditional resources (e.g., timber) (Jevons, 1865, p. 29). Once knowledge of the resource increases and consequent technological development takes place, the use of the resource becomes cheaper and more accessible, hence causing a 'rebound' in the system in favour of a higher use. The Jevons' paradox shows that efficiency in the use of a resource might not only be unable to cope with the increased demand due to population growth, as presented by Malthus' theory, but might even cause an increased demand of the resource (Jevons, 1865, p. 74). When applied to a non-renewable resource such as coal, efficiency might paradoxically become the reason behind its exhaustion.

The nineteenth century saw an increase in both population and per-capita resource consumption, challenging Malthus' dystopic scenario of famine and poverty. Individual interest, driven by what we might see as an evolution of Smith's Invisible Hand, took to the development of new efficient tools and technologies, accompanied by optimistic views about the innovative

potential of mankind, appropriately expressed by the contemporary positivist philosophy. Despite such circumstances, the Malthusian dystopia did not leave the debate; it rather adapted to the new scenario by considering economic dependency on scarce resources and the paradoxical downsides of efficiency, that might be the very driver of non-renewable resource exhaustion and, subsequently, industrial and population collapse.

4. *The Twentieth century: large-scale pollution and environmental sustainability join the debate*

Jevons' theory's main limitation was the explicit disregard of the capability of knowledge and technological development to provide access to new and more efficient resources to replace previous ones. The essay addresses most natural sources of energy (water, wind, sunlight, tides, geothermal etc.) ruling them out one by one as inferior to coal (Jevons, 1865, pp. 83-97). Still, the ability of human ingenuity to address new energy sources (e.g. oil) and ways to use them, substantially contributed to a continuing rise in population, energy and resource demand throughout the first half of the twentieth century, despite the two global conflicts and the financial crisis in 1929, opening an avenue to the third industrial revolution in the second half of the century (Meadows et al., 2004, pp. 28-41). Such progress, however, will need to face a new resource management limitation, previously only faced from a local perspective and which will assume a new form and scale: pollution.

Despite the consistent economic transition from agricultural to industrial sector seen in the two previous centuries, food production will be the protagonist of the first great step towards shaping the modern debate on resource management.

The publication of Silent Spring by Rachel Carson (1962) was the precursor to a new political and academic debate over the entity and implications of resource scarcity (Sabin, 2014, p. 21). The book denounced a negligent use of chemical pesticides, claiming their long-term dangers were strongly underestimated and potentially able to undermine the very basis of life on Earth. It described in detail the negative impact of chemical pesticides on several species of insects (not only pests) and their persistence in the ecosystem through their spread to all stages of the food chain, including mankind. Moreover, the effect showed the ability to propagate far beyond cultivated lands, through the mobility of affected species (especially birds), seeing chemicals reach almost every area of the United States (Carson, 1962, pp. 103-127). The essay depicted a long-term scenario where most complex forms of life would disappear with unprecedented consequences for life on Earth (Carson, 1962, pp. 1-3). The dystopian image of a mostly dead planet had a powerful public impact and Silent Spring has generally been recognised as the initial big step towards the development of the modern environmental movement (Sabin, 2014, p. 21).

Silent Spring added a new element and consideration that will continue to have a role in both resource management and sustainability in general. It presented a potential danger to resources in the very developments that were supposed to grant greater efficiency. Technology and innovation might not only be unable to cope with scarcity and increasing demand, but might be the actual driver of resource exhaustion (Jevons' paradox) or even the destruction of their very basis. The essay called for the consideration of environmental externalities of resource use to address their long-term sustainability.

In 1971, the Club of Rome published another very well-known essay, entitled 'The Limits to Growth' (Meadows et al.,

1972), which has several times been associated with a modern elaboration of Malthusianism (LaRouche, 1983, pp. 22-58). Based on the first computer model on global population growth and resource availability (Sabin, 2013, p. 90), the book presented a forecast of the trends and interrelations among the five macro variables discussed throughout this essay: population, food production, industrial output, non-renewable resources, and pollution.

While industrial output and world population are considered as the drivers of increasing resource use, the other three variables are seen as inherent limitations of the system, mostly for the reasons addressed by previous authors and considered publications. Despite the essay offering a far more detailed analysis, including the proposal of various scenarios based on policy choices and variable characteristics (e.g., resource availability, efficiency), the main conclusions still call to mind Malthus' theory. The same crucial point is made: based on the available data and assumptions, food production and non-renewable resources cannot cope with unchecked exponential growth in population and consumption rates. Most of the proposed scenarios imply that, should mankind not react in a rapid and conscious way to reduce resource depletion and population growth, the limits imposed by resource scarcity and pollution (environmental impact and related health damages) will be breached and lead to a scenario where increased mortality rates over births will reduce population and take the system back to balance. The Club of Rome's model has been updated and reproposed several times: in 1992 (Meadows et al., 1992), in 2004 (Meadows et al., 2004) and in 2022 (Bardi and Alvarez Pereira, 2022). Despite several adaptations to accommodate historical and technological changes, the general conclusions remain the same but with an increased urgency due to the

approaching limits and mankind's lack of courage in taking the necessary actions to increase efficiency and birth control.

The Limits to Growth (1972) has become one of the main references of the so-called neo-Malthusians (LaRouche, 1983, pp. 22-58). Its conclusions were backed by an increasing number of well-known essays and reports, warning against dystopian scenarios resembling the Malthusian expectation. Some of the most influential of these were 'The Tragedy of the Commons' (Hardin, 1968), 'The Population Bomb' (Ehrlich, 1968) and 'The Global 2000 Report to the President' (Barney, 1980), which addressed the devastating risks of population growth and resource depletion. Their view was soon challenged with similar enthusiasm by those supporting the idea that the increasing amount of people and therefore individual initiative and ingenuity would almost inevitably prevent any limits, as had been the case since the birth of the Malthusian dystopia. Among those that directly challenged the publications mentioned above, were 'There are No Limits to Growth' (LaRouche, 1983), 'The Ultimate Resource' (Simon, 1981) and 'The Resourceful Earth: A Response to Global 2000' (Simon and Kahn, 1984).

5. *The circular economy and expectations for the future*

The debate over sustainable resource management, integrated with the new environmental concerns, was soon accompanied by a parallel discussion over the new solutions to be adopted to prevent the Malthusian dystopia. Here too, two representative views have emerged on how to address the issue, differing in their degree of trust in the potential of technological development as a solution.

The first view, expressed by the advocates of happy degrowth, claims the impossibility for technology alone to cope with resource scarcity and other environmental constraints (Latouche, 2006). The only way to reduce resource consumption is to integrate (or even replace) technological development with a willing reduction of consumption (Jackson, 2009). This view finds its roots in the nineteenth century, implicitly acknowledging the basic principles expressed by Malthus, and has more recently been adapted by neo-Malthusians in the twentieth century, presenting a dystopian scenario of famine and devastation as an inevitable consequence of not willingly reducing economic growth drivers. The quest aims at decoupling the concepts of economic growth and development, downsizing the value of GDP as an indicator of the latter (Latouche, 2006, pp. 44-59) and detaching human satisfaction from consumption (Jackson, 2009, pp. 143-156). In contrast, the second view embraces economic growth as the driver of the technological development needed to improve efficiency and reduce concerns for scarcity and externalities. The Brundtland Report, 'Our Common Future' (1987) – famous for its popular definition of sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (p. 43) – presents this view forcefully by affirming the need for constant economic growth in parallel with environmental sustainability. The latter would not be possible without the former, as poorer communities would be forced to stick to inefficient methods of production and energy use with an environmental impact far greater than advanced societies (pp. 196-200). As a sort of compromising solution, the debate now includes a major push to decouple economic growth from material consumption. The approach would both reduce material extraction and maximise their use efficiency, through a compromise between

technological developments aimed at circular productive flows, the turning of as much material consumption as possible into services, the sharing of goods against individual property, and reduced transportation through digitalisation. The expression 'Circular Economy' has become increasingly popular in both academic and social debates and has gradually been adopted as the representative definition of all the activities listed above (Kirchherr et al., 2017). The idea first appeared in the 1980s (Bompan et al., 2016, pp. 34-35) and while there is no officially acknowledged definition of Circular Economy, the most popular one proposed was that from the Ellen McArthur Foundation (Kirchherr et al., 2017, p. 226):

> The Circular Economy is an industrial system that is restorative or regenerative by intention and design. It replaces the 'end-of-life' concept with restoration, shifts towards the use of renewable energy, eliminates the use of toxic chemicals, which impair reuse, and aims for the elimination of waste through the superior design of materials, products, systems, and, within this, business models.
> (Ellen McArthur Foundation, 2012, cited in Bompan et al., 2016 and Kirchherr et al., 2017, p. 226).

The above shows that the main implications of its full implementation would be the elimination of the end of life of materials and the consequent elimination of virgin natural resource extraction. It is arguable that its application to non-renewable resources could be an attempt to close their production chain loop in ways that are conceptually quite similar to the ones adopted in agriculture, where forage is used to feed animals whose manure will then feed crops, a rotation aimed at increasing land use efficiency. The basis also resembles that used by natural ecosystems long before mankind made its appearance on Earth: the constant transformation of biomass in order to

retain it throughout the food chain. This is why the circular economy has often been referred to as an attempt to imitate nature in its way of managing resources (Bompan et al., 2016, pp. 50-55). The substantial difference is that while plants and animals are already subject to a natural reproduction rate fast enough to match human activity, non-renewable resources must be provided with this through technological advancement and innovative practices.

The ideal scenario depicted by circular economy enthusiasts sees a socio-economic system characterised by efficient waste collection and management favouring recycling over other practices. Moreover, it would push for practices preventing the creation of waste in the first place, through efficient production chains, consumption habits and the reuse of goods. A similar approach has also been developed with regards to water management and energy consumption, favouring production from highly renewable sources. A perfectly circular resource management would finally eliminate the need for virgin non-renewable resource extraction, as well as resource disposal (Bompan et al., 2016, pp. 55-60). While the idea of granting our industry and its non-renewable resources the same material flows typical of organic renewable ones in the ecosystem, the expectation has already received several considerations that would make its full realisation unpractical.

1. Thermodynamic Limits: The 'Fourth Law' proposed by Georgescu-Roegen points out that the second law of thermodynamics implies that the energy needs to accomplish material recovery renders total recycling even theoretically impossible (Korhonen et al., 2017, pp. 41-42)[3].

[3] This limitation has been partly confuted. Technically, even the natural ecosystem and agriculture are part of an open system constantly fed and

2. The second, significant large-scale limit has already been addressed above. The Jevons' paradox, or rebound effect, shows how efficiency in the material amount of a resource's use is one of the very drivers of its consumption (Jevons, 1865, p. 74; Meadows et al., 1972, p. 90). The principle implies that an increased efficiency (even in the shape of circularity) in material flows will push towards a higher external input of the same materials into production chains, which will necessarily have to be extracted as virgin resources. While this effect is not necessarily registered at local or microeconomic levels, it will likely be the response at global and macroeconomic levels (Korhonen et al., 2017, pp. 42-45).

This essay has shown how the debate over resource management and related scarcity has developed from the classic political economists in the first industrial revolution to the present day and the main perspectives ahead. It might be interesting to note how the basic elements of the original models and thinking have adapted to historical and technological changes, yet without changing their essential traits. More than two hundred years later, we can still see an ongoing debate between a dystopian view of unmanageable population growth and resource scarcity, and a utopian view of perfect and unlimited efficiency that will always grant growth and abundance to an increasing population. The former is supported by quantitative data on present perspectives of the future, the latter by empirical data

sustained by solar energy, Earth's internal heat and energy derived from its rotation. Those same sources of energy might be used to sustain modern society's energy demand, provided their availability is in proper forms (Boulding, 1966). As thermodynamic limits affect matter only indirectly, in the extent to which they need virtually infinite energy to be endlessly processed, solving the limitation of energy flows might make a closed-loop material economy theoretically possible (Boulding, 1966). Still, this involves consistent consideration for energy needs to sustain circular material flows.

on previous mistakes in those perspectives because of an underestimation of human ingenuity.

It might be appropriate to conclude this essay with a quote from the original theoretical dystopian model of Malthus (1798). Nakazawa and Ozawa (2021) note a citation from John Milton's Paradise Lost (1667), 'The world was all before them where to choose' (Milton, 2001, p. 249), not actually quoted by Malthus but which has appeared in various chapters in all seven of the published editions of Malthus' essay, with a discussion of the potential implications. Milton's poem describes Adam and Eve being forced to leave Paradise after giving birth to the original sin. Once sent to Earth, where suffering and struggle are a relevant and inevitable constant and expectation, they look around and still see an option for partial redemption in the freedom granted by their ingenuity and the vast and diverse landscape surrounding them (Nakazawa and Ozawa, 2021). It will likely never be enough to grant them the utopian scenario they came from, but if properly managed with humility and acknowledgement for risks and limitations, it might be the tool to constantly postpone the more dystopian of futures.

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Imagining and Governing Development: A Historical Analysis of Utopian Ideals and Policy Implications

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Abstract

By retracing the steps of the most prominent development theories since World War II, this essay aims to explore the historical evolution of the concept of 'development' through the lenses of utopia and governance. Conceived as opposing, yet complementary, political modes, the frameworks of 'utopia' and 'governance' offer insights into how we envision, measure and pursue development objectives, as we address the challenge of achieving ambitious goals of growth and progress within systems constrained by rational and circumscribed governance structures. By tracing the progression of key schools of thought in development studies, this article seeks to uncover the extent to which these two ideal-types have influenced prevailing national and international approaches to development policy, highlighting their strengths, challenges and lessons for the future. Emphasis will be placed on both 'mainstream' development theories and more recent perspectives that underscore the importance of sustainability, gender empowerment,

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self-determination and freedom in fostering virtuous development.

Keywords: development theory; economic growth; capability approach; governance; modernisation theory; dependency theory; human development; sustainable development

1. *Modernisation Theory: Embracing the Western Blueprint (1950s-1960s)*

Development is a multifaceted concept encompassing economic, social, political and cultural processes, aimed at enhancing the well-being, capabilities and opportunities of individuals as well as creating an equitable and sustainable future for all (Sen, 1999). Traditionally, development has been narrowly defined in terms of economic growth, but more recent perspectives have emphasised the importance of considering human, social and environmental dimensions in the pursuit of development objectives (UNDP, 1990; WCED, 1987).

The purpose of this essay is to retrace the historical evolution of the concept of development – as represented by the prevalent theories since World War II – through the lenses of utopia and governance. Understanding how the evolution of development *theory* has unfolded over time is crucial, as it sheds light on the underlying assumptions, values and priorities that have shaped development *practices* over time in the form of national and international policies (Escobar, 1995). By examining the progression of development theory, we can gain insights into the successes and failures of past approaches, identify persistent challenges and emerging trends, and inform the formulation of more effective and equitable strategies (Rist, 2008).

Within this context, the concepts of utopia and governance serve as opposing, yet complementary, modes that can help elucidate the ways in which development has been imagined, measured and pursued throughout history. Utopian perspectives on development represent the aspirational goals of growth, progress and human flourishing, while the concept of governance embodies the rational and circumscribed structures that constrain and enable the pursuit of development objectives. By examining the interplay between utopia and governance in development theories, we can deepen our understanding of the tensions and synergies between visionary aspirations and pragmatic considerations in policy and practice.

This essay will explore the strengths, weaknesses and lessons learned from these theories, with a particular focus on both mainstream approaches and more recent perspectives that emphasise human empowerment, self-determination, and freedom. This approach is well-suited to the examination of development policies, which have always grappled with the challenge of achieving utopian goals within a system constrained by governance structures.

Today, most economists concur that the notion of development encompasses various aspects of human experience. Rather than merely associating development with economic growth, it is widely acknowledged that economic, social, political, gender, cultural and environmental dimensions must all be considered and enhanced to achieve genuine 'progress' in human terms. However, until relatively recently, the mainstream discourse on development has been heavily influenced by *growth* theories and models.

Examining the historical experience of the Old Continent, early theoretical models from the 1950s and 1960s viewed development as material growth and industrialisation, and considered countries that had not fully realised these objectives to

be at a more 'primitive' stage of evolution. Two such models, Rostow's Stages of Growth and Lewis's Dual Sector model, encapsulate this view (Lewis, 1954; Rostow, 1960).[2] These perspectives were reflected in the development practices recommended and funded by the most influential nations.

Indeed, this early perspective was rooted in the historical and political conditions of the post-World War II era. Escobar observed that the concept of development did "not [emerge as] a natural process of knowledge that gradually uncovered problems and dealt with them; [...] it must be seen as a historical construct that provides a space in which poor countries are known, specified and intervened upon" (Escobar, 1995).

Key elements of this early discourse included the 'discovery' of poverty by developed nations, the framing of poverty as a global issue, and the adoption of Western living standards as a universal benchmark for measuring progress. These aspects contributed to what Escobar called the "invention" of the Third World, which not only marked the beginning of a concerted effort to combat global poverty, but also established development as a distinct discipline in economics (Escobar, 1995).

[2] Walt Whitman Rostow's *Stages of Economic Growth*, published in 1960, is a classic representation of this period's framing of development. Rostow proposed that societies progress through five stages: traditional society, preconditions for take-off, take-off, drive to maturity, and the age of high mass consumption. The notion of "take-off", influenced by the Industrial Revolution, embodies the belief in the transformative power of industrialisation (Rostow, 1960). Similarly, the Dual Sector model by Sir William Arthur Lewis, published in 1954, imagined development as a transition. Lewis posited that an economy comprises a traditional, often rural, sector and a modern, often urban and industrial, sector. Development, then, was seen as a process of labour moving from the traditional to the modern sector (Lewis, 1954).

Endemic poverty certainly did not originate in 1945. Still, the issues faced by the Global South were framed differently prior to the fall of global colonial empires. During the colonial era, the prevailing belief was that poor countries were 'a lost cause'. There were limits to the extent to which the industrialised nations could 'enlighten' the local populations (Escobar, 1995).

The prevailing views began to shift, particularly within economic circles, with the emergence of modernisation theory in the 1950s. As former colonies asserted their autonomy, the necessity for economic growth and social transformation in newly independent countries started to influence the dominant discourse. This discourse increasingly depicted development as a linear, universal journey that all societies eventually undergo, transitioning from a traditional, agrarian stage to an urban, industrialised one (Lewis, 1954; Rostow, 1960).

Modernisation theorists, such as Rostow, Lewis and Lerner, considered underdevelopment as a shared stage in the history of all countries, resulting from inadequacies in local factors of production. They believed that adopting Western cultural values, political institutions and economic practices would 'modernise' indigenous populations, stimulate technological progress, enhance productivity and establish advanced social structures (Lerner, 1958). On the one hand, they advocated for national specialisation in goods tailored to the specific factor endowments of each developing country. This would enable efficient resource allocation and increased gains from international trade. These gains, in turn, could then be converted into savings and leveraged for investment in transformative policies and enterprises. On the other hand, they emphasised the importance of robust, centralised bureaucracies and efficient political systems modelled on Western examples, as these could

facilitate the establishment of modern state structures (Huntington, 1968).

Far from emerging in a historical vacuum, many argue that modernisation theory also embodied strategic considerations related to securing political dominance and access to natural resources in developing countries, as the latter gained independence from their colonisers. Indeed, the United States (US)' priority of rebuilding Europe after the war depended on securing these resources. From a geopolitical standpoint, the prevalent Western view at the time maintained that if impoverished countries succumbed to their own underdevelopment, communism would likely follow. Therefore, development and poverty became intertwined with the geopolitical confrontation between the two leading superpowers (Escobar, 1995).

The aim of development policy was to guide the evolution of poor countries along the lines of capitalism, envisioning a modern nation where Western relations of production prevailed. As the ability of marginalized populations to exercise self-determination was progressively eroded, the Global North saw itself as holding the key to worldwide progress. For this reason, some critics have viewed the 'war against poverty' as a paternalistic instrument of power and control, serving the strategic priorities of industrialised nations (Escobar, 1995).

As the Marshall Plan (1948) proved successful, faith in science grew among Western thinkers. The notion that transfers of technology could solve the problems of the Third World – regardless of the cultural, social and political conditions in the target countries – gained traction among economists. The discourse on poverty became increasingly detached from cultural and political realms, shifting towards the more 'neutral' and 'objective' realm of science (Escobar, 1995).

By promising rapid transformation and progress for underdeveloped countries through the emulation of Western

production modes, modernisation theory embodied a strong utopian element (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). Ultimately, achieving 'modernity' would lead to improved living standards, equality and social cohesion; it was only a matter of time (Lerner, 1958).

2. *Dependency Theory: Challenging Global Inequalities (1960s-1970s)*

By the late 1960s, it became apparent that the Third World was not experiencing a temporary phase of underdevelopment, but was instead trapped in a condition of *chronic* underdevelopment (Seers, 1969). Alternative perspectives gradually gained ground, centred on the notion that developing countries were structurally different from advanced ones and, consequently, required different paths to overcome their condition.

Colonisation had restructured the economies of former colonies, leading them to specialise in the production of raw materials, trade crops and food commodities for inexpensive export to the Global North (Frank, 1967). This unequal international division of labour, coupled with a diminished capacity for industrialisation and capital accumulation, created an imbalance between a wealthy, industrialised centre and a poor, predominantly agrarian periphery (Prebisch, 1950). Since the prices of manufactured goods from the centre increased at a higher rate than the prices of basic commodities from the periphery, international trade did not aid developing countries in overcoming their condition, as modernisation theorists believed. Instead, it perpetuated an uneven pattern of global development.

These alternative views gave rise to the emergence of the dependency theory in international relations (Frank, 1967; Cardoso & Faletto, 1979), which posited that socioeconomic dependence breeds underdevelopment, and that the progress of peripheral countries is hindered by their relationship with central countries. While the theory gained prominence during the 1960s, its origins can be traced back to the 1940s and 1950s, when the United Nations (UN) Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA, or UNECLA) first characterised global economic relations using the terms 'centre' and 'periphery' (Escobar, 1995; Prado, 2017).[3] Later, dependency theory would become the cornerstone of Marxist and neo-Marxist perspectives on international relations and development (Escobar, 1995).

As a strategy for development, CEPAL and early dependency theorists advocated for import substitution, which prescribed the production of goods for domestic markets rather than their import from the Global North (Hirschman, 1958). The objective was to promote greater domestic industrial diversification and eventually export of manufactured goods (Baer, 1972). However, this strategy often proved counter-productive, as it tended to increase vulnerability to foreign currency and to exacerbate inflation. For countries with limited domestic markets, widespread inefficiencies and slow rates of adoption of

[3] The ECLA is a UN regional commission to encourage economic cooperation. Established in 1948, it changed its name to include the Caribbean in 1984, and is known today as the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, UNECLAC, or CEPAL, in Spanish). Within the Commission, the 'centre' and 'periphery' terminology is most associated with Argentine economist Raúl Prebisch, who served as ECLA's first executive secretary from 1950 to 1963. Under his leadership, ECLA became a key proponent of what has come to be known as the 'Prebisch-Singer Hypothesis', or dependency theory (Prado, 2017).

advanced technologies, this was a recipe for disaster (Krueger, 1980).

The shortcomings of the import substitution strategy prompted a shift towards an export promotion strategy, which prioritised manufacturing finite goods for international markets to develop a comparative advantage (Bhagwati, 1988). This approach relied on leveraging the lower wages and modest domestic consumption typical of underdeveloped countries to enhance international competitiveness. However, during the 1980s, numerous export-oriented nations accumulated substantial external debt (Sachs and Huizinga, 1989), eventually resulting in sovereign debt crises (Krugman, 1988).

The utopian element of dependency theory was its promise of emancipation and self-determination for the Global South, enabled by radical political and economic transformations that would redistribute wealth and power globally (Amin, 1974). In terms of governance, dependency theory emphasised the need for strong, interventionist states that could regulate the economy, protect domestic industries, and resist the pressures of global capitalism (Evans, 1979).

3. *Crossroads of Thought: A Comparison of Modernisation and Dependency Theories*

Modernisation and dependency theories represented contrasting perspectives on development – the former emphasising the universality, linearity and inevitability of development, and the latter highlighting the structural determinants of underdevelopment (Hettne, 1995). While both theories embodied utopian elements, modernisation theory envisioned progress through the emulation of Western models, whereas dependency theory called for a radical transformation and the

assertion of self-determination by the Global South (Peet & Hartwick, 2009).

In terms of governance structures, modernisation theory emphasised the importance of strong, centralised bureaucracies and efficient political systems, whereas dependency theory called for interventionist states that could resist external pressures and be autonomous in the implementation of self-sufficient development policies (Leftwich, 1993). Despite these differences, however, both perspectives acknowledged the key role of the State in guiding the development process by shaping it through public policy (Weiss, 1998).

Early perspectives have had significant implications for public policy, shaping the approaches taken by both national governments and international organisations in the pursuit of development (Killick, 1998). Modernisation theory influenced the promotion of industrialisation, urbanisation, and the diffusion of Western values and institutions (Rapley, 2007) – policies which often led to the prioritisation of large-scale infrastructure projects, investments in education and export-oriented economic strategies (Easterly, 2001). Dependency theory, in contrast, inspired policies aimed at diminishing dependence on the Global North and pursuing self-sufficient development strategies, such as import substitution industrialisation, agrarian reforms and the nationalisation of vital industries (Kay, 2002). Such policies aimed to tackle the structural imbalances and power disparities within the world economy and to champion self-reliance and self-determination for countries in the Global South (Galeano, 1973).

The divergent approaches of modernisation and dependency theories have sparked substantial debate and controversy within the realm of development studies, which have seen their respective policy recommendations being continually critiqued and re-evaluated (Seers, 1969; Hirschman, 1981). While

some aspects of these early development theories have been discredited or revised over time, their core insights remain influential and their legacy can still be observed today, as debates continue over the appropriate role of State intervention, the need for a radical transformation, and the pursuit of global equity and justice (Nederveen Pieterse, 2001).

4. *The Rise of Neoliberalism: Washington Consensus and Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs)*

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed a "neoclassical counter-revolution," which marked a departure from social democratic and Keynesian development policies in advanced countries, as neoliberal thinkers accused State-led interventions of causing economic inefficiency, rent-seeking behaviours, and fiscal imbalances (Williamson, 1990). This shift coincided with efforts by major international institutions like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the US government to establish a unified global market (Stiglitz, 2002).

Neoliberals argued that development could only be achieved through the natural interaction of market forces, rather than strategic State intervention (Bauer, 1984). They believed that development failures stemmed from excessive economic regulation, and thus advocated for minimal State intervention, the elimination of social welfare programmes targeting the poor, market liberalisation, and the privatisation of public enterprises. This approach aimed to allow capital, goods and services to move freely and efficiently within and across self-regulating international markets, guided by the 'invisible hand' (Harvey, 2005).

At the same time, the neoliberal project emphasised the importance of 'good governance principles' (World Bank, 1989). The idea was that the 'invisible hand' could foster positive development only within a high-quality institutional context, encompassing a well-defined set of property rights, currency, financial institutions and the business environment (North, 1990). The essence of good governance, then, was to ensure the proper functioning of these institutions, allowing the free market to 'work its magic' (Williamson, 1990).

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, a new policy framework known as the Washington Consensus emerged as a guiding principle for development policies, epitomising the neoliberal agenda. Coined by economist John Williamson in 1989, the Washington Consensus outlined a set of ten market-oriented policy recommendations that were widely endorsed by key institutions, emphasising fiscal discipline, interest rate liberalisation, trade liberalisation, foreign direct investment promotion, privatisation of state-owned enterprises, deregulation and property rights protection (Williamson, 2000).

Another central aspect of the neoliberal discourse was the implementation of Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs). In the 1980s and 1990s, the IMF and the World Bank began to provide financial aid to developing nations facing economic crises. To receive this assistance, however, the countries in crisis had to agree to implement a series of economic reforms, which typically involved neoliberal measures, such as the reduction or elimination of State subsidies, trade and capital flow liberalisation, privatisation of public enterprises, and reductions in public expenditure on social welfare schemes (Killick, 1995; Stiglitz, 2002). Informed by neoliberalism and the Washington Consensus, these policies aimed to promote macroeconomic stability, reduce fiscal deficits, and increase economic

efficiency through market-oriented reforms (Mosley, Harrigan, & Toye, 1991).

The rise of neoliberalism significantly impacted global development policies, shifting focus away from State-led strategies towards market-oriented policies that prioritised private sector growth and foreign investment (Babb, 2009). Importantly, resource distribution and redistribution within and across countries were removed from the mainstream discourse, with adverse consequences for poor countries (Escobar, 1995). This is the main reason why neoliberalism has sparked intense disagreement in the realm of development studies, as critics assert that it has led to heightened poverty, income disparities and environmental harm in the Global South (Stiglitz, 2002; Cornia, Jolly, & Stewart, 1987). The words of Polanyi, who already in 1944 argued that the neoclassical ideals represented an unrealistic utopia, almost seem to anticipate these critiques:

> Our thesis is that the idea of a self-adjusting market implied a stark *utopia*. Such an institution could not exist for any length of time without annihilating the human and natural substance of society; it would have physically destroyed man and transformed his surroundings into a wilderness. Inevitably, society took measures to protect itself, but whatever measures it took impaired the self-regulation of the market, disorganised industrial life, and thus endangered society in yet another way. It was this dilemma which forced the development of the market system into a definite groove and finally disrupted the social organisation based upon it (Polanyi, 1944)[4].

Here, the definition of the market-driven economy as a utopia is crucial, as it contrasts directly with the neoliberal vision of the laissez-faire market as a natural fact. Not only is such a system an unreachable ideal, but also an undesirable one,

[4] Corsivo mio.

fundamentally at odds with both humanity and nature; indeed, it actively fosters their demise.

Despite significant theoretical and policy differences, there is a common utopianism centred around the belief that development is tied to market expansion, the establishment of well-defined institutions (most especially, private property rights systems) and national income growth (Rostow, 1960). Such utopianism is most evident in the liberalisation and privatisation policies adopted since the 1980s to encourage development and growth convergence between wealthy and impoverished countries (Sachs, 2005; Rodrik, 2007). Ultimately, neoliberalism's impact on development policies and practices remains considerable, influencing how governments and international organisations approach the task of fostering economic growth and social advancement in the 21st century (Peet, 2003).

In summary, neoliberalism and SAPs have significantly influenced development policies since the 1980s, representing a departure from state-led development strategies towards market-oriented reforms. While these policies have been credited with some positive economic outcomes, they have also faced substantial criticism for worsening poverty, inequality and environmental degradation, as well as undermining national sovereignty and democratic governance in the Global South. Indeed, the continuing debate surrounding neoliberalism's effects on development outcomes underscores the complexities and challenges of formulating effective development policies in an increasingly interconnected world.

5. *The Shift Towards People-Centred Development (1970s–)*

Alternatives to mainstream development paradigms encompass a utopian, albeit distinct, vision that is grounded in a thorough critique of the theory and practice of the 'development industry' (Escobar, 1995). Starting from the 1970s, a multitude of critical perspectives also emerged, emphasising the ethnocentric foundations of development models and their potential limitations, as well as the cultural and ethical dimensions intrinsic to the concept of development. Postmodern theories challenged the notion of progress as an inevitability, while postcolonial theory scrutinised the challenges faced by former colonial states in establishing national identities (Spivak, 1988). Subaltern studies, in turn, endeavoured to re-conceptualise history from the perspective of marginalised actors, thereby asserting the value of alternative experiences and development models distinct from the capitalist utopia (Guha, 1982).

All these critiques facilitated a significant paradigm shift: disassociating the concept of development from purely economic growth and personal utility, and emphasising the importance of incorporating social development and human empowerment into the development discourse (Sen, 1999).

Nobel laureate in economics, Amartya Sen, and philosopher Martha Nussbaum played a pivotal role in this revolution, profoundly altering the manner in which the utopia of development was conceptualised, and contributing to the definition of the concept of human development (Sen, 1999). According to Sen and Nussbaum, redistribution is an indispensable condition for addressing inequality – it is, however, insufficient on its own, as inequalities re-emerge at the level of *capabilities* (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993). Their capabilities approach characterises individual well-being not as a static, materialistic condition defined by the mere possession of utility-generating

income or material goods at a specific moment in time, but as a dynamic process wherein resources – while essential for achieving well-being – are not adequate indicators of overall quality of life (Sen, 1992). Well-being, poverty and equality should be assessed within the realm of capabilities, emphasising the actual opportunities people have to lead the lives they value (Sen, 1985). In other words, the focus is shifted from the goods people possess to the ability of people to use those goods in ways that are meaningful to them, leveraging material resources to achieve "desired states of being" (Stanton, 2007).

The capabilities that a person actually uses, in turn, are defined as 'functionings'. By introducing the notion of functionings, Sen and Nussbaum's approach highlights the multiplicity of circumstances that influence individual well-being (Robeyns, 2005). Differences in physical, psychological, social, economic and environmental attributes shape and condition the ability of people to convert resources into functionings (Sen, 1999). Given equal income and resources, individuals possess different needs and capabilities to transform assets into tangible outcomes (Sen, 1999). It is the sum of these potentially attainable capabilities – or concretely realised functionings – that collectively contribute to determining people's quality of life (Nussbaum, 2000).

By reimagining the concept through the lens of human capabilities and functionings, Sen and Nussbaum's approach has significantly broadened our understanding of development. Emphasising the importance of human agency, choice and empowerment in the process of development (Nussbaum, 2000) has been crucial to informing various recent development initiatives, particularly those aimed at enhancing human rights, gender equality, sustainability and participatory decision-making (Alkire, 2005).

One notable achievement was the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) introduction of the 'human development' concept, which "is about people – and about how development expands their choices. It is about more than GNP growth, more than income and wealth, and more than producing commodities and accumulating capital. A person's access to income may be one of the choices, but it is not the sum total of human endeavour" (UNDP, 1990). To measure human development, the UNDP introduced the Human Development Index (HDI) in 1990: a composite, additive index that incorporates health (measured by life expectancy), education (measured by mean and expected years of schooling) and standard of living (measured by GNP per capita) (Haq, 1995; UNDP, 1990). By focusing on these dimensions, the HDI seeks to incorporate the capabilities approach, emphasising the multidimensional nature of human well-being and development and recognising that economic growth alone does not necessarily translate into improved quality of life. At the same time, the index converts all these principles into a comprehensive, operational framework that facilitates the measurement of nations' progress over time, and a comparison between countries of their people-centred development (Stanton, 2007).

The notion of human development has significantly impacted development theory. Not only did it openly challenge the inadequacy of theories that solely relied on macroeconomic factors as proxies for human progress, but it also provided an operational alternative to measuring development in the form of the HDI (Stiglitz et al., 2009). Furthermore, the human development paradigm repositioned the State as a key player in protecting and enhancing human well-being, underscoring the necessity for good governance and socially oriented state policies, which neoliberalism had previously proscribed (Peet and Hartwick, 2009).

In conclusion, from the 1970s, the evolution of the concept of development has been profoundly influenced by critiques of mainstream development paradigms, alternative visions grounded in utopian ideals, and the interplay between development, good governance and human-centred approaches. The human development concept, along with Amartya Sen's capability approach, has shifted the focus from a purely economic perspective to a more holistic understanding of well-being, incorporating social, cultural and environmental aspects of the human experience. This transformation has led to the development of more inclusive and equitable strategies and policies, especially in terms of development cooperation across States. By recognising the value of alternative experiences and development models, as well as acknowledging the multitude of factors that shape human well-being, the field of development studies can continue to advance and contribute to the realisation of a more just and sustainable global society.

6. *Development Theory Through Time: Utopian Aspirations, Governance Realities, and the Path Ahead*

This essay has examined the historical evolution of development theory through the lens of utopia and governance. It has traced the progression from early theories of modernisation and dependency, through neoliberalism and SAPs, to the emergence of revolutionary concepts such as human development, capability approach and alternative perspectives centred on self-determination and freedom. Indeed, the complex interplay between utopian aspirations for human progress and the actual limits of governance have shaped the ways in which development has been imagined, measured and pursued over the course of history.

When looking at development theory through the lens of an historian, several lessons emerge. First and foremost, this exercise has highlighted the importance of considering the complex interplay between the multiple dimensions of development, as evidenced by the shift from a focus on economic growth to more holistic and inclusive approaches (Sen, 1999; UN, 2015). Secondly, it has pointed to the value of incorporating both utopian aspirations and pragmatic governance considerations in the formulation and implementation of development policies (Chambers, 1997).

Drawing on the lessons learned from the historical evolution of development theories, future public policy and development practice can benefit from adopting a more integrated, inclusive and context-sensitive approach. Policymakers and practitioners should consider the multidimensionality of development and strive to balance the pursuit of utopian goals with the realities and constraints of governance structures (Sen, 1999). They should also prioritise the needs and aspirations of marginalised and vulnerable populations, promoting their active participation and empowerment in development processes (Mansuri & Rao, 2004). Finally, the recognition of the interconnectedness between development, social justice, environmental sustainability and cultural diversity can guide the formulation of more equitable, effective and sustainable development policies and programmes (UN, 2015). By embracing these insights, the future of development can be shaped by a more nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between human progress, governance and its limits, and "feasible" utopias.

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The Great Leap Forward and the Chinese Famine Between 1958-1961: The Dystopian Side of a Utopian Development Plan

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is to analyse a crucial period in Chinese state-building between 1958 and 1962, through the conceptual categories of utopia and dystopia. Using the tools of political economy, the main factors that caused the terrible famine and its economic, political and social consequences will be highlighted. On the one hand, the new leadership under Mao sought to modernise China by introducing a series of economic reforms significantly named the "Great Leap Forward". Accompanying these transformations was a relentless propaganda campaign by the central government to extinguish the last counter-revolutionary sparks and strengthen faith in the Chinese Communist Party. It is in the combination of these two elements that Mao's utopian project can be identified: a planned economy and, simultaneously, a state capable of competing with the major world powers. On the other hand,

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however, this series of reforms quickly turned into a dystopia, giving rise to one of the worst famines in contemporary history, which forced Mao to withdraw the policies introduced with the Great Leap Forward.

Keywords: utopia, dystopia, famine, planned economy, political trust

1. *The Utopian Revolutions of the 20th Century*

The theme of *Utopia and Dystopia* played a significant role in the 20th century, particularly if we consider the birth of new States, such as the USSR or the People's Republic of China. Part of the aim of these processes was to replace the existing society with a different one and, for this reason, a certain level of utopian thought was seen as a common thread through the different revolutionary experiences. The revolutionary process provokes a drastic change in the current state of things and this change enables those who win to build a society that is supposed to differ completely from the previous one[2]. The focus of this paper is to analyse the period of the Great Leap Forward and the subsequent famine that impacted China between 1958-1961, 10 years after the end of the civil war between the Communists and the nationalists.

The first question that needs to be answered regards the choice of China. Over the last two and a half centuries, the world has witnessed several revolutionary experiences or civil wars that have proved relevant in shaping our political and international system. Among these, we can cite the French

[2] The values and political ideas of those who gained power are a central aspect of the new society and, usually, this process is very close to the attempt of building a utopian society.

Revolution, the American Revolution and the October Revolution. However, these events have been widely studied and analysed from different perspectives that underlined their impacts from a political, economic and sociological point of view (Scokpol, 1979; Brinton, 1965; Tilly, 1978). In this respect, the Chinese Revolution and Great Leap Forward, inspired by the oversized ambitions of Mao, are generally less well known. Despite this fact, the creation of the People's Republic of China is of primary importance for many reasons if we want to discuss *Utopia and Dystopia* in contemporary state-building. The importance of Beijing in the international system has increased sharply over the last few decades, seeing both the U.S. and European Union change their approach to China. Western policymakers realised that beyond the mutual gains from trade, there were certain security issues to address. Understanding the Chinese state-building process helps to analyse their current politics. Another aspect worth noting, is that the Chinese government's control over its citizens is pervasive and touches very intimate spheres of private life[3]. The Chinese government has succeeded at maintaining a strict control over its citizens' lives despite the increase in new communication tools and the spread of globalisation.

The aim of this paper is to link Mao's ambitions, that were significantly utopian in part, with the set of policies known as the Great Leap Forward. These policies were responsible for one of the worst famines in human history, and the consequences still affect Chinese society today. This paper seeks to

[3] Among the most common policies introduced, it is possible to find the *One-child policy* until 2015 that restricted to one the number of children that a family could have in certain areas of the country, the *Great Firewall* that blocks a large number of websites and the *Social credit system* to monitor the trustworthiness of citizens.

show how utopian thinking in the context of economic reform can turn into a dystopian reality. The sections in this paper will be organised as follows: paragraph I will present the historical context of the Civil War that led Mao to victory. Paragraph II will focus on the Great Leap Forward, highlighting its key elements and including the utopian vision held by Mao and his government of China's future. Paragraph III will focus on the famine that hit China around 1958-1961, one of the severest in human history. Paragraph IV will discuss some of the consequences of the famine that still persist, seeking to underline how deep the impact of such an event can be on a society.

2. *The Historical Context of the Great Leap Forward*

The process that led the Communists to power in China was as long and complex as the October Revolution in Russia. However, it is important to review it briefly, as will be evident later in this essay, in order to understand the consequences of the famine.

The economic system of the *Ancien Regime* in China (before 1911) was largely based on agriculture. Farmers cultivated the land in small plots but faced high taxes and oppression from the dominant system, which brought a stop to agricultural development. Another important aspect worth noting, is that the Chinese government had already built a bureaucratic system where the selection of officials was based not on family origins but on a test; a more modern selection process than, for example, the French case (Skocpol, 1979, pp.236-283). Against these premises, it is possible to briefly analyse the civil war that brought the Communists to power in 1949.

In the early 1920s, the Kuomintang nationalists and the Chinese Communist Party formed an alliance against the imperial

system. This was an alliance not intended to endure, as there were several differences between the two parties. However, this first united action was crucial in provoking a radical change in the existing society. The empire was already facing some difficulties in ruling the country, and local war lords had gained power at the expense of the central government. The alliance between the nationalists and the Communists, to some extent also encouraged by the U.S.S.R., sought to achieve a democratic revolution by conquering those areas under the war lords' control between 1923 and 1926.

A key aspect of the civil war, which will display its relationship with the theme of *Utopia and Dystopia*, was evidently the propaganda that both the Communists and the nationalists implemented to gain the support of local populations. Given the significant role played by agriculture in the Chinese economy, the target of this propaganda was the farmers who were suffering under the *Anciene Regime*[4]. In this sense, the Chinese Communist Party and its world vision based on the Marxist-Leninist doctrine were very popular among the peasants (Skocpol, 1979, pp.112-158)[5]. The popularity of the Communists was a breaking point in the alliance with the nationalists, who feared their increasing power (Wu, 1969). In 1927, the civil war started, and the nationalist government began a programme of Communist persecution, forcing them to hide in the country's rural areas. In these remote parts of China, the Chinese Communist Party organised a well-structured army and built a strong relationship with the farmers, who allowed them to use

[4] Ironically, as it will be explained later, the rural population suffered the most from the famine.

[5] Skocpol believes that the universalism of some political doctrines, such as the Marxist-Leninist or Jacobinism, is fundamental to social revolutions. A universal political view of the society can show its utopian elements very easily.

their resources in return for protection. Clearly, this increased their popularity (Bianco, 1971, pp.199-210).

A few years later, when Japan invaded China, Mao and his allies saw an opportunity to exploit the situation and stage a return to the centre of the political arena. They proposed a national unity to fight the invader and protect the Chinese people, especially in the region of Manchuria (Coogan, 1994). The Chinese Communist Party began to regain support among a large share of the population; this led to the break-up of the United Front and saw the Communists fighting against both the nationalists and the Japanese. After several years of war and the defeat of Japan in World War II, the Chinese Communist Party declared the Communist Republic.

What is crucial to understand, it is that the civil war and subsequent liberation was a lengthy process that did not happen uniformly across the country, but took strategic organisation and the formation of a local bureaucratic class to implement the reforms that the Communists aimed to introduce (Skocpol, 1979, pp.236-283). This influenced later decisions, including the Great Leap Forward and Mao's plan to industrialise the country in order to compete with the most powerful western countries.

3. *The Great Leap Forward and the "Chinese Way"*

Given the geostrategic position of China, it is not surprising that western countries and the Soviet Union tried to influence the events of the civil war. Due to their ideological alignment, the U.S.S.R. supported the side of the Chinese Communist Party, and helped the new government at first to build a new socialist republic (Skocpol, 1979, pp.236-283). It was in this context that the first elements of Mao's utopian ideas

developed, with the aim of building something new with respect to the Soviet Union experience. In order to understand the Great Leap Forward, it is crucial to start with an analysis of the Sino-Soviet relationship before the Chinese government chose a communist society, with its characteristics, as the main goal.

During the first years after the civil war, Beijing had a positive relationship with the Soviet state and China was seen by communist intellectuals across the world as proof that the socialist revolution could spread outside Russia[6] (Shen, Xia, 2011). However, many historical documents describe how initial frictions between the two communist leaderships began around the mid 1950s, when Mao's ambitions increased after having secured control of the Chinese territory. In 1956, after the 20th congress of the Chinese Communist Party, the Soviet Union was seen by the Chinese leader as an *"object lesson"* (Shen, Xia, 2011), meaning that Mao believed that China could build socialism faster. Theoretically, Mao's reasoning could have been correct: the U.S.S.R. gave to the Chinese government examples of both the mistakes and correct steps taken by the Soviet leaders following the October Revolution.

However, Mao's ambitions went too far. He started to think that China could overtake important western countries and the Soviet Union in just a few years by implementing the correct reforms to increase industrialisation and modernise agriculture (Shen, Xia, 2011). A utopian element is evident in his thinking, since the civil war and Japan's invasion left China with several issues requiring attention. Shen and Xia (2011)

[6] For instance, the leader of the Swiss Labour Party viewed Mao's attempt to more rapidly build a communist society in a positive light and, in general, there was widespread support of the Great Leap Forward among Marxist intellectuals (Shen, Xia, 2011).

translated several passages from some of Mao's speeches when he was developing the idea of the Great Leap Forward. During the second speech at the 2nd Plenum of the Eight Party Congress he said: "We do not raise the slogan of 'cadres decide everything' and 'technologies decide everything' that Stalin put forward. Nor do we raise the slogan of 'Soviet plus electrification equals communism' that Lenin put forward. Our slogan is to build socialism in a fuller, quicker and more effective way. Is this slogan wiser? I think it is. We are students educated by the masters and should be wiser. The latecomers come first! In my view, communism may arrive earlier in China than in the Soviet Union."

As the start of the Great Leap Forward approached, Mao's ambitions went even further: with a sense of euphoria, he constantly reduced the time-lap to overtake many other countries in the process of development (MacFarquhar, 1983). Initially, the Soviet Union considered the Great Leap Forward and the Chinese leadership's efforts to build a new socialist society positively. However, following their early enthusiasm, they saw that Mao and his leaders were walking on thin ice. Shen and Xia (2011) analysed Khruschev's memories, and it is clear that Moscow realised that the reforms Mao aimed to implement were very dangerous and could lead China into several crises. Ironically, Khruschev underlined how several aspects of the Great Leap Forward had been present in the Soviet policies of the 1930s, with devasting consequences (Khruschev, 1974). Mao's communist utopian plan turned into a dystopian system for many people. The main aspect of this dystopian reality concerned the living conditions in China's rural areas, where peasants – who had provided an important support to the Chinese Communist Party during the Civil War – suffered the harshest consequences of Mao's new policies and which resulted in one of the most terrible famines in history.

The reforms introduced by Mao sought to change the relationships of production, the industrial composition and, in general, the whole economy of the country. This impacted, among other factors, the grain output, which saw China succumb to one of the greatest famines in human history.

The Great Leap Forward involved a strict centralisation of the economy, meaning that if anything went wrong, the impact would affect the entire country (Li, Tao Yang, 2005). Between 1958 and 1961 many things in Chinese industrial relations changed. The main aspect to consider is the diversification of resources from agriculture to industry and construction. Approximately 16 million peasants moved to the cities to work in these new sectors, but at that time, the number far exceeded the industrial capacity (Li, Tao Yang, 2005). Since many workers were relocated to boost industrial development, the Chinese government had to increase grain production, and agricultural production in general, to feed these workers. Mao decided to organise a collectivization of agriculture that, to his mind, would increase productivity.

Along with the reallocation of the workforce, Mao introduced a series of administrative reforms that merged smaller communities into 26,500 "people's communes", aiming for a more efficient use of resources[7] (Li, Tao Yang, 2005). In summary, then, the three pillars of the Great Leap Forward were: industrialisation, the collectivisation of agriculture, and administrative reforms. These reforms were not introduced peacefully, and in many cases the government repressed those who opposed the Great Leap Forward. Mao exploited the civil war's long duration to eliminate those who were not aligned with the new government, calling them counterrevolutionaries, a

[7] Every commune included around 5.000 households, and they were forced to eat and work together in line with a collectivisation system.

weapon that has been used widely in other revolutionary experiences. However, the repression initiated a period of terror where even the officers that supported the Great Leap Forward were afraid of the central government, to the point that they started to lie about the goals and development of the reforms (Li, Tao Yang, 2005). This is a key element to understanding the beginning of the famine.

4. *The Chinese Famine and the Real Dystopia*

The Chinese famine still remains a little-known topic for several reasons. Firstly, the government tried to hide the most devasting effects and, since the regions that were hit hardest were the country's rural areas, it was difficult to collect precise data on the number of deaths and other social indicators. Even many decades later, the government still used propaganda and the control of public opinion to hide important details of the famine and, particularly, the responsibilities of the communist leadership. Due to the lack of information, historians are still debating the exact number of deaths. Using previous research reports[8], Li and Tao Yang (2005) estimated that between 15 and 35 million people died because of the famine. It is an impressive number, close to 5% of the Chinese population at the end of the 1950s. However, such a large range leaves space for the political use of these numbers[9]. Another important aspect

[8] They pointed out that the variation in numbers is due to the different datasets and estimation techniques used by demographers to understand the true number of deaths.

[9] Critics of the regime will tend to keep the numbers high, while supporters will tend to keep estimates lower and reduce the involvement of the Chinese government. Probably, it will be impossible to know the exact number of

worth noting is the heterogeneity of the famine's geographical impact, which saw some regions suffering harder consequences than others, and which helped the government propaganda to blame natural disasters and not the policies introduced with the Great Leap Forward (Chang, Wen, 1998).

Why did the famine become so severe in China? It is possible to identify a combination of several factors that contributed to worsening a situation already compromised by the industrial policies introduced with the Great Leap Forward. Due to the harshness of repression, local officers were incentivised to apply the reforms even if they could see that they were not working, or to lie about grain procurement[10] for fear of being labelled as counterrevolutionaries and, in the best-case scenario, being removed from their jobs (Li, Tao Yang, 2005). Even though overall grain production increased during the years of the Great Leap Forward, it was not enough to feed the whole population (Chang, Wen, 1998) or achieve the development that Mao had envisaged would see China overtake western countries and the Soviet Union. For instance, the net export of grain increased from an average of 2.11 million tons in the period 1953-1957 to 3.95 million tons in 1959, but the grain retained in rural areas decreased by 273 kg per capita in 1957 to 193 kg in 1959 (Li, Tao Yang, 2005).

However, China is not the only regime or country where a famine has occurred due to incorrect policies or for a combination of factors saw agricultural production decrease. Another explanation for the severity of this famine could lie in

people who lost their lives in this terrible famine, but understanding the causes is still important from an historical and political perspective.

[10] Since the grain was sent to urban areas to feed the workers that were involved in the industrialisation process, the government started to take more grain than what was available to keep the peasants alive and healthy. This led to a decrease in productivity that worsened the situation.

the economic theory and, particularly, in an analysis of a specific policy introduced by Mao. Chang and Wen (1998) identified a problem of consumption inefficiency. When Mao reformed the administration, he introduced the People's Commune, a system of working and living based on collectivisation. Chang and Weng stressed how the Communes did not define either property or food rights. Since some economic theories (Coase, 1960; Pareto, 2014) state that without these rights, agents couldn't reach an efficient allocation of resources, they include this aspect to explain the severity of the famine. The idea is that if food is provided free of charge, people will tend to pay less attention to optimising their consumption. Significant food wastage in the first year of the Great Leap Forward could have worsened a situation already compromised by Mao's ambitions, causing a decline in productivity and, therefore, a worsening of the famine. Xue Muqiao (1974) estimated that in 1959, wasteful use of food accounted for 11% of the rural grain supply.

There are other explanations for famines across the world, but this one seems particularly appropriate for the Chinese context. The utopian ambitions of Mao and the Chinese government turned into a dystopian reality for the millions of people that suffered these consequences. The fear of being labelled a counter-revolutionary, the starvation that followed the fall in grain per capita in rural areas, and the destruction of expectations created by government propaganda were the main characteristics of this dystopian reality. The policies introduced in 1958 were cancelled around 1961-1962 and China found other ways to implement its development. Nevertheless, the Chinese famine left a deep wound in society with some important implications that will be analysed in the next section.

5. *The Long-term Consequences of the Chinese Famine*

The Chinese government never admitted its responsibilities in the famine and officially blamed natural disasters. The fact that in some regions few natural disasters occurred created a heterogeneity effect of long-term consequences of the famine; this was because in those areas that suffered floods or droughts, the propaganda could better disguise the political responsibilities of the Chinese leadership. For instance, children were taught nursery rhymes highlighting Mao's efforts for the nation in those difficult years. Another common form of propaganda were articles published in the *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party. Officially, the government called the period 1958-1961 "*three years of natural disasters"*, until 1981 when it was labelled as "*three years of great difficulties"*. This does not mean that some members of the Party did not admit to having made mistakes, but rather that some of the policies supporting the industrialisation of China made redemption easier (Joseph, 1986). Bo Yibo, a Chinese politician and Former Minister of Finance, in 1981 admitted, in a moment of self-criticism, that the people forgave the communist leadership because they knew that their intentions were good (Joseph, 1986). Since the first years following the famine, many Chinese politicians sought to understand what went wrong during the Great Leap Forward, which included a serious analysis of their conception of agrarian socialism and its compatibility with the Marxist view of industrial relations (Joseph, 1986). However, the people did not fully excuse the Chinese Communist Party, as the government's responses to growing dissent in the 1960s showed.

There is substantial literature in Economics showing the link between a traumatic event, such as a famine, and a lower performance in many social indicators (Sen, 1981; O'Rourke,

1994). It is not hard to understand why, in the short term, this would be the case: a worker who cannot eat properly and consume all the correct nutrients will have a lower productivity and this will result in a general lower economic performance for the society. However, these events leave wounds in the society that can linger and affect its growth in many ways[11]. For example, children born of mothers who experienced famine while they were pregnant may suffer health conditions that last for the rest of their lives and could affect their cognitive capabilities. In this sense, the Chinese famine is no exception.

We can divide the analysis of the consequences across two different frameworks: the first looks at the effects at a macro-level by trying to understand how the overall society was affected by this event. The second one looks at individuals and how this event impacted their lives.

Gooch (2016) tried to estimate the relationship between the Chinese famine and the Chinese GDP per capita over the long term. Using an OLS[12] regression, the author found that regions with a higher excess mortality rate during the period 1959-1961 were associated with a lower Chinese GDP per capita in 2010. After almost 50 years, the famine still appeared to have a significant effect on growth in these regions. To establish a causal relationship between the two variables, Gooch (2016) also implemented an Instrumental Variable estimation[13] by analysing

[11] There are several indicators that could be affected by a famine: for instance, productivity per worker, children's test scores, health conditions connected with starvation and level of trust in institutions. Overall, all these indicators are useful to understand the level of development of a society.

[12] The Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) is one of the most common techniques used in statistics and econometrics to understand the relationship between two variables (Stock, Watson, 2011, pp. 114-119).

[13] The Instrumental Variable estimation (IV) is a technique that deals with several issues of a simple OLS (Stock, Watson, 2011, pp.425-433).

the timeline of the liberation of Chinese regions during the civil war. Territories that were conquered later by the communists tended to more strongly resist the expansion of the Chinese Communist Party; in these regions, therefore, the central government entrusted power to non-local officials who would be more likely to strictly implement the Great Leap Forward. Her results are consistent with the idea that political radicalism could have worsened the situation, as local leaders would likely feel more empathy towards their population and, therefore, soften certain policies.

It has been highlighted how the Chinese government blamed natural disasters for the famine, and how people believed that Mao's reforms were implemented with good intentions and, therefore, the communist leadership should be forgiven. After several decades, however, the story seems to have changed, and recent studies have proved that the famine had an impact on citizens' perceptions of the government. Chen and Yang (2015) conducted an empirical study to measure how this event affected political trust in Chinese citizens both at the local and central level. Since the famine was a heterogeneous event that did not affect all provinces in the same way, it is possible to use this fact to analyse the causal impact on the accountability of the government. They combined the severity of the famine and the presence in that region of a natural disaster, for instance floods; they then used the China Family Panel Study[14] to explore the relationship between the previous variables and political trust. As would be expected, in regions where the famine was particularly severe and natural disasters did not

[14] The China Family Panel Study is a biennial survey that was created in 2010 by Peking University. They use a non-public version that contains sensitive information about traumatic events and political trust.

occur, the level of political trust was lower[15], while in regions that experienced calamities it was higher; this emphasises how well government propaganda worked in this case. The survey that they used was from 2010, more than 50 years after the start of the Great Leap Forward, showing how this tragic event is still affecting Chinese politics.

These findings are more aligned with the views of Dutch historian, Frank Dikötter (2011), on the Chinese famine[16]. In an article in *Foreign Policy*, Dikötter (2013) highlighted the fact that it is almost impossible to find pictures of the famine or other evidence of this period apart from a few bureaucratic documents that describe what was happening but without analysing it in detail. Dikötter believes that the communist leaders probably destroyed a lot of documentation that bore testament to the Chinese famine. This suggests that the government did not assume all its responsibilities and it seems more likely that the leaders, including Mao, tried to use propaganda and the *Cultural Revolution* to hide their faults[17].

Along with the macro consequences of the famine that affected variables such as political trust in the government or GDP per capita, economists and social scientists tried to understand the impact on the individual level. There is substantial literature, especially in the psychological field, that underlines

[15] It is important to underline that there is a difference in political trust between local and central government; however, some studies indicate a strong correlation between the two (Cantoni et al., 2014).

[16] His book on the Chinese famine won the Samuel Johnson Prize in 2011, and received many accolades as well as many criticisms. It describes the impact of this event on the lives of ordinary people and the pain that they suffered, especially in rural areas.

[17] Dikötter makes a comparison with the Ukrainian famine (known as the *Holodomor*) when, after several decades, some evidence emerged, with Moscow's responsibilities in the event now being well-established.

how a tragic event in childhood can affect several aspects of our lives even many years later (Redelmeier and Khaneman, 1996). The Chinese famine could certainly be considered a traumatic experience for a child. Feng and Johansson (2012) used this idea to understand how the famine affected the later lives of a particular category of people, namely financial and business managers. Using a sample of all the major Chinese firms and the information available on their CEOs, they found that managers that were children during the time of the famine tended to behave more conservatively when making financial decisions and, additionally, displayed a more risk adverse behaviour[18]. To establish a causal relationship, they also included the severity of the famine by region and the results suggested that this conservative behaviour was even higher in CEOs that came from areas where starvation was more widespread (Feng and Johansson, 2012).

Finally, there is a strong relationship between famine and individual health characteristics. Gørgens et al. (2012) found that children who suffered starvation during the first years of life are on average shorter (approximately 2 centimetres) than they could have been. This is consistent with all the indicators from the WHO and other health organisations that have documented this effect in African villages where malnutrition is a serious issue. This will affect performances in several different areas: Hoddinott et al. (2008) found a relationship between correct childhood nutrition and long-term productivity, by analysing after several years, an experiment implemented by The Institute of Nutrition of Central America and Panama

[18] Among the variables where this conservative attitude is most pronounced, we found corporate fraud, financial leverage and debt.

(INCAP): this stressed the importance of consuming the proper nutrients to have better life indicators in the future[19].

6. *A Fast and Steep Transition from Utopia to Dystopia*

In conclusion, it possible to say that every revolutionary experience starts with the aim of replacing an existing society with a new one, and that utopian thinking is a significant part of this process. The Chinese civil war lasted for many years and only after World War II could Mao and his comrades form the People's Republic of China. To some extent, one can understand Mao's eagerness to build a country that could compete with the most powerful nations, like the United States and the Soviet Union. With this goal fixed in mind, the utopian project of his reforms gained prominence to become the main task of his government. In this context, the Sino-Soviet split assumes a particular relevance, since at first the Soviet leadership offered to help China in its development. However, Mao's ambitions went too far with his belief that he could build a new developed communist society more rapidly, forgetting the mistakes that the Soviets had made in the 1930s (Khruschev, 1974).

Unfortunately, leaders sometimes get trapped in their own utopian thinking; the ambitious industrial plan of the Great Leap Forward underlined a leadership that, in some respects, ignored the real conditions of the country it was ruling and that, at some point, turned into a dystopia. The biggest mistake was thinking that certain mechanisms present in a society for

[19] Between 1969 and 1977, the INCAP performed this research in Guatemala with the aim of understanding the impact of a correct nutrition in a pregnant mother on the cognitive development of the children. Different indicators of well-being, such as wages and test scores, can improve with a correct alimentation.

many decades, not to mention centuries, can be changed suddenly with the introduction of new policies and a new way of living and organising people's lives. In this sense, the Great Leap Forward can be seen as a big experiment that failed miserably, causing one of the biggest famines in human history.

The Chinese famine resulted in the death of millions of people in horrific circumstances and the long-term consequences of this tragic event still reverberate in Chinese society on multiple levels: economic, health and political. In this sense, the dystopian side of the Great Leap Forward goes beyond the repression of the so-called counter-revolutionaries and the losses that many families suffered due to starvation. In fact, we have shown how people's lives have been affected in the long run, leaving a wound in Chinese society that will likely persist for years. The most terrifying aspect is the speed with which a society that should have been launched into economic development found itself in terrible conditions. In less than one year, from 1958 to 1959, the policies implemented caused a grain shortage in rural areas while the new administrative system, based on the idea of collectivisation, revealed its limitations, condemning to starvation those who were not lucky enough to live in urban areas.

What also worsened the situation, was the role played by the government and the Chinese leadership's refusal to take full responsibility for this tragedy; on the contrary, leaders used their power to cover up evidence and place the blame on natural disasters such as floods and droughts. This fact increased the dystopian aspect of those tragic years: those who suffered the worst consequences, saw their lives changed following the introduction of new policies but then had to witness the elimination of these failed policies while officially being forced to blame natural disasters. It should not be a surprise, then, that the trust level in the political class is lower in those areas where

people starved the most. Even now, the Chinese famine remains a sensitive topic, and even though the government and politicians have admitted some responsibility, it is still hard to obtain precise data to analyse what happened in detail. Overall, this amplifies the dystopian nature of this tragic event as it will not be possible to obtain precise records of what people suffered and how they tried to survive. However, this is also a key aspect of a dystopian society, where the truth is often hidden.

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Nostalgia for the Past in the "New Turkey". Kemalism and Islamism at the Brink of a Utopian-Dystopian Divide.

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Abstract

The now twenty years the AKP party has been in power have certainly brought radical changes, both in the domestic sphere and in the foreign policies of Turkey. A crucial role is played by the "New Turkey" (*Yeni Türkiye*) project, both as an electoral manifesto and a popular narrative of politics, culture, business and everyday life. This vision, characterised by Islamist features, anti-western rhetoric and memories of the Ottoman golden age, has somehow succeeded in discarding the old Kemalist dream of Westernisation as a utopian top-down and exclusionary social engineering process. At the same time, the *Yeni Türkiye* project draws on reinterpretations of history and a glorification of the Ottoman past. Therefore, this chapter aims to show how, despite apparently supporting two contrasting ideas of Turkey's state/nation-building process, both the Kemalist and New Turkey projects deal with their own nostalgia for the past that lies at the brink of a utopian-dystopian divide.

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1. *A Country of Nostalgia*

> Memory and forgetting are two sides of the same coin. Indeed, each provides the presupposition for the existence of the other. There is also something in between memory and forgetting, which describes the status of the trauma (Papadakis, 1993, p. 139).

It is exactly this status of trauma that forged the creation of the Republic of Turkey, which was one of the outcomes of the massive transformations that began during the latter half of the nineteenth century and culminated in the Great War, fuelled by the powerful forces of nationalism, modernisation, imperialism, and war (Reynolds, 2011). The fall of the Ottoman Empire left traumatic scars on the memory of Turks, which have consolidated in a national psyche of fear and collective victimhood within the Turkish people at having lost their nation to external and internal enemies (Gülsah Çapan and Zarakol, p. 272). Known as "Sèvres Syndrome", this ontological insecurity guided the emerging republican establishment to erect its concept and construction of the Turkish nation and state in clear opposition to its preceding experience. As such, modern Turkey was created through a top-down nation-building project that rejected the Ottoman cultural heritage and used all means to "erase it from memory" (Zürcher, 2008). Therefore, debating the legacy of the Ottoman Empire remained a taboo topic due to the Republic's policy of forgetting the Ottoman past in order to forge a new national and secular (Turkish and Western) identity for the present and future of the Republic. However, more or less manifestly, the ideal and memory of this past

continued to simmer beneath the ongoing nation-state project of the Republic of Turkey. Although the Kemalist nation-building incorporated all means to suppress the Ottoman heritage, this imperial "ghost" still haunts the state and society and has done so since the empire collapsed: "the more it was pressed – just like a spring – the more it responded with the same intensity of remembering that imperial past" (Yavuz, 2020, p. 6).

It is no coincidence that a common saying among Turks translates as "we are a country of melancholy"[2]. In the Turkish sociocultural environment, from music to politics, the concept of melancholy (*hüzün*) is closely related to a sense of nostalgia for something that is lost in the past, but that recurs – or that can be recovered – in everyday life. This combination represents the gloomy feeling that things are in decline and that the situation – often political in nature – will probably get gradually worse, unless each individual makes that sentiment their own so as to make things better.

In concrete terms, this appears evident in contemporary Turkey under the now twenty-year rule of the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*), which – while looking back at the forgotten Islamic-Ottoman past – aims to build a "New Turkey" (*Yeni Türkiye)* for the future. Under AKP rule, according to its "ideologue" Kalın, "Turkey returned to its past experience, dreams and aspirations in its greater hinterland. Turkey's post-modernity seems to be embedded in its Ottoman past" (2010, p. 99). From this viewpoint, the *Yeni Türkiye* concept "loudly reverberates echoes of empire in which the image of a rising Turkey encourages the people to think of the current government as a total break with the Kemalist past and a resurrection of a glorious Ottoman history" (Fisher Onar, 2015, p. 149).

[2] In Turkish, *bizler hüzünlü bir milletiz.*

As such, it demonstrates how the dominant Kemalist ideological scheme in Turkey was, and still is, contested via its selective recycling of the past and interpretation of the present in terms of historical *myths*, thus presenting a *counter-memory* and *counter-hegemonic* vision to challenge the traditional dominant one by reshaping all its elements in an identity-formation process (Foucault, 1997).

In this regard, what seems to be at play in Turkey is the "politics of nostalgia", which operates as "a whitewashed past, a glorious era that everyone can rally around, everyone and everything being of a constructed and contested nature" (Elci, 2022, p. 15). In this sense, the most vital source of legitimacy of those currently in office stems from combining a "nostalgia for the old" with a new vision for the future that allows one to "invent a tradition" in which continuity with a "gold pre-Kemalist past" is to be established (Hobsbawm, 1983). In today's Turkey, the vogue for the Ottoman Empire is more than mere politics: it is rather a social concept, a bundle of historically rooted emotions, a form of behaviour, and an identity (Batuman, 2014). However, Neo-Ottomanism is not about a discourse fixed in the past, as romanticising the time before the decline of the Ottoman realm is actually a nostalgic evocation to be critical of the present. Thus, the current re-imagination of the Ottoman past offers "a cognitive space for examining the cultural entanglement between nostalgia for the Ottoman past and utopia for Turkey's future" (Yavuz, 2020, p. 8). It helps to understand whether, both in discursive and practical terms, this brand-new conception of the Turkish state-society is a socio-political aspiration for a better country through dreaming, hoping and wishing for a better world, or merely an imagined past that, in being projected into the future, creates a dystopian present (Levitas, 2010).

2. *Reacting to a Utopian Nation-building Process*

In general, this emerging narrative divides the political history of the Turkish Republic into two eras: the Kemalist period (the old Turkey) and the post-Kemalist period (the AKP era). The latter is presented as the antithesis of the former, in which *Yeni Türkiye* fills the vacuum created by the demise of the secularist, centralist and authoritarian reign of the Kemalist period; the putative new master narrative of the Turkish nation and the replacement of the formerly dominant reading of national history. As Alaranta (2015, p. 94) remarks, "*Yeni Türkiye* is both a catchword, disseminated publicly in order to define the core elements of a particular national conception aimed at hegemony [...], and a mobilising tool intended to de-contest that which is fundamentally contested – namely, national identity". This is because the national past (or history) is often defined by memorable events and restricted to selected historical periods, without due attention paid to historical antecedents, and this contributes towards a perception of the nation in the singular – as one nation, one community, and one identity. However, the struggle between different constituencies over the ability to define the national past (of the individual nation-states) constitutes the general framework within which all national politics coalesce. The construction of national identity, and in particular the civilisational identity within which this is placed in different eras and historical contexts, is a "highly political act, serving the purpose of building an emotionally and intellectually credible basis for a collective political actor in the context of popular sovereignty" (Alaranta, 2015, p. 283). The consequences stemming from these narratives are dependent on how these collective identities are framed, and the kind of national projects they serve to legitimise.

It is evident that, while sharing nationalist substrates, the competing modernisation projects have divergent interpretations of Turkey's civilisational identity and the main characteristics of her national identity. What Mardin (1973) coined the "centre-periphery cleavage" explains how the country's contemporary secularist-Islamist struggle is a continuation of the socio-cultural and socio-economic duality between the ruling centre and ruled periphery in the Ottoman Empire. While the former embraced secularism, Turkish nationalism, unitary state and state-supervised economy, the latter supports Islamism, conservatism, a liberal economy and decentralised state. Not only does the centre-periphery cleavage now overlap with the left-right dimension – where the left appears as supportive of secularism and the right as the champion of Islamism – but a further third dimension has now emerged, with the (re)definition of Turkish nationalism and nationhood as comprising multiple components – Turkism, Kemalism, Islamism and Ottomanism (Çarkoğlu, 2012).

In order to find their roots, one has to look at what happened a hundred years ago, when Turkey's President Mustafa Kemal (later Atatürk) and other key political figures in the establishment of the Republic, radicalised the Westernisation (*batılılaşmak*) project originally started in the Ottoman Empire during the nineteenth century. In their mindset, the nation-building project was based on a holistic understanding of modernity, requiring Turkey to absorb what was then seen as the universal aspects of modernity, namely a rational-scientific worldview and secularism. The new Kemalist elite thus tried to homogenise the nation and undertook a "Turkification" project, in which not only non-Turkish/Muslim identities but also certain cultural-ethnic-religious groups were securitised and fashioned as existential threats. Moreover, because their Ottoman predecessors were seen as being stuck in the past due to

religious governance, they engaged in a "civilising mission" to promote secular nationalism through an assertive social engineering at different levels of society. In political terms, these reforms were an attempt to shift the basis of political legitimacy from Islam to the secular democratic principle of popular sovereignty. Although the Kemalist struggle against the "*ancien régime*" of the Ottoman ruling class has been described as a "Jacobin civilising process from above so as to create a new way of life", its actual spill-over effects were not speedy enough to produce the expected long-standing transformation in cultural outlook of all individuals (Cizre-Sakallioğlu, 1994).

In direct confrontation with this holistic interpretation, counter-narratives had already emerged in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Since their emergence in Turkish politics in the early 1970s, the most visible and wide-ranging ones came from conservative-Islamist circles. Their unique rhetoric famously referred to themselves as "the blacks" (*siyah*) of Turkey who were stigmatised and discriminated against by "the white" (*beyaz*) Turks and Kemalist hegemony, and were deprived of opportunities of employment in prestigious positions and of upward mobility. They referred to Kemalism as a "quasi-religion", given that its nationalist sacred and unquestionable truths not only replaced those of Islam but also restricted democracy (Gülalp, 2005). Alternative proposals mainly revolved around the ideas of the founder of Turkish sociology, Ziya Gökalp, who believed that the Turks should adopt civilisation from the West but jealously preserve their authentic culture.

To a significant degree, preserving the original Kemalist Westernised project has obstructed the development of a more pluralist and liberal political regime in Turkey. As Gülalp (2005, p. 352) argues, "whereas secularisation has been a precondition for democracy in Western Europe, the two seem to have been mutually exclusive in Turkey". Therefore, if political

Islam can also be seen as a particular manifestation of nationalism, especially in those cases where the central state has aimed to create strong, monist national ideologies with Islam at their centre, Turkey's Muslim-nationalist reformulation of national identity represents precisely a kind of religious nationalism produced in order to grab and consolidate the state. Indeed, Islamist movements in Turkey not only formed as a reaction to the secular nationalist civilising mission of the founders, but were also products of it (Kirdiş, 2023). Among them, though not emerging overnight from Turkey's political tradition, there is no doubt that the AKP's rule represents the most influential phenomenon in altering many of the Turkish sociopolitical environment's unique features.

3. *The AKP as a Counter-hegemony*

According to Zürcher (2017, p. 330), "the Turks voted for Erdoğan because they believed he could put an end to *yoksulluk* (poverty) and *yolsuzluk* (corruption), not because they wanted an Islamic state". Indeed, when the party came to power in Turkey in 2002, rather than presenting themselves as the vanguards of Turkish society leading it towards Islam, the new leaders of the AKP claimed to be the representatives of a pious majority that had been barred from decision-making by Kemalist elites for decades. In a sense, it epitomised a bourgeois revolution, a radical redistribution of political power, economic capital and symbolic resources, carried out by using the mechanisms of democracy and a form of adapted version of liberal tradition, emphasising individuals' rights against the repressive state. As a matter of fact, despite emerging from a religious background, the AKP in its early years represented a generational clash against the direction of the traditionalist National

View Movement[3], as it shifted from its old claim that Turkey was not religious enough to the claim that Turkey was not democratic enough.

Yet, the party leadership formulated its mission as the "normalisation" of Turkish politics, strongly suggesting that the Kemalist top-down, state-led modernisation project, founded on attempts to control religious institutions and behaviour, had produced a social trauma to be solved by a broader social contract (Karaveli, 20009). Known as *yenilikciler* (reformists), its cadres depicted a new orientation defined as "conservative democratic" (*muhafazakâr demokrasi*), part of a modernisation movement that brought together local and global political dynamics without losing important characteristics of the national identity to foreign interests. It argued that "it [did] not intend to reverse the secular system, but only to moderate the extreme restrictions placed on Islamic symbols" (Turunc, 2007, p. 80). With this reorientation at its inception, the party was welcomed both at home and abroad, as demonstrated by the progress in its EU membership and the promotion by Western countries of a "Turkish Model" that could combine Islam, democracy and liberal economics in times of rising Islamist threats (Tuğal, 2016).

Towards the end of the first decade of the 2000s, the AKP had consolidated its electoral hegemony and went on to launch a series of reform packages that produced significant economic advances and improvements on the political front, but also raised serious concerns about the government's intentions. As it became the dominant political actor in Turkish politics at the expense of the secular military/judiciary tutelage, the AKP became more subversive in promoting the national

[3] *Milli Görüş* is a political-Islamist ideology and movement with strong anti-republican and pro-Ottoman characteristics.

and religious characteristics of the people. While the focus of Kemalist nationalism had been territorial in nature, restricted to creating a national consciousness solely for Turks living within the boundaries of the Turkish nation-state, the Islamists' focus was on a form of supra-national identity for all Muslims. While this approach enjoyed some initial success in promoting the public image of its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, among Islamic-conservative masses from Palestine to Indonesia, it also began to alienate large segments of Turkish society and polarise the country's political landscape, with negative consequences for its image among its Western allies. As Yeşilada (2016, p. 19) notes, "what seemed to be a promising reform movement [was] replaced by a grim picture of illiberal political developments". The lowest point was reached when the government responded to the Gezi uprisings[4] with unprecedented state violence on the ground and poisonous rhetoric in the public square – both at home and abroad – that sought to both trivialise the movement and cast it as the handiwork of hostile foreign and domestic forces. The shortcomings of the Turkish Model in facing the Arab Uprisings, the allegations of Turkey's geopolitical double-dealing between West and East, and especially the failed coup against Erdoğan' government in 2016, further left Turkish politics in a kind of suspended animation. This turned into a securitised "state of exception" in which any internal or external "enemy of the nation" was thoroughly purged from the military and other branches of the state, creating a highly centralised system with a personalised approach to decision-making, and increasing state intervention in many spheres of the society (Baser and Öztürk, 2017).

[4] A wave of demonstrations and civil unrest in Turkey in May 2013, initially to contest an urban development plan. Subsequently, widespread protests and strikes broke out against a wide range of concerns all over Turkey.

It is from these watershed periods that one can trace the utopian components of AKP's project to secure the state, which went further in its plan to construct a New Turkey. This operates in its own image in a way that is increasingly indifferent and inconsiderate of Turkey's complex society, and that does not renounce its wish to spread the imperial glorious past and Islamic commonalities across other territories. In order to validate its "powerful but genuine" image, even in turbulent times, it has capitalised on the massive societal infrastructure of its predecessors and adopted a Sunni Muslim Turkishness, a banalised version of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis, appropriated not only to appeal to the core of the party's electorate but also to guarantee the party a safe place in its fragile positioning between its Islamist past and its nationalist-nativist present, which is still in the making (Coşar, 2011, p. 184). For instance, a clear example of this emotionally powerful narrative can be found in Erdoğan's speech at the start of his presidential election campaign in July 2014:

> For two hundred years, they wanted to separate us from our history. They wanted to separate us from our ancestors. They wanted to separate us from our cause. They wanted us to behave humbly in front of everyone. They wanted to force us into a certain model. They even went so far that they thought they could arrange things in Turkey just by waving their fingers. [...] We are the people, we are Alparslan, and we are the grandchildren of Süleyman Shah and Osman Gazi. We are the heirs of Mehmed the Conqueror and Yavuz Sultan Selim. We are the ones who carry forward the memory of Gazi Mustafa Kemal, Menderes, Özal, and Erbakan. We are the followers of those martyrs whose blood is writing our epics (Aktif Haber, 2014).

This kind of discourse demonstrates how the AKP was no niche player, but one that could act as a dominant party able to reshape the socio-political landscape in its favour. In doing

so, it has never rejected the Kemalist tradition but rather tried to add its own conservative-Islamist ideology to the inclusive shared social and cultural traditions of the Turkish people, seemingly without breaking away from alleged universal democratic principles. Such a strategy fits well with the argument that in Turkey "there is a process of nationalisation of Islam and (...) Islamisation of nationalism" (Waxman, 2000, p. 21). In this regard, there is much debate over what Islamist parties are, whether they can/will moderate to embrace liberal democratic values in party politics, and how secular/democratic their incumbencies have been. Nowadays, Turkey can be defined as a "competitive authoritarian" regime, where there are formal democratic institutions, such as regular elections and opposition parties, but the playing field is highly skewed in favour of the ones in power (Esen and Gumuscu, 2016). However, it is still important to understand that, within this framework, some vote for the ruling party not because they are forced to do so but because they have a vested interest in that party's rule and/or because they believe in its leaders and their vision. Furthermore, while it is easier to understand why Islamist parties appealed to voters when they provided an alternative to bad governance, it is crucial to find what explains AKP's persisting popularity even in times when its mission and way of ruling are perceived by some – if not many – as ineffective and dystopian.

4. *Nostalgia in Practice: The New Turkey Project*

> With the first popularly elected president taking office, today is the day that Turkey rises from its ashes. It is the day the

> process to build the New Turkey gains strength (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Başbakanlık, 2014)[5].

Although the term "New Turkey" had been used by senior members of the ruling AKP well before, it was this declaration that officially introduced the concept into the Turkish political vocabulary after the 2014 elections, when the Turkish people could directly elect their president for the first time[6]. It soon became obvious that, despite the absence of a clear definition, it was more than just a slogan. The expression was used as an overarching idea to draw together all the changes that had been introduced over the AKP's then twelve-year – and now twenty-year – incumbency. According to its leader and current Turkish President Erdoğan's understanding, "the party has not only formed a government, governed the state, conducted politics and held authority, but had been executing a civilisational consolidation (AKP Arşivi, 2014) whose project is to redesign Turkey, to found it again after a hundred years". *Yeni Türkiye* covers Turkish politics, society and economics, and implies that the "social and political order under the party's rule is maintained by a new set of norms and values, all of which the ruling AKP itself expects to define". (Christofis, 2018, p. 20). In general, it recalls a civilisational identity, namely "a form of identity that locates an ethnic or national community within a context of a broader, cultural community, often extensive in geographical and temporal scope" (O'Hagan, 2002, p. 11-12). Shared ideas on their part influence the way people believe the world should be, the goals that should be striven for, and even the

[5] Author's translation.

[6] This speech by then President Erdoğan at the time of his electoral campaign in 2014 also bore symbolic value because it took place during his visit to the Atatürk mausoleum in Ankara, which used to be an institutional tradition for every incumbent Prime Minister to remark Turkey's laicism.

things that are at stake. Taken together, civilisational identities locate the state or nation in a much broader imagined community, providing the opportunity for membership in a normative community, of the kind that is not necessarily fixed but capable of change, evolution, diversity, and even inconsistency.

In the building of a New Turkey, a central role is played by the so-called Neo-Ottomanism (*Yeni Osmanlıcılık*) that became one of the AKP's hallmarks and that can be broadly defined as "a constructed memory of the Ottoman Empire, formed by numerous cultural, literary, and cognitive factors that contribute to invoke a broad view of Turkish national identity. (Yavuz, 2016, p. 444). Overall, the AKP's Neo-Ottomanism can be considered a

> process of memory-building that reimagines the Ottoman nostalgia as both an ideological and pragmatic project. The party criticises the Kemalist secular nation-building project while strategically using the Ottoman heritage, religious networks and shared history to become an important player in several regions and to consolidate a Turkish national identity that ensures their legitimacy in power [at home] (Yavuz, 2016, p. 460).

For instance, according to senior adviser Kalın (2011, p. 11), "the AKP should abandon the isolation of the Cold War period and reflect the birth of Islamic civilisation. This will reaffirm that Turkey today has a new story and a new narrative that can express the periphery, meaning the Middle East and North African region". In the same fashion, claiming that Turkey "cannot act with a 1923 psychology, President Erdoğan openly attacks the restrained foreign policy of Turkey's founders". This mentality has produced – but is also product of – a new geopolitical concept based on former Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's vision. His seminal book, Strategic Depth (*Stratejik Derinlik*),

alluded to a kind of *Sonderweg*, arguing that in order to fulfil its historical destiny and become a superpower, Ankara would have to match its Western orientation with a recovery of its Islamic-Ottoman space and ties. Although Davutoğlu left the palaces of power, his approach in many ways is still vivid in the current rhetoric of a "precious loneliness" that sees an unaligned Turkey with ambitions beyond its borders, a country that either works with the West if necessary or bypasses it, that does not and will never trust foreign powers, that will take strong positions or negotiate its way in regional affairs (Kalın, 2013). This is evident in what is called the "New Turkish Foreign Policy" (Abrami, 2023) that aims – and somehow has succeeded – to not only show Turkey's increased military capabilities and operative autonomy but also create a symbolic value for a futuristic approach to defending the nation without harming its people, citing the famous Bayraktar drones (see, *infra* Russo).

It is not a coincidence that this new foreign policy approach has shaped the way many Turks, regardless of political affiliation, view their being part of a rising power that aims to gain more visibility, strategic independency and new bilateral relations in the international scenario (Yeşiltaş and Pirinççi, 2021) as a given, and indeed as a show of strength against their country's ontological threats.

> The flag will never be lowered. The prayer never silenced. The country never divided. The people never kneeled. The state, God willing, will always survive (Erdoğan, 2019).

Such words highlight how the AKP has developed and implemented "an unorthodox alternative definition of Turkishness and a nation that imagines Turkey not as a nation embattled within its current political borders but as a flexibly bordered Turkey, the self-confident successor to the Ottomans in

a rediscovered (and reinvented) past" (White, 2013, p. 9). In concrete terms, everything from lifestyle to public and foreign policy is up for reinterpretation, according to a distinctively Turkish postimperial sensibility that ultimately reduces Ataturk's legacy to an anachronism. However, the emphasis on authenticity through Turkish Islam is intended as an inspiration for greatness, promoting a strategy that consolidates the ideological framework of the political order through certain symbols and values in both foreign and domestic policy.

Another noteworthy aspect is that the nativist rhetoric does not challenge the existence of the "West" but rather utilises it as a counter-image for an allegedly authentic and historically distinct (Turkish) Islamic civilisation. In the AKP's discourse, the distinction between Western and Islamic civilisation is constructed through the glorification of historical figures such as Sultan Abdülhamid II, who was turned into the "other" of the republican "self"[7] (Zürcher, 2017, p. 96). In many speeches, the West often becomes a hostile, monolithic category that wants to attack and humiliate the Islamic world, while Westerners are described as despicable, unworthy people. This has become evident, especially after the attempted coup in July 2016, with government circles emphasising the *Yeni Türkiye* concept as a "Second War of Independence" for the country. In the words of President Erdoğan, "July 15 has become one of the symbols of our national history just like the Victory of Manzikert, the Conquest of Istanbul and the August 30 Victory along with the

[7] He was the last reigning sultan of the Ottoman Empire (1876-1909) who, due to the huge losses suffered in territory and population in 1878 following the Treaty of Berlin, accentuated the Islamic character of the Empire and its authority. Indeed, in order to legitimise his role, the Sultan gave birth to a defensive form of pan-Islamism, aimed primarily at compacting the Ottoman community around the symbols of Islamic tradition, vis-à-vis the "cultural and imperialist" threats coming from the West.

foundation of the Seljuk and Ottoman states and our Republic" (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Basbakanlık, 2017). These traumatic events thus provided the AKP with the opportunity to rectify them and declare 15 July as the "Day of Democracy and Martyrs". This has been used to shape the Turkish collective national memory by introducing a celebration that does not revolve around the secularist and pro-Western Atatürk, but rather around the AKP government and its more traditional and religious ideology. Moreover, this highlights how the martyrdom narrative serves as a powerful tool of political action for creating and maintaining popular support for nationalist struggles. It functions "to forge a sense of solidarity, enhance mass mobilisation, and preserve the sacred values of the community". Since the monuments and public areas have been reshaped and renamed accordingly, they are now part of a daily routine and visible reminder from which the Turkish people cannot escape (Yanık and Hisarlıoğlu, 2019, p. 61).

In like manner, Neo-Ottomanism has also become a phenomenon with societal implications. That is, the nostalgic memory for the Ottoman Empire is not only evoked to justify some of the AKP government's internal and external policies, but also to reinforce a past that has been commodified to the point where the image of the Empire has become part of everyday practice, reflected in a wide array of areas. As reflected by Assmann (2006, p. 216) "institutions and larger social groups, such as nations, governments, the church, or companies, do not have a memory – they create one for themselves with the aid of memory-inducing signs, such as symbols, texts, images, rites, ceremonies, places and monuments". Within this framework, Neo-Ottomanism has evolved into a form of "Ottomania", namely "a venue for re-evaluating and rehabilitating a tradition that was rejected by republican modernisation" (Ergin and Karakaya, 2017, p. 41). This proves evident in the

fact that, in daily life and in the cultural sphere, there has been an increase in the number of shops with Ottoman nomenclature as well as Ottoman restaurants, movies, soap operas and even a football team. One of the most recent and debated moves was the announcement of the end of Covid-19 curfews on the anniversary day of the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul with a ceremony held at the Hagia Sophia Museum, which had been established as a museum by the secular founders of Turkey but was reverted to a mosque by the AKP. Similarly, after decades of impasse, Taksim Mosque has been built in what was the former highly symbolic space for republican memories in clear contrast with the Atatürk Cultural Centre and the Gezi Park area, that became well-known after the 2013 antigovernmental protests.

At the same time, the building of a New Turkey on these ideological premises requires the articulation of an ideal citizen, and this is achieved mainly by promoting a nostalgia via an emphasis on the Ottomans' multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism and tolerance. Thus, the regime embarked on creating a pious generation that would serve its ideological goals. A major role in imposing a new state ideology is played by the Diyanet[8] that, thanks to a skyrocketing budget and a number of affiliated Islamic civil society organisations, funds the education of students attending Imam-Hatip schools and promotes Islamic values within the society. This has also impacted the public bureaucracy/sector, with Islamic groups filling the civil service, replacing the previous secular bureaucracy. Their proponents also started running as AKP candidates, while MÜSİAD, a business organisation representing the conservative wing of Turkish business, became a close ally.

[8] The Directorate of Religious Affairs receives a larger budget than the Ministries of the Interior, of Trade and of Foreign Affairs, and employs 120,000 people, making it one of Turkey's largest state agencies.

Foremost among these, and one of the biggest media groups today, is the Demirören Group, part of a conglomerate that has dealings also in natural gas, real estate, construction and the manufacturing sectors. In Gramscian terms, these groups have created a new class of public officers and civil servants, serving as "organic intellectuals" for conservative-Islamist ideologies (Baser and Öztürk, 2017). According to Kirdiş (2023),

> such derivatisation of Islamic groups and their organic intellectuals has marked a radical change in Turkish state policy, which, until the JDP government, had not only banned religious organisations from state institutions, but had also proactively sought to marginalise and dismiss any type of religious expression in state institutions. For instance, veiled women had previously not been allowed at various state ceremonies, and affiliation with religious organisations had led to expulsion from military academies.

Therefore, as the combination of these policies, practices and discourse affect public spaces, personal life and everyday habits, what seems to be operating in Turkey today is also the effect of an extensive conceptualisation of necropolitics, defined as "the political making of spaces and subjectivities in an in-between of life and death, in which sovereignty means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not (Yilmaz and Erturk, 2022, p. 244). This concept helps to explain how the everydayness embedded in necropolitical spaces repeatedly sets necropolitical boundaries and attempts to operate subconsciously to bring about the active participation of the subjects in the sovereign's message. We can call these processes a commodification of the past, as it has been appropriated for daily consumption just as "these projects, conceptions, symbols, discourses, and media intersect with physical necropolitical sites in an attempt to create "a

memory-inducing public" that is ostensibly foundational (and thus prepolitical) and agentive (because people can choose to participate), and which naturalises a new political arrangement" (Yanık, 2016, p. 468). In this sense, the nostalgia for the past has both sentimental and ideological elements that prioritise the creation of a new identity for Turkey rather than an intelligent comprehension of the Ottoman past. As a result, it may not represent inclusive realities of Turkey and its surrounding societies, but rather the dreams or wishful thinking of Turkey's current decision-makers and a portion of the Turkish populace.

5. *On the Brink of Dystopia and Retrotopia*

Given that remembering is a cognitive action that takes place in the present, the case of Turkey's continuing contested national identity and ongoing state-building process demonstrates how, in the course of this activity, the past is continuously modified and re-described to the extent of imagining a new future carved out of those modifications (Furlanetto, 2015). Missing and remembering an imperial past through a highly political discourse diffused throughout the public sphere, however, may result in a modification of the past and the creation of a hyper-reality that distorts the truth, most notably the glory of those days. Turkish elites have taken extreme sides in either rejecting the Ottoman past or in embracing an imaginary glorification of it, resulting in a failure to confront the "trauma of losing an empire" (Yavuz and Ahmad, 2016). Today, more than in the past, the real problem is the arbitrary construction of a new Turkish memory, which not only triggers the transformation of popular culture but also creates a dystopian environment in which citizens are unable to distinguish

between true and false history, to produce a common conception of a Turkish nation-state, and to cope with the equilibrium between the individual and the governmental sphere.

Accordingly, "the current nostalgia for the past under the AKP is not about the past itself but about current Turkish politics, as well as a mental map to deconstruct the Kemalist Republican's concept of identity and society in the future" (Yavuz, 2016, p. 448). This is not to say that it replaced the latter with an authoritarian Islamic state structure, but with a hierarchically ordered society with strong Islamic overtones in its discourse, policies and everyday life. However, this has not resulted in any systematic re-evaluation of the post-Kemalist paradigm, nor has it produced a new dominant approach, since authoritarianism in Turkey did not start with the Kemalists, nor has it ended with their elimination. AKP's narrative takes a holistic view of the "history of the Turks". It comes into existence through a narration that gives meaning to the present by emphasising how all the great predecessors have contributed to the same cause, in contrast to the other, "non-national" actors and forces that have tried to prevent the nation from reaching its "manifest destiny". The boundary between nation and "unnation" in Turkey was thus established, and this discourse can be reproduced in day-to-day politics whenever it appears to justify a specific cause.

In the same logic, although the policy of the AKP is compared to the Ottoman past and Erdoğan to a sultan, their policies of the last decades "share more similarities, *mutatis mutandis*, with the initial Kemalist experience than with previous periods" (Christofis, 2018, p. 30). For instance, the *Yeni Türkiye* concept seems to aim to rebuild history in a way that leaves room for the establishment of a renewed conservative "empire" to lead the Muslim world. As such, one could argue that, in an attempt to mirror the personality cult of Ataturk, the

projection of these ideas onto the socio-political realm feeds a vigorous and growing personality cult. In addition to being consolidated to great effect among AKP supporters, it has also polarised society to an extent that takes the country back to the "us vs them" competition that has always characterised Turkish history. Overall, "polarisation has eroded fact-based public debate, facilitated a dramatic retrenchment of democracy, undermined the legitimacy of public institutions, divided civil society, and hurt social cohesion" (Aydın-Düzgit, 2019). One could thus argue that the New Turkey's attempt to put an end to the old Kemalist status quo is actually appropriating the same power mechanisms of the past in a "mimetic", imitative manner, modelling Kemalism in order to replace it. Like the Kemalist era, Erdoğan's *Yeni Türkiye* seeks to inculcate its reach through the hegemonic power of the pedagogic state, attempting to shape hearts and minds at different socio-political levels. Despite its initial promise of democratising the oppressive Kemalist configuration,

> the AKP has regressed into the old ways of the *ancien régime*, that is, the old system's centralist and illiberal spirit based on conservatism, the creation of a bourgeois class, and elitist top-down modernisation through social engineering around the motto "one nation, one party, one leader" (Christofis, 2018, p. 31).

Ultimately, the current Turkish regime stands in continuity with the organicist "stratocracy" that has characterised Turkey's history and has its roots in the political culture of the Ottoman Empire. What unites Erdoğan and Atatürk is their authoritarian, centralised and pyramidal vision of society and the state. The former's innovation was based on a Neo-Ottoman revival of the pan-Islamic and, more generally, universalist dimension as the intended goal of the modern Turkish state. As

in AKP's slogan "the world is bigger than five", it claims for the country a universal historical role, a "fair order" in which Turkey is not a secondary player in inter-state power relations. This only reinforces traditional Turkish statolatry: the good of the Turkish state in this perspective is not only the good of the nation, but the precondition for the realisation of a universal mission that transcends Turkey itself.

Thus, the definition of Erdoğan as an "anti-Ataturk Ataturk" (Cağaptay, 2017, p. 8) highlights how the spectre of the past Kemalist regimes plays an important narrative role, illustrating what would happen to "the people" in a post-Erdoğan era. There has recently emerged – from political opposition parties to civilian resistance – a vocal and fairly homogeneous willingness to counter AKP's political hegemony and reverse the path of socio-political alternation of the last twenty years. However, this has sometimes provoked the emergence of a contrasting – but equal – sense of "Kemalist nostalgia" that yearns for "the childhood of the nation when everything was pure, and citizens were gathered around the authority of their father" (Özyürek, 2006, p. 16; Elçi, E. (2022). In this case, the risk is that such yearnings would lead to a repeat of the sentimental future-past wistfulness in which a Kemalist nostalgia could (re)emerge as a form of *Retrotopia* based on "visions located in the lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past, instead of being tied to the not-yet-born and so inexistent future" (Bauman, 2017, p. 5).

As Agamben (p. 267) reminds us, "remembrance restores a possibility for the past, making what happened incomplete and completing what never was. Remembrance is neither what happened nor what did not happen but, rather, their potentialisation, their becoming possible once again". Thus, the Kemalist and the New Turkey projects lie at the brink of a utopian-dystopian divide, which are neither fully separated or opposed, but which both in different ways deal with a common nostalgia

for the past. Furthermore, they both originated from a traumatic event, a certain void in the individual but also the wider community; a void which they both strived to fill with either a narrative of hope and a blueprint for a better future, or one of pessimism, bad governance and an utter loss or suppression of different elements. This is because, though extremely divergent, both visions for the Turkish nation-state are embedded in the rhetoric of "fatherland first" (*önce vatan*), or "so there can be a fatherland" (*vatan sağolsun*), in which the "Turkish fatherland" has been constructed as a place that supplants everything of political importance, including human life.

However, Turkey's current socio-political environment appears more polarised than ever and based on a "us *vs* them" conflict in which each group aims to reconfigure personal or collective identities in a satisfactory manner. What is taking place in Turkey is also a "nostalgia for the present" (Jameson, 1992), namely an attempt to understand the sudden changes and ruptures of "now" within the more familiar framework of "then", while simultaneously looking back to a "golden old past". One must thus be aware of the fact that "any past contains past futures and past pasts that might play a role in a future, and that this future will in turn deal with future pasts and future futures" (Landwehr, 2018, p. 267). Looking at Turkey's history, this turbulent game looks set to continue indefinitely.

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The Energy Transition in the Gulf Countries: Visions or Utopia?

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Abstract

The Persian Gulf countries are endowed by vast hydrocarbon resources, which has played a pivotal role in the economic, energy and socio-political evolution of these countries. Hydrocarbon resources have shaped the state's formation and consolidation process in these countries. However, the existing socio-economic model is under pressure from several challenges, such as climate change, the global energy transition and domestic transformations. Against this backdrop, governments have launched new ambitious strategies (the so-called Visions) aimed at transforming the economy, the society and, consequently, the social contract. Such strategies may result in a deep transformation also in the state's formation, but they need to address several challenges.

Keywords: Rentier State, State Formation, Energy Transition, Renewable energies, Middle East and North Africa

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1. *Oil's Socioeconomic Relevance in the MENA Region*

Energy has always been a crucial driver of social, economic and technological development. Fossil fuels, especially oil, have substantially changed global societies and economies. The ability to transform unprecedented amounts of energy generated enormous advantages in agricultural productivity, as well as contributing to industrialisation, urbanisation and the growth of transportation and telecommunication capabilities (Smil, 2018). As a result, these profound transformations have also triggered long and remarkable periods of high rates of economic growth, resulting in further improvements in life quality for most of the world's populations.

There is probably nowhere else in the world where such trends are more visible, than the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and, particularly, the Persian Gulf. These countries are largely endowed with vast hydrocarbon resources and are responsible for a major share of global oil and gas output and exports[2]. Thanks to hydrocarbon reserves and the consequent hydrocarbon revenues (*oil rents*), the Gulf countries have managed to substantially improve their socioeconomic conditions and governance over the past century. Indeed, hydrocarbons have played a crucial role in forming the state, with the distribution of hydrocarbon revenues lying at the heart of the social contract; this has contributed to a system of low or no political representation in exchange for no taxation. However, they also developed an overdependence on hydrocarbon export revenues with a subsequent vulnerability to oil price volatility from a fiscal perspective. For many years, hydrocarbon-

[2] The MENA region was endowed with 52% of the world's oil reserves and 43% of the world's gas reserves in 2021. It also accounted for 35% of the world's oil production and 22% of the world's gas production in the same year (BP, 2022).

producing countries have tried to diversify their economies in order to reduce their reliance on the oil and gas industry. A new momentum in this matter occurred in the region when global oil prices dropped in 2014; this saw all the affected governments announcing plans for diversification. These plans, also known as *Visions*, seek to diversify their economies into sectors like tourism, aviation, logistics and the knowledge sector. Moreover, the Gulf Visions also envisage harnessing the Gulf's vast renewable energy potential, which as of today remains largely untapped. The diversification effort also seems prompted by multiple factors, such as the global energy transition, which seeks to end the world's thirst for fossil fuels and boost the use of clean energy technologies, especially solar and wind. Such transformation strategies aim to redraw the functioning of the state and its relationship with its citizens. Given the deep interplay between oil, governance and economy in this region, the question is whether the Gulf countries' diversification plans will also entail reforming the socio-political dimension.

The Gulf countries are among the world's major hydrocarbon producers and exporters. As global oil consumption surged following World War II, the MENA countries' abundant hydrocarbon reserves prompted socioeconomic growth that shaped their domestic governance, economies and societies. Before the 1950s, MENA countries had some of the lowest levels of socioeconomic development in the world. However, these countries experienced unprecedented levels of economic growth and social development from the 1950s to the 1980s. In terms of GDP per capita, the region experienced a growth of 3.7% per year over the 1960-1985 period (Yousef, 2004). The rapid economic growth also triggered major gains in a series of social indicators. By the late 1980s, the Middle East region had experienced sharp drops in infant mortality,

rising life expectancy, school enrolment levels approaching 100%, and higher literacy levels that rose from an average of some 40% of the adult population to almost 60% (Yousef, 2004).

One important aspect is that economic growth went hand-in-hand with oil price cycles. In the 1970s, the world experienced the first two major oil spikes, in 1973 and 1979, which contributed to a significant economic boom. Back then, MENA oil-exporting countries managed to earn a sizable windfall. In contrast, these countries saw their revenues drop between 1985 and 2000 due to relatively low oil prices. Economic conditions changed drastically again with the rising global oil prices seen between 2000-2014, which provided MENA governments with significant revenues. To put this into context, MENA oil revenues grew fourfold during the 2000-2008 period.

Hydrocarbon resources have not only affected the domestic dimension of the Gulf countries but have also heightened their importance in the international sphere post-WWII. This international relevance began with the meeting between US President, Frank Delano Roosevelt, and Saudi King, Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud, on the USS Quincy in the Suez Canal on Valentine's Day in 1945 (Yergin, 2009), which marked the beginning of the US-Saudi partnership. This partnership was based on a simple agreement: the Saudis would ensure stable and affordable energy supplies in return for security from the US. In short, hydrocarbons have contributed to consolidating the socio-political systems and governance of the petrostates, as well as their status within the international arena.

2. *Rentier State Theory and its Key Features*

This interplay of oil, economics and politics has been analysed over the past five decades. The main analytical framework is the Rentier State Theory (RST). The two main scholars of RST are, without doubt, Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani, who based their analyses on the seminal study previously conducted by Hussein Mahdavy. Mahdavy, who wrote about pre-revolutionary Iran of the late 1960s, was the first scholar to define the fundamentals of rentierism as a term and concept. His work (1970) mentioned for the first time the term 'rentier' in relation to countries. From his perspective, rentier states are those that receive substantial amounts of external rents on a regular basis but which have little to do with the production processes in their domestic economies. Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani expanded and further developed Mahdavy's theoretical framework in their publication (1987), where they outlined the main features of a rentier state. According to the two scholars, a rentier state is when: i) it relies on substantial external rent to sustain the economy, reducing the need to develop a strong productive domestic sector; ii) it has a small proportion of the population engaged in the generation of the rent, while the majority of the population is only involved in the distribution or utilisation of it; and finally, iii) its government is the principal recipient of the external rent. Furthermore, Beblawi affirmed that a rentier economy creates a specific mentality (a rentier mentality), namely that income is not generated through work and risk-taking but solely through chance or condition. Luciani further developed this analysis, focusing on the main role of the state in rentier countries. According to the scholar, rentier states might also be defined as allocation states because their key role is to allocate and distribute wealth to citizens. This function renders rentier states profoundly different

to production states, which have to extract resources through taxation and then reallocate them to others in the society, which ultimately requires democratic legitimation (the next section will delve further into this aspect).

Hydrocarbon resources and their related revenues (*rents*) have played a pervasive role in the MENA countries' economies, accounting for large shares of their revenues and exports. In 2019, the hydrocarbon sector accounted for 70% of export revenue and 50% of GDP in Saudi Arabia, and represented 92% of export revenue and 40% of GDP in Kuwait (OPEC, 2019).

Sizable hydrocarbon revenues have yielded massive socioeconomic growth in these countries, but they have also contributed to several negative effects. The primary challenge is the exposure to oil price volatility, which directly affects oil rents and entails a negative impact on economic growth and fiscal sustainability. In 2018, the IEA's Special Report on Oil Producing Economies (2018) pointed out that MENA countries have too often implemented their spending plans on the basis of current oil prices, meaning that government expenditure rises while prices are high and comes down when they fall. This "pro-cyclical" approach has jeopardised the region's fiscal and financial sustainability. It is difficult to reverse expansionary policies, implemented when oil prices are high, with austerity policies enforced when oil prices are low, given the social contract in place in the region. When the price of oil dropped in 2014, fiscal issues emerged as the oil prices were no longer able to satisfy the countries' fiscal breakeven oil prices.

Another key feature and challenge of the rentier model is the overdependence on the public sector. Traditionally, governments have used hydrocarbon wealth to fund jobs for their citizens in the public sector, which has functioned as the equivalent of a social security net. More than half of the Gulf's

citizens are currently working in the public sector, compared to a global average of 10-20%. The expansion of the public sector also threatens budgetary sustainability. For example, in Iraq the public sector has grown from 1.2 million employees in 2003 to around 3 million in 2018, posing a serious challenge to the state budget. Indeed, in 2016, Iraq spent over $30 billion in salaries, corresponding to 60% of the country's net income from oil and gas that year (IEA, 2018). This context worsened due to the changing demography at the beginning of the 2000s, when the MENA region experienced the so-called "youth bulge". Having one of the youngest populations in the world, the MENA region has failed to create enough jobs for its ever-growing youth, resulting in a high rate of youth unemployment. Indeed, the region experiences one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the world, totalling an average of 30% in 2017 with respect to a world average of 13%; there are, however, large differences between the countries. Some of the highest youth unemployment rates (15-24 years old) in the region in 2019 were registered in Palestine (37%) with Gaza at 61% (World Bank, 2020), Jordan (37.2%), Tunisia (35.8%) and Saudi Arabia (30%) (World Bank, 2021).

The lack of a developed private sector, and the reliance on public sector employment for political and stability purposes, has had serious and damaging consequences for the MENA country economies. The dependence on public sector employment undermines labour productivity in the MENA countries, since jobs depend on neither performance nor achievements. These two elements are the main reason for the low labour productivity expressed as the value added per employed worker in oil-producing MENA countries. The creation of numerous public sector jobs has not added significantly to economically productive activity. A large gap in average wages between the private and public sector contributes to the greater

attractiveness of the public sector at the expense of the private sector. For example, across the GCC countries, the gap between average public and private wages is often between 150% and 250% (IEA, 2018). The differences in labour productivity are particularly stark when comparing hydrocarbon-producing economies in the Middle East and North Africa against other countries in the region that import oil and gas (Tagliapietra, 2019).

Another key characteristic of the rentier state is the generous application of energy subsidies. Low energy prices play a central role in welfare protection and wealth distribution as well as in industrial policy and economic development. For these very reasons, energy subsidies represent a pillar of the social contract and hold importance from a political perspective. First, pricing policies in the MENA region are a key component of the social contract. The government, which is the main receiver of oil rents, is responsible for allocating and redistributing wealth. Low oil prices are one of the components of such a welfare state. Without any other changes in political representation and other social aspects, an increase in energy prices would represent a unilateral alteration in the social contract. Second, low oil prices can be used as a powerful industrial policy. They can promote and foster economic development and sustain specific industrial sectors and their competitiveness. For example, industrialisation in energy-intensive sectors (e.g. petrochemicals, cement, aluminium and steel) has been a key aspect of the GCC countries' industrial policies. Third, low energy prices are considered a tool for maintaining power and control through systems of patronage and rentierism. Given the crucial role played by energy subsidies in social and political stability, implementing pricing reforms is often politically costly and can threaten political stability, although GCC

countries have made some steps in this direction, especially after the 2014 oil price drop.

3. *The Role of Hydrocarbons in the State's Formation: A Resource Curse?*

These features of rentierism and the rentier state have defined both the relationship between states and their citizens, and state formation itself. In these countries, the American Revolution slogan 'no taxation without representation' can be conversely applied. Indeed, a rentier state does not need to tax its citizens' income in order to finance its expenditure, as it relies on external rents. The different function of an allocative state versus a productive state carries important consequences for the socio-political model and state formation (Ross, 2001; Hertog, 2016). Based on this assumption, another theoretical path (the so-called 'resource curse') was developed, aimed at explaining why many oil-rich countries experienced a lack of democratisation and several negative governance outcomes, such as corruption and bureaucratic inefficiencies. A primary mover in this sense was Terry Lynn Karl who argued that a reliance on oil, rather than other sectors, fostered weak institutions that restricted the state's ability to adapt to changing economic market conditions (Karl, 1997). Michael Ross (2001) affirmed that revenues generated from natural resources were generally used by rulers for repression and patronage. In short, oil can hinder democracy while providing revenue and avenues for the endurance of authoritarian regimes.

What is certainly true, is that oil rents have contributed not only to socioeconomic development but also to the consolidation of existing rulers and regimes. In the Gulf region especially, oil has cemented power in the hands of the existing

ruling families. Indeed, very few countries were democracies when oil rents began to flow into the governments' coffers. Furthermore, the great strategic relevance that oil gained after World War II prompted a major extra-regional involvement in the protection of the ruling families, in particular those who were in favour of Western countries.

For these very reasons, hydrocarbon resources have played a pivotal role in the state formation of these countries. Rolf Schwarz (2008) affirmed that rentier states followed a particular path to their formation, which stands in contrast to the European path of state formation. That is because European states were the result of war-making processes, which forced the state to rely on domestic taxation. In contrast, oil-rich countries in the Gulf emerged quite peacefully and were built around and upon hydrocarbon rents. He then highlighted in which functions these states were strong (security and welfare in times of high oil prices) and in which they were weak (representation and welfare in times of fiscal crisis).

On this note, Steffen Hertog (2016) exposed the unique features of Gulf state formation and consolidation. Since the handover from colonial overlords to independent governments was more consensual and gradual, Gulf countries have never experienced a revolution or 'national moment' (e.g. war of independence or unification) that usually mobilises segments of the population around a common ideological vision. This function was taken on by resource rents, which were instrumental in state-building and the penetration of society by the regime and state apparatus. From the first oil boom in the 1970s, the expansion of the state has occurred at an extremely fast pace, while the ruling elites have largely remained unchanged, dominating the various spheres of the economy and society. In this sense, the ruling families have emerged as a

permanent focal point of national politics and business and, to an important extent, the national identity (Hertog, 2016).

4. *Challenges to the Current Model: Climate Change, Energy Transition and Rising Domestic Energy Consumption*

The current economic, political and energy model is under growing pressure from multiple factors, both external and domestic (Hafner et al, 2023). Externally, the main challenges are climate change and the consequent higher political consensus for a global energy transition that entails a more restricted acceptability of fossil fuels. Governments around the globe have gradually built an international climate change regime, which seeks to reduce global emissions in order to fight climate change. Thus, the global energy transition envisages a drastic reduction in hydrocarbon use (from 80% of the world's energy supply in 2020, to 20% in 2050) and an increase in clean energy technologies, such as solar and wind (from 12% in 2020, to around 66% in 2050) (IEA 2021). This context embodies a challenge for oil-rich countries as they have preserved their resources for the future (since they are the government's main revenue source) despite their competitive advantage. However, a scenario of lower oil and gas demand would undermine the ability of MENA countries to monetise their large reserve base, which is vital for the functioning of their economies and sociopolitical architecture. The loss of rents would change the fundamental nature of the allocative rentier state.

At the same time, hydrocarbon producing countries face a domestic challenge as well. Over the years, they have also become large consumers of oil themselves, directly threatening their main income source. Indeed, these countries have recorded high energy consumption growth rates, which are

almost entirely satisfied by fossil fuels, becoming some of the largest consumers per capita in the world. MENA countries, in particular the Gulf countries, consume far more oil per capita than developed countries do. In 2019, the Gulf countries consumed between 37 and 45 barrels per capita, twice the US and even four times the EU rate (Hafner et al. 2023). The increase in domestic energy demand was dictated by a combination of demographic growth and industrialisation, as well as the large use of energy subsidies that contributed to energy inefficiency. Reforming the energy subsidies would not be easy, given their pivotal role in the distribution of wealth and in the social contract. However, high fossil fuel subsidies cause significant economic losses because oil is sold in the domestic market at a fraction of its international market value. Furthermore, energy subsidies incentivise energy consumption and, consequently, energy inefficiency, as well as encouraging rent-seeking behaviour. Lastly, they represent a barrier to the deployment of renewables as they distort the economics of energy and the price signals of energy resources. In this sense, Jim Krane (2019) cited an almost prophetic warning from King Faisal of Saudi Arabia[3], who warned his fellow citizens about the risk of wasting energy and oil: "In one generation we went from riding camels to riding Cadillacs. The way we are wasting money, I fear the next generation will be riding camels again." Growing domestic energy demand and rising international pressure on hydrocarbons have increasingly forced MENA countries to consider energy transformation, since being large fossil fuel consumers directly erodes the main income source for governments (i.e. oil export volumes).

[3] As quoted in Mai Yamani (2000), *Changed Identities: The challenge of the new generation in Saudi Arabia*, Brookings Institute Press, January 2000.

3. *Visions and Renewables: The Transformation of the Economy and the State*

Despite several benefits, the rising challenges experienced by the Gulf countries both domestically and internationally have urged them to consider diversification strategies. Calls for economic diversification are not new in the region, as Saudi Arabia expressed its intention to diversify its economy away from oil revenues in its first National Development Plan back in 1970. Nonetheless, a new momentum for economic diversification efforts emerged after 2014, when oil prices collapsed and all the Gulf countries experienced fiscal vulnerabilities and economic challenges. For these reasons, the Gulf countries[4] have launched and updated several ambitious initiatives to finally diversify their economies and transform them from resource-based to more knowledge-based economies. Such renewed efforts were also dictated by the medium- and long-term forecasted decrease in global oil demand caused by increasing decarbonisation policies across the world. These new (or at least reinforced) strategies generally aimed at increasing the private sector's role, also by developing small and medium enterprises (SMEs), creating jobs for citizens and investing in education and innovation. Through the development of these sectors, the Gulf countries are aiming to overcome their oil dependence, as stated by Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, during the presentation of Saudi Vision 2030 in 2016. The emergence of new, younger rulers in the Gulf was instrumental in the renewed momentum and the launch of new and ambitious diversification strategies. Through these Visions, the rulers are also seeking to forge a new state identity while preserving the

[4] Bahrain's Vision 2030, Kuwait's Vision 2035, Oman's Vision 2040, Qatar's National Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, and the UAE's Vision 2021.

support of their growing and young population. In this process, it is clear that the Visions are tied to their personal leadership and ultimately aim to reinforce their legitimacy in their citizens' eyes. The Visions convey messages of leadership adaptability and are intended to reinforce the bonds between citizens and the state over time (Vakil, 2022). The envisioned transformation can be gleaned from the Saudi Vision's three broad pillars: a thriving economy, a vibrant society and an ambitious nation. To implement these Visions, the governments have combined sheer ambition with a social liberalisation agenda. In doing so, they are attempting to reconfigure the domestic social contract away from an allocative rentier state model by gradually altering its traditional approaches to governance. The envisioned targets and measures seek to broaden the levels of public participation in the state's functioning and, ultimately, in the creation of a new social contract. By involving the population in building a new socio-economic model, the Visions are also forging new loyalties and national identities (Vakil, 2022).

Despite some differences, all the Gulf Visions accord significant value to science and technology in achieving diversification and Gulf power. Technology is perceived as instrumental to solving the many problems that these countries are facing. Within this context, low-energy projects provide the ruling elites with new and increased legitimacy in their citizens' eyes, as well as prestigious recognition from external stakeholders (Sim, 2020). Indeed, renewable energies are a fundamental part of this transformation. All the Gulf countries have increasingly expressed their ambitions to harness their vast renewable energy potential by setting ever-growing renewable targets in power generation capacity, with shares ranging from 15% to 50% (Hafner et al., 2023). A steep increase in political ambition was most evident in 2021, when several Gulf countries

pledged to become carbon neutral by and around the middle of the century; this marked a paradigm shift in the energy field, since these countries are among the largest hydrocarbon producers and exporters. Renewables projects could address multiple issues, such as creating jobs for young, growing populations, decarbonising the domestic energy system, and attracting investments and technologies.

Renewables could also have important consequences from the socioeconomic and political point of view. Some scholars argue that decarbonised energy systems foster diversified economies that, in turn, mobilise demands for inclusive governance and democratic institutions (Mahdavi and Uddin, 2021). This would be due to the lower rents earned, which could force countries to abandon their allocative model and adopt a governance system based on taxation of the broader economy. Such a shift could improve overall governance in the region by improving incentives for fiscal responsibility and accountable institutions. Furthermore, renewable energy systems are more widespread than oil and gas systems are; a more widespread energy system allows for tax revenue collection along the whole value chain, creating both capital- and labour-intensive segments and fostering working-class organisations that could press leaders for accountable government.

4. *A New Energy and Economic Model for a New State: Opportunities and Challenges*

The urgent need to address the multiple challenges facing the current model, has forced the Gulf countries to imagine a new future for their economies and societies apart from their hydrocarbon resources. By doing so, the ruling elites are also imaging a new type of state and a new relationship with their

citizens. However, moving away from their historical dependence on hydrocarbons may prove challenging. Given the profound interplay of oil, politics and economics in the hydrocarbon producing countries, the transformations envisaged in the Visions demand significant reforms in multiple fields. Yet, the reform process and the ambition to create a new social contract may affect and shake up the socio-political model. The final outcome is still uncertain. Examining the challenges and potential consequences of energy transformation, provide insightful examples with different trajectories.

Indeed, with the transformative process, the energy sector will certainly come under increasing pressure as it will need to prove not only that it can generate rents (which are instrumental in creating new industries and sectors) but also that it can extend the value change and create new industries within the energy sector (Fattouh and Sen, 2021). This is because renewables may replace hydrocarbon resources in the domestic energy mix but not in the government budget, as investments in renewables do not yet generate the high returns that the oil and gas industry provide (Fattouh and Sen, 2021). This condition embodies the challenges that come with diversification efforts. As pointed out by the IEA (2018), oil-rich countries need to diversify to reduce their reliance on rents, but the main means to diversify come from oil and gas. This conundrum is complicated by the fact that the means and ends are typically out of sync. Normally, the urgency to diversify is higher when oil and gas revenues are low, and vice versa.

Energy transformation could also have profound political consequences, as the previous section highlighted. However, renewables are unlikely to undermine the Gulf rulers' resilience, for multiple reasons. Firstly, renewables are used to decarbonise the domestic energy sector in order to free up oil and gas volumes, which preserve and potentially increase oil

rents. Secondly, renewables are pivotal in the decarbonisation of other sectors and the creation of new rent channels (hydrogen and electricity exports). Additionally, governments may prefer supporting more centralised renewable projects, such as large utility-scale, to reduce the diffusion and maintain control and legitimacy. Greater renewables deployment could reduce political and external pressures, reinforcing governance resilience.

Lastly, governments should undertake a significant reformation of their energy systems in order to actually achieve their ambitious renewable targets. First and foremost, governments should reform energy pricing by removing universal subsidies which incentivise energy consumption and discourage energy efficiency and cleaner energy sources. Given their pivotal role in the social contract and in the allocative functioning of the state, the rentier state theory discards this option as it would imply a unidirectional change in the social contract. Yet, the Gulf countries have rolled out some reforms, reducing energy subsidies and undertaking different strategies and implementation timelines since 2014. Despite these unidirectional changes, the Gulf countries have not experienced any changes in the socio-political sphere. According to Krane (2019), this is likely because subsidies are not perceived as acquired rights; they are rather seen as customary privileges that can be ceded in exchange not for greater political participation, but for a particularly precious collective good: security. Krane states also that retracting unsustainable benefits may result in streamlining and strengthening political structures thanks to the transformation of governments' capabilities and citizens' preferences.

In conclusion, the energy transition, a key component of the Gulf countries' Visions, could provide opportunities to adapt their national economies. Yet, a full economic

transformation seems largely utopian because of the fundamental role of hydrocarbons and their high remuneration. While hydrocarbons are expected to continue to play an important role in their national economies, renewables will help address several of the challenges facing Gulf countries (e.g. high domestic energy consumption). Given the interplay of oil, economics and politics in the region, any transformation of the energy sector will require important reforms that could lead also to a transformation in the socio-political context. It is generally considered that renewable energy sources (hence, energy transition) could – through their more widespread nature – spur democratisation, in contrast to fossil fuels, which are often related to conflicts and authoritarianism. Nonetheless, instead of presenting renewables as utopian instruments for democratisation, the ruling elites are committed to exploiting their vast renewable potential to gain economic benefits while reaffirming and adapting their power to the new evolving context.

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Renewable Energy Sources: Developments and Distortions in the Italian Electricity Market's Evolution

FRANCESCA GIULIANO[1]

Abstract

As Enrico Giovannini, spokesperson for the Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development (ASVIS), pointed out, building a better future requires thinking about a sustainable utopia. Along this path, the electricity sector emerges as a critical and unprecedented opportunity to foster a clean energy transition and decarbonisation process. Marginal pricing markets have been the fundamental organisational structure for the European and Italian electricity system in liberalised contexts for the past decades, but today certain aspects of this model have become problematic for a renewables-based power system. Indeed, while it seems paradoxical that electricity prices should be rising while generation costs are falling, this possibility is an artifact of how electricity markets work. Taking this perspective, this essay explores the historical evolution of the Italian electricity market, seeking to analyse the concurrent political changes, the consequent growing role of renewable energy sources (RES) within the national energy mix, the effects and

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key points of this progress, the relative critical issues and distorting phenomena, and, in conclusion, some possible developments.

Keywords: Italian electricity market; liberalisation; renewables; marginal price.

Green is not only the colour of vegetation;
it is also, and above all, that of destiny.
MICHEL PASTOUREAU, *Vert. Histoire d'une couleur*, 2013

1. *Visions of Climate Futures and the Role of the Electricity Sector*

Although "utopia" and "dystopia" are rarely used in climate science and environmental policy, it is currently not particularly difficult to imagine 'dystopian scenarios'. We need merely consider the various reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) on the state of the climate, which offer a dire warning for the future (IPCC, 2023). Without doubt, the various apocalyptic natural disasters facing humanity will be conditioned by global economic trends, geopolitical developments, technological progress, and the ability to respond to nationalistic tendencies, increasing poverty, polluting emissions, and rising temperatures. Regarding this latter threat in particular, as the European Council points out, it can be said that escalation is already underway, so much so that the average temperature has been 2.2°C higher in the last five years since the end of the 19th century. 2020 was the hottest year in Europe to date (Consilium Europa, 2022). In particular, Italy experienced worrying temperatures during the summer of 2022; five regions in the north of the country declared a state of

emergency due to severe drought, which led to the consequent allocation of EUR 36.5 billion in emergency funding.

However, some of the sustainable visions in the political bargaining of climate negotiations can be seen as utopian thinking, in the sense that they are not a projection based on current trends, but rather policy goals and a kind of transformative force. Some studies have argued that elements of both the Brundtland Report and the Agenda 21 outline sustainable development policies that surpass even the prescriptive characteristics of utopian thinking (Hedrén and Linnér, 2009, pp. 210-219).

Against this backdrop, the whole energy issue, especially in our current times, takes on an emblematic role and emerges as a central and challenging theme in the debate on utopias and dystopias, even more so in the aftermath of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict that has immediately highlighted the most critical aspects of the sector. Energy production from fossil fuels is, in fact, one of the main causes of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions and, within this framework, electricity is a major building block of a climate-neutral energy system. Indeed, precisely because fossil fuels currently dominate the electricity mix, the electricity grid potentially represents the main enabling factor for the decarbonisation of the entire energy system.

On the other hand, energy has been a vital and strategic asset for every economy of the past and present; it is the driving force behind the industrial and economic development of every country, and is a tool to improve the quality of life of every individual. It therefore has two intrinsically coexisting faces: the positive one being its necessity, the negative one being pollution.

Over the course of years, European – including Italian – energy policies have tried to reach a compromise between the

intrinsic aspects of energy listed above, sometimes pushing for its access as the engine of development, and other times, in contrast, focusing on its production and the resulting environmental impact.

In view of the aforementioned premises, the main aim of this essay is to contribute to the existing literature on the evolution of the Italian electricity market, seeking to analyse its functioning, the growing role of renewable energy sources (RES) within the national energy mix, the effects and key points of this progress (also in relation to the final energy prices paid by domestic customers), the related critical issues and distorting phenomena and, in conclusion, possible developments.

Indeed, over the decades the regulatory and technological framework, as well as the policy objectives of public decision-makers, have changed profoundly and this has had direct and indirect consequences on the regulation and functioning of the national electricity market itself.

2. *From Nationalisation to Liberalisation*

The current Italian electricity market, also known as the Italian Power Exchange (IPEX), came into being in Italy on 1 April 2004 following approval of Legislative Decree 79 of 1999, the so-called 'Bersani Decree' (named after its deviser). This implemented a structural reform of the electricity sector, similar to the experiences already gained in the international arena. In fact, following an initial period characterised by a regime that could be described as oligopolistic and that had shaped the post-war years in Italy, Keynesian economic theories were adopted to guide governmental actions aimed at reviving those countries severely impacted by the war. This basically meant

taking public control of industrial sectors considered strategic for the country's economic growth, including electricity. This was a common trend throughout Europe and gave rise to the big national players in the sector.

Through Law No. 1643 of 1962, also known as the 'Nationalisation Law', the Ente Nazionale per l'Energia Elettrica (ENEL) was established. This was entrusted with all the sector activities under a monopolistic regime, namely the production, import and export, transport, transformation, distribution and sale of electrical energy from whatever source produced. ENEL's activities were supervised by the Minister for Industry and Commerce.

At the time, the technical-political objective of establishing this structure was to achieve – through nationalisation – greater unity of the electricity service, better coverage of demand, and more effective exploitation of economies of scale (Mezzacapo, 2018). In fact, the initial period of the ENEL monopoly was characterised by considerable progress and modernisation of the electricity grid: there was significant development of rural electrification, and high-voltage connections with foreign countries and the islands (Sardinia and Sicily) were established. However, following this 'golden' era, a need to increase the sector's efficiency alongside European competitiveness favoured a gradual evolution and change in the reasons adduced for the presence of a public monopoly.

Some forty years later, therefore, the Bersani initiative radically transformed the pre-existing conditions: a gradual process of national liberalisation of the electricity market was initiated, promoted as early as the mid-1990s by the European Commission, with the aim of establishing an internal electricity market with free competition, so as to increase the efficiency of production, transmission and distribution, while at the same

time strengthening security of supply and the competitiveness of the European economy (Pavoncello, 2021).

From a theoretical point of view, reliance on competition for electricity generation and supply is based on the idea that open markets provide an economic impetus in the implementation of an optimal generation system in the long term. In the government-industry relationship, the evolution from the 'traditional' paradigm to a 'market-oriented' paradigm was thus accomplished, in the expectation that privatisation would reduce the inefficiencies of public management.

Indeed, the positive effects of liberalisation, although not immediate, served to relieve the sector of the myriad problems that had existed from 1973 onwards. It also helped resolve the even more critical state the sector found itself in at the end of the 1990s, when it faced difficulties in building new power stations and new transmission lines, prices were well above those in other European countries, and there was neither a market nor widespread consumer awareness (Zorzoli and Ortis, 2008).

With regard to electricity production, the Decree stipulated that from 1 January 2003, no entity could produce or import, directly or indirectly, more than 50 per cent of the total electricity produced or imported into Italy, and that, by the same date, Enel had to dispose of at least 15,000 Megawatts of its production capacity. These regulatory changes led to a sharp increase in the number of players within the Italian electricity market (for instance, the number of operators with bids grew by one-third between 2005 and 2009). The same period was characterised by the consolidation of dominant European energy firms on an international level; this saw the entrance of foreign European companies to the Italian electricity market.

Moreover, in order to promote the use of renewable sources for electricity production, the same decree established the 'Green Certificates' system, imposing an obligation on all

producers from conventional sources to feed a certain amount of green energy into the national electricity system.

As previously mentioned, the Italian Power Exchange (IPEX) was launched in 2004 and became fully operational in January 2005 as a necessary tool for the development of a competitive market. The IPEX, in fact, "favours the emergence of efficient equilibrium prices that allow operators, producers and wholesalers, to safely and transparently sell and buy electricity in the most cost-effective manner" (GME, 2009).

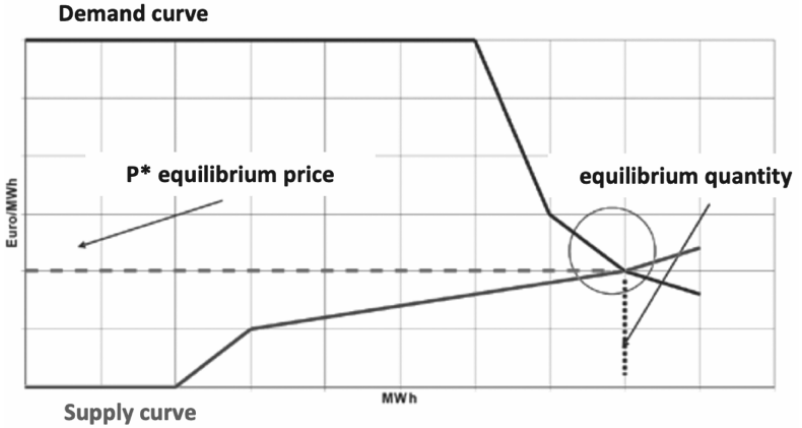
From its launch to the present day, the functioning of the Power Exchange follows the marginal price system, also called price as clear, which characterises the so-called Day-Ahead Market or Mercato del Giorno Prima (MGP); this is managed by the Gestore dei Mercati Energetici (GME), which organises it according to criteria of neutrality, transparency and objectivity. So-called because transactions take place in the morning of the day before the day of delivery, the Market is organised as a non-discriminatory auction in which the negotiation of bids for the purchase and sale of wholesale electricity takes place and within which the Uniform National Price or Prezzo Unico Nazionale (PUN), is defined.

In detail, through the marginal price system, the matching of supply and demand takes place as follows. On the demand side, operators indicate the quantity of electricity they wish to purchase (MWh) and the maximum price they are willing to pay for the same quantity (€/MWh). On the supply side, operators indicate the quantities of electricity they are willing to supply and the relevant minimum acceptable selling price. The various bids are ordered with the above-mentioned marginal price system rule, according to which an aggregate supply curve is constructed by ordering the power plants according to their marginal costs in increasing order (the so-called merit order). Therefore, the equilibrium price (p*) reflects the

marginal costs of the last power plant to come on stream to meet demand. Since the market operates by fulfilling demand at the most affordable cost possible, bids with prices higher than the equilibrium price, which are therefore too onerous, are not accepted or see a reduction of volume being dispatched and clearing prices reduce.

Once it has been established, the PUN is valid throughout the country and is independent of the technology used (coal, fuel oil, gas, renewables, nuclear etc.).

Figure 1 – *Creation of the equilibrium price*



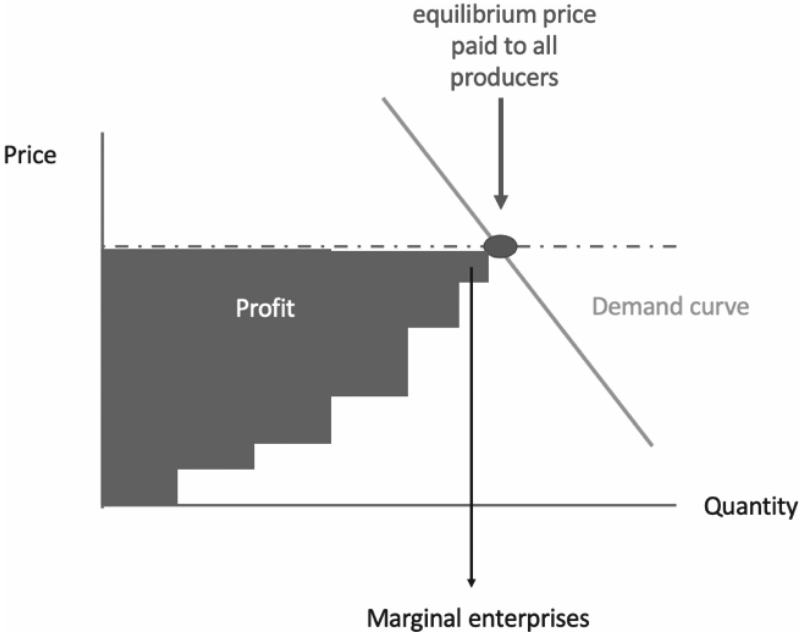
Source: https://www.mercatoelettrico.org/it/MenuBiblioteca/documenti/20091028VademecumBorsaElettrica.pdf

Once the limit set by the national requirement has been reached, all producers, even if their bid proposed a lower cost, are remunerated at the marginal price, which is equal to the price of the last, most expensive bid entered.

As such, one can classify the enterprises within the electricity market into 'marginal enterprises' (those enterprises

producing at a cost close to the final price), and 'infra-marginal enterprises' (those enterprises producing at a cost below the daily marginal price). The latter group, which are characterised by more efficient technologies and bids below the equilibrium price, receive a profit. In other words, the difference between the price of their accepted bid and the marginal cost of the last unit, rewards plant efficiency and allows producers to invest in technologies that cut costs. Competition between suppliers is thus played out in the ability to reduce production costs.

Figure 2 – *Marginal and infra-marginal enterprises*



3. *From Fossil Fuel Era to Renewable Energy Era: The Penetration of RES within the Electricity Market*

Following the end of the monopolistic model built around ENEL's role and the subsequent opening of the energy markets, the described model was considered the 'best' and has been successfully applied to the procurement of electricity over the last decades. In fact, right since the start of liberalisation and related functioning of the marginal pricing market, the system so conceived has favoured the entry of producers of renewable sources that would otherwise have been left out of the market (especially considering that renewables such as photovoltaics, wind, geothermal and biomass were new technologies with high installation costs and very long payback periods). Comparing the costs of different energy sources, only ten years ago it was much cheaper to build a fossil fuel power plant than a new photovoltaic or wind power plant: the latter was 22% more expensive than coal while photovoltaic was a crippling 223% more expensive. The marginal pricing market has therefore allowed these actors to benefit over time from a protected system in terms of profitability.

Over the years, the Italian electricity system has evolved significantly, leaving behind most of its initial features and connotations. From a production scenario strongly based on fossil fuels, there has been a shift to an electricity system increasingly characterised by the presence of renewable sources. This was the result of several developments. On the one hand, renewable energy production is entirely related to energies already present in nature (sun or wind, for example) that are simply captured by technological tools and transformed into electricity; the cost of a renewables-based power system is, therefore, only attributed to the cost of the technology itself, which has gradually become more efficient with a concomitant emergence of marginal pricing

misalignments. On the other hand, the gradual penetration of renewables can be seen as an effect of the energy policies and targets introduced at EU level, as well as a growing and more fundamental awareness of climate change.

After years of preparatory work, the Paris Agreement on greenhouse gas emissions, reached at the Climate Change Conference - COP 21 in 2015, was of particular importance (UNFCC, 2015). The driving goal was to keep the temperature increase below 2° and to continue, thanks to the progress of renewables, with the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, considered to be the main cause of the planet's increasing temperature. Subsequently, in 2016 the Clean Energy for all Europeans Package or "Winter 27 Package" (European Commission, 2016) was presented, with targets for 2030 including a 40% reduction in CO2 emissions compared to 1990 levels and a 32% increase in the use of RES. Furthermore, in 2019 the Commission adopted the so-called European Green Deal (European Union, 2019). Under the leadership of President Ursula von der Leyen, this new strategy sets out initiatives to help member states achieve certain targets by 2050, with the aim of transforming the European Union into a climate-neutral society with a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy.

The NextGenerationEU funds (the economic recovery and revitalisation tool introduced to restore the losses caused by the Covid-19 pandemic) and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) approved by the Italian government pursued the same objectives. In fact, they assumed the centrality of the ecological transition and the development of renewable energies functional to the pursuit of decarbonisation goals.

The path started at the EU level has, therefore, also been fully undertaken by Italy which, over the years, has set itself increasingly ambitious national reference goals and targets. Most recently, in order to achieve the objectives of the Integrated

National Energy and Climate Plan or PNIEC for the period 2021-2030, the development of renewable sources to cover electricity consumption has been given a fundamental role.

Driven by the aforementioned socio-political drivers, coupled with incentive instruments and technological innovations, the country has seen a continuous increase in renewable generation capacity. To date, Italy's installed capacity of renewable energy plants exceeds 60 GW, thanks mainly to increases, over the last decade, in the national solar and wind generation sector. In fact, the installed capacity of these non-programmable sources has increased from less than 5 GW in 2008 to more than 33 GW in 2021 (Energy Strategy, 2022).

Future prospects also seem encouraging in this direction. A recent analysis conducted by the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) shows that the cost reduction drivers (technology improvement, supply chain efficiency, scalability and production processes) for solar and wind power will continue for the next 10-15 years (IRENA, 2021).

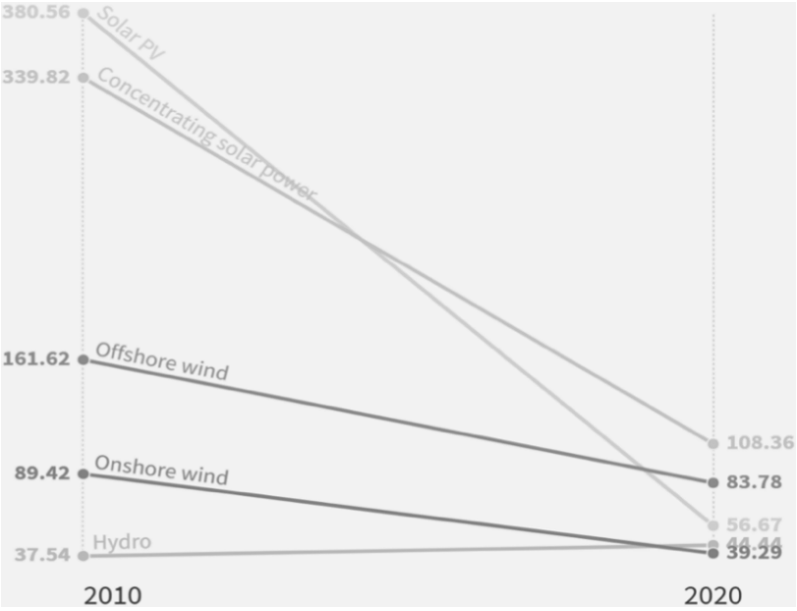
These changes, both on the demand and supply side, and brought about by the increase in installed power, have led to certain impacts and a consequent academic debate around the functioning of the current Italian electricity system and the mechanisms of energy price formation in the wholesale market. Indeed, the increasing ecological transition at national level has led to the same systematic contradictions that have substantially affected all markets across the continent (Buelga, Herrera and Foruria, 2011, pp. 1-49): renewable energy generation costs have fallen sharply over the past decade (Figure 3), remaining competitive and continuing to fall in 2021, despite supply delays and rising commodity prices.

To date, renewable energy producers come to market with very low prices, positioning themselves at the start of the merit order curve and securing acceptance of their bids. At the same

time, however, the penetration of renewable sources in the energy mix and the volumes offered by the production of renewable plants are not sufficient to determine the marginal price on the electricity wholesale market as they cannot satisfy a sufficient share of demand to exclude the higher offers of gas plants which currently determine the equilibrium price.

This does not mean that marginal pricing cannot or should not continue to play a significant role in renewables-based power systems, but its role needs to be adjusted to the characteristics of the involved technologies.

Figure 3 – *RES generation costs 2010-2020*



Source: IRENA "Renewable power generation costs 2020"

Indeed, under the current organisational structure, the marginal cost of the marginal technology is unrelated to the average costs of the various generation technologies because the PUN creation is set by expensive gas plants. Although evidence of these misalignments had been slowly permeating the debate even before the recent trade war between the European Union and Russia, since that moment (as detailed in the next paragraph), it was on full display.

4. *The Energy Crisis and the Debate on Electricity Market Design*

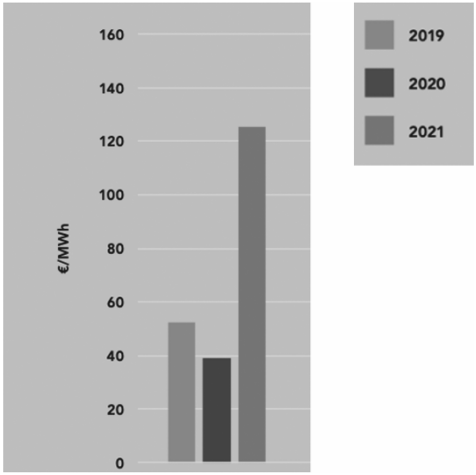
The energy and geo-political crisis that has decisively affected and is still affecting the price of gas was the spark that triggered some legitimate reflections on a possible reform of the internal electricity market, including within the EU energy policy agenda (see, for instance, the Acer report (ACER, 2022), clamoured for by European leaders in the final months of last winter).

In fact, as mentioned earlier, energy from fossil fuels raises the price of all units traded on national markets and sets the marginal price at a level that is almost eight times higher than the marginal cost of renewables at this historic moment.

Italy was in a particularly vulnerable position because natural gas accounts for 40% of its energy mix, compared to 17% in France and 26% in Germany (ISPI DataLab, 2022). On the other hand, Italy is expected to be among those who benefit most from the expansion of renewable generation capacity, as greater production from RES redistributes the surplus in favour of end consumers (domestic) and to the detriment of gas and oil exporters (foreign).

As shown in Figure 4, the annual trend of the average PUN has changed significantly over the last four years. The spot price on the power exchange shows a decrease in the pandemic year due to the contraction of electricity demand and a subsequent spike due to higher gas prices.

Figure 4 – *PUN: national annual average*



Source: Energy Strategy (2022). Electricity Market Report 2022.

During the early part of 2022, tensions in the energy markets – which had already led to unprecedented price increases in the gas and electricity wholesale markets in the last quarter of 2021 – were further heightened by the war in Ukraine and the sanctions imposed by Western countries on Russia. In March 2022, for instance, the average PUN increased by 411% compared to its value in March 2021. Certainly, PUN fluctuations have affected, and are still affecting, the cost of electricity in the bills of end consumers, posing further social problems for the most vulnerable sections of the population.

In the literature it has been observed that the lack of any benefits for consumers from the liberalisation of energy markets does not translate into mere pricing dissatisfaction among end customers, but rather something far worse. In fact, Europe is witnessing the emergence of large pockets of energy poverty (Chester and Morris, 2011, pp. 435-459).

The wholesale component is, in fact, a component of the final price and directly affects the citizen's bill. Thus, the PUN refers to the electricity tariffs that are subsequently proposed by suppliers to end customers and, as things stand, the marginal price system does not allow the cost benefits of renewables to be exploited by domestic consumers. In other words, the cost advantage of renewables cannot be fully exploited at present. For that reason, as well, in a non-paper presented by the European Commission in November last year, the Spanish, French, Italian, Romanian and Greek governments argued for urgent action to ensure that citizens pay electricity prices that reflect the costs of the generation mix used to serve their consumption.

Such a situation, further exacerbated by recent events, has led to reflection on the definition of a new implementation path capable of leading the Italian electricity market towards its future, maximising the benefits of transition, and protecting consumers from possible distortions and increases in energy costs. In fact, it is quite likely that the trend in the development of renewables, documented in recent years, will continue and that this type of resource will play an increasingly important role in national electricity production. In the long run, fossil fuels are expected to remain marginal (in terms of quantity but not in terms of importance in the system thus conceived), acting mainly to fill the structural shortcomings of naturally intermittent renewables.

Based on these considerations and the available data, the electricity mix in Italy, as well as in Europe, is undergoing a profound change, such that the current structure of the electricity market and, in particular, the method by which the wholesale market price is determined may no longer be efficient. The recent statement by the President of the European Commission marked a clear turning point in this respect. "This market system no longer works", said Ursula von der Leyen in early June 2022; "It was designed 20 years ago when renewable energies began to enter the mix. We (...) must adapt it to the new realities of the dominant renewable energy sources" (Agence Europe, 2022).

Within the wide-ranging open debate, several solutions have been identified. Some, such as the introduction of temporarily administered emergency price mechanisms or price caps, are aimed at a temporary mitigation of electricity price increases, while others seek a more medium- to long-term solution through the ambitious design of an alternative market (Laboratorio REF Ricerche, 2022) based on the electricity system envisaged by the green transition.

Among the latter, the decoupling of gas and electricity prices has been repeatedly proposed, giving consumers access to low-cost renewable energies. Within the European Union, the first official proposal of this kind was put forward by Greece in the Council on 22 July 2022. They presented a theoretical future structure of the electricity market conceived in two different sub-markets: one for renewable energy sources and one – conceptually residual and temporally subsequent to the first – for other types of sources, such as gas plants. Even this proposal, for various reasons, has not been without criticism.

However, whatever the pros and cons of the different solutions put forward, the current system clearly shows the need for a change of course in the European and national electricity

market (while being careful not to take a step backwards in the European electricity market integration process by introducing new barriers to cross-border trade).

Moreover, the growing need for flexibility in the electricity system is also related to the challenges arising from the transition process from a mono-directional model, based on a few large plants far from consumption centres, to a complex and distributed model, characterised by a multiplicity of actors, interactions and independent producers. Indeed, with the exponential increase in renewable energy plants, the traditional distinction between the role of energy producer and that of energy consumer is gradually fading. The public push to decarbonise the energy system has opened up the electricity system to prosumers, namely citizens that rather than simply consuming energy, play also an active role in its production (Parag and Sovacool, 2016, pp. 1-6).

Prosumers, on the one hand, are presumed to bring multiple benefits to the energy system, sustainability and society through reduced carbon emissions, increased use of renewable energy sources, new business opportunities, better access to energy in urban areas and improved resilience for rural communities. Prosumerism, on the other hand, shakes the existing regimes and incumbent energy sector stakeholders, while its increased share of variable energy generation can cause commercial, technical, and operational issues for the electricity system (Kotilainem, 2019, pp. 1-14).

Against this backdrop, although it is not easy to foresee future developments in a sector like the electricity industry in which many elements are uncertain, it is plausible – indeed, desirable – to think that, just as the 1979 energy crisis accelerated processes of energy efficiency and the development of technologies in the wind and solar sector, the current crisis

may further stimulate the use of renewable and low-emission energy sources.

Thus, as indicated by Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development (ASVIS) spokesperson Enrico Giovannini, a 100% renewable future may not be a mere utopia (Giovannini, 2018).

Indeed, the great majority of scientific publications highlight the technical feasibility and economic viability of a completely renewable energy system Several energy system models have also been established for modelling global 100% renewable energy research, although few models to date have been developed far enough to describe all required sectors and features in sufficient detail and are yet to be applied at a global level).

However, there is also a recent increasing polarisation in the public discourse on the transition to climate neutrality in the energy sector, with some arguing that transitioning to 100% renewable energy would be too slow to limit climate change!

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Utopian Promises and Dystopian Realities in Democracies' Pursuit of Bloodless Warfare: The Case of Air Power and Remote Warfare

ALESSANDRA RUSSO[1]

Abstract

This essay explores the evolution of military technology and doctrines, with a special focus on air power, through an analysis of the conceptual categories of utopia and dystopia. The goal is to shed light on how this evolution is characterised by an internal tension. Armed unmanned aerial aircraft used in carrying out targeted assassinations and signature strikes in the Global War on Terror have seemingly provided democracies with an "ethical" weapon capable of achieving the utopia of a riskless, bloodless warfare conceptualised well before the emergence of drones. However, these technologies, and their potential progression towards AI-driven autonomy, create unheard-of ethical issues. Scholars worry that this could lead to a dystopia of dehumanisation and surrogacy of war to machines, an erosion of the conventional idea of a just war, and the loss

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of the principle of reciprocity with the subsequent detrimental transfer of risk to a weaker, technologically inferior enemy.

Keywords: utopia, dystopia, remote warfare, military technology, ethics

1. *The Pursuit of the Utopian Ideal of Bloodless Warfare by Means of Technological Innovation*

The Clausewitzian adage "war is the continuation of politics by other means" (Von Clausewitz, 1950) best captures the inextricable link between the use of force and the State employing it. Clausewitz asserted that war has an ever-changing character akin to a chameleon, alongside an enduring, immutable nature. Developments in military technology are facilitating an increasing distancing of soldiers from the perils of the battlefield, allowing war to be waged from afar, particularly in asymmetric warfare contexts. Yet, technology itself is not the only cause of this phenomenon: General Clausewitz asserted, in fact, that "very few of the new manifestations of war can be attributed to new inventions or new idea trends. They arise mainly from the transformation of society and from new social conditions" (*Ivi*, 1950), Since the end of the Cold War and with the beginning of the unipolar moment, a paradigm shift has been observed in the way democratic states handle violence. After the decisive success of the First Gulf War and its *Desert Storm* operation at the beginning of the 1990s, it was clear how technological prowess could guarantee victory while dramatically reducing the risks for one's own armed forces. From that moment on, a strong momentum has been building up in democracies, both in the technological and political realms, towards achieving the utopia of painless, bloodless warfare by means of military technology. But are the most advanced

technologies really capable of realising this utopia? Or are they a dangerous slope towards the dehumanisation and surrogacy of warfare to machines, to the ultimate detriment of weaker, technologically less capable parties?

The drive to pursue ever greater safety in war, stemming from the biological spirit of self-preservation, can be found in the development of every type of weapon whose ultimate goal is to seek distance from the enemy. It could even be said that the history of military innovation, from the moment the first stone was thrown, has had as one of its main goals to harm the enemy without exposing oneself to risk (Scharre, 2018). This drive was heightened to its extreme following the trauma of the First World War, a conflict that laid bare the magnitude and destructive potential that a heavily industrial war could muster. This very trauma sparked the first intellectual impulse to seek an alternative to the mass slaughter that ensued in the trenches between 1914 and 1918. In 1925, in his *Paris or The Future of War*, Sir Basil Liddel Hart asserted that the combination of certain new technologies that had debuted or had proven their potential during World War I, namely the nascent air power and non-lethal chemical weapons, would allow the realisation of a contradictory and utopian concept: the waging of "bloodless wars". However, Liddel Hart's thinking was not exempt from criticism: Oxford University military history lecturer, Henry Spenser Wilkinson criticised Liddel Hart for pursuing an "... old will o' the wisp, victory without battles or bloodshed" (Swain, 1990). Given the technological means, their tactics of employment and the manner of conducting warfare at the time, the prospect of a conflict that could be fought and even won while minimising death, suffering and violence might indeed have seemed utopian. However, the much-reviled "will o' the wisp" conceptualised by Liddel Hart proved to prophesy

the developments that continued to materialising alongside the technological evolution of warfare during the 20th century.

2. *The Quest for Bloodless Warfare: from Early Air Power Theories to Armed Drones*

The pursuit of precision finds its most noble *raison d'être* in the very same desire of Liddel Hart: to make warfare less violent and costly in terms of military and civilian casualties. This desire materialised in the quest for growing precision in weapon capabilities and use so as to reduce the Clausewitzian elements of chaos and friction through technology, considered a tool that could unravel the fog of war. In World War I, along with tanks and chemical weapons, a technology born just a few years earlier gave access to a domain that was hitherto precluded to men: the sky.

General Giulio Douhet, one of the leading theorists of the first half of the 20th century, systematised his thinking on air warfare in *Il Dominio dell'Aria* ("The Command of the Air"). The idea at the heart of his work was the employment of air power to strike decisively at the enemy's population, government and industries using heavy bombers. As counterintuitive as it may seem, Douhet argued that such a modus operandi would, ultimately, reduce the number of casualties, as the "time would come when, in order to put an end to the horror and suffering, the people themselves, driven by the instinct of self-preservation, would rise up and demand an end to the war" (Douhet, 1921). The application of cutting-edge technology and the use of force had already begun to work towards the "lesser evil" of reducing bloodshed in war. Another father of air power was the aforementioned Sir Basil Liddel Hart. He followed in the footsteps of Douhet's work; however, he softened

the main tenets of Douhet's strategic bombing theory, suggesting instead to target and destroy the enemy's productive sector in order to sap the economy. This would indirectly crush the population's morale and drive its resistance without the need to incur unnecessary innocent casualties. The "indirect approach" he theorised would not immediately come to fruition; however, it would later influence the U.S. Bomber Mafia's advocacy for precision aerial bombing as a means to fight and win wars (Stefanachi, 2011). The Bomber Mafia's conception of warfare became a critical part of the U.S. aerial warfare strategy during World War II, using strategic bombing campaigns to target the enemy's military and infrastructure and so crush both the enemy's military and the population's morale (Vergun, 2019). This was the first real-life example of intermingling technology with the quest for precision in a full-scale conflict.

The deployment of air power in World War II would, however, not be a feasible option in the Cold War, using the Mutually Assured Destruction strategy of nuclear weapons. During the Cold War, the strategic and human failures of the Korean and Vietnam wars pushed the U.S. to pursue a path of structural review of its deployment and use of the instrument of force beyond its national borders in order to avoid repeating the tragic loss of lives. Furthermore, the fall of the USSR and the beginning of the unipolar era saw an acceleration of the riskless warfare paradigm. The U.S. Desert Storm operation in Iraq in 1991 was a turning point that spurred on this trend. Its rapid and resounding victory, brought about by technological superiority through precision bombings and the suppression of enemy air defences, ushered in an unprecedented enthusiasm for the capabilities and applications of the newest technologies in warfare to bolster the capabilities of the now mature and unparalleled potential of air power. Drawing from the

painful lessons learned in Vietnam and galvanised by the Desert Storm successes, the Powell Doctrine laid the cornerstone for the criteria determining the use of force abroad and on how to carry out military interventions that transcended the air domain. The Powell Doctrine prescribed that American troops be sent to fight abroad under solely three circumstances: if military intervention was seen as a last resort for taking action; if vital political objectives were at stake and, finally, if every alternative diplomatic and economic means had been exhausted. The intervention would then be carried out with clearly defined military objectives, with the full support of the American people, and only if the operation bore acceptable risks (Powell, 1992). The need for risk reduction was also expressed in the decision to only undertake operations when certain victory could be achieved with overwhelming forces, that is, when the U.S. had the guaranteed means to achieve decisive results (Stefanachi, 2011). With the Powell Doctrine, there was a definitive shift from an all-encompassing quest to limit the effects of war, to one that only reduced the risks and costs for one's own armed forces, without regard for the opposing side.

This riskless warfare trend was further exemplified by NATO's *manu militari* intervention in the 1999 Operation Allied Force in Kosovo. The use of military force had, by that time, become fully subordinate to the political imperative of preserving military lives – especially American ones. Allied Force was a military operation carried out using solely air forces and no boots on the ground, and pilots were prohibited from flying below an altitude of 15,000 feet to guarantee full safety from enemy anti-aircraft defences. William Cohen, Bill Clinton's Secretary of Defence, later stated that "the most important lesson learned from Operation Allied Force was that *the welfare of our people must remain our first priority*" (PBS, 2000). President Milosevič's capitulation after the operation was

deemed a complete success with the achievement of the mission's ultimate objective. It even pushed some observers, such as John Keegan, to assert that the events of 3 June 1999 marked a turning point in history, proving that a war can be won by air power alone (Keegan, 1999). Edward Luttwak also posited that modern weapons, coupled with appropriate military planning aimed at maximising their technical potential, would allow [a country] "to emulate the casualty-avoiding methods of eighteenth-century warfare and thus *conduct armed yet virtually bloodless interventions*" (Luttwak, 1995).

The "post-heroic" conceptualisation of warfare, employing cooperation and technology as tools to minimise and avoid unnecessary violence and casualties, had reached full maturity and was about to be taken a step further. Keegan's enthusiastic vision of Allied Force's success in Milosevič's capitulation may have influenced a trend that reappeared a few years later, with the arming and extensive deployment of drones in the Global War on Terror. This took riskless warfare even beyond that which had been considered possible during Allied Force in Kosovo, and what Douhet and Liddel Hart could ever have imagined. In 1964, an engineer, John W. Clark, conjured up "telechiric machines" in a study entitled Remote Control in Hostile Environments; these were remotely controlled devices that could be the "alter ego of the person operating them", which would contain the human operator's consciousness "transferred inside a mechanical body" (Chamayou and Lloyd, 2015). An embodiment of this concept was, without doubt, found in contemporary unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). The first drones date back to the early 1920s and were mainly used as moving targets or *ante litteram* kamikaze drones. They were then deployed as a tool to bolster Intelligence, Reconnaissance and Surveillance (ISR) missions, mainly developed by the U.S. and Israel. These "eyes in the sky" would not be weaponised

until the early 2000s, with the critical push of the 9/11 attack and the subsequent Global War on Terror that ensued. U.S. President at the time, George W. Bush, enthusiastically presented the expansion of the drone arsenal, from around 170 to more than 6,000, and how these were being armed to hunt down the terrorists threatening America (Bush, 2008). The Predator and Reaper drones came to embody a democratic *zeitgeist* in which the political and economic idea of no-casualty warfare replaced the somewhat stale ideal of heroic sacrifice in battle that had served a central purpose in the industrial interstate warfare of the first half of the century (Russo, 2019).

In the context of asymmetric warfare and counter-insurgency, armed drones were – and still are – mainly employed in carrying out targeted killings. These are deliberate lethal attacks by government forces against an individual of interest for security purposes/military operations, or alternatively someone guilty of crimes who is not in the custody of the authority exercising lethal force ('Q & A: US Targeted Killings and International Law', 2011). In this vein, targeted killings appear to be adopted as an antithetical response to terrorism: while terrorist attacks are condemned for their deliberately impersonal and indiscriminate way of killing, targeted killings apply lethal force surgically and individually. This pre-emptive elimination of dangerous individuals sees war take on the guise of vast operational campaigns more akin to extrajudicial executions than actual battles. The Obama administration further modified the targeted killing practice by developing "signature strikes"; these adopted far looser criteria in the targeting process, and were based on identifying the target through intelligence monitoring and analysis.

Advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies might push past even the removal of men and women from the battlefield through remotely controlled drones, with "man" no

longer having relevance in the term "unmanned": incorporating AI into current remotely controlled armed systems to render them partially or even fully autonomous, substantially removes the need for humans in the decision-making process, from targeting to the decision to fire a weapon. A first example of this was the STM-Kargu-2 drone that was reportedly employed with full autonomy in the civil war in Libya in 2021 (Choudhury *et al.*, 2021). The previous decade focused on the debate around so-called "killer robots" (Sauer, 2016) without coming to a conclusion on their actual feasibility, nor any agreement on a pre-emptive ban on their development and use having been successfully reached yet. Some scholars even argue that the new frontiers of technological evolution encompassing AI and full autonomy – when guided by a built-in, ethics-based code enabling full compliance with the Laws of Armed Conflict and Rules of Engagement – could remove and replace humans in war (Umbrello, Torres and De Bellis, 2020). However, several technical hurdles have been highlighted in making this process feasible and safe, while some even doubt that AI could be an "ethical" agent at all.

3. *Remote and Post-Heroic Warfare: The Duality of Utopian Promises and Dystopian Realities*

Jeff Hawkins, former American diplomat and member of the U.S. Department of State, spoke about drone warfare in the Global War on Terror, stating that "drones are the most refined, *accurate* and *humane* way to fight [this war]" (Chamayou and Lloyd, 2015). "Accurate" and "humane" are the cornerstones adjectives and the climax of the riskless warfare trend that has been developing in the U.S. and its democratic allies. Stephen Biddle asserted that technological changes

considered as revolutionary, such as the increased lethality of precision-guided weapons or the increased range of air and missile systems, are all extensions and results of much longer-standing trends (Biddle, 2006). Remote warfare and the first steps towards the deployment of AI and the "intelligentisation" of warfare (Kania, 2021) fall within the scope of this broader trend. Some scholars have stressed that advances in technology that enhance the protection of just war-fighters are – in principle and excluding any strong drawbacks – ethically preferable and must thus be employed (Strawser, 2010). In this vein, armed drones should be the right choice as they are not inherently illegal; as such, their use in asymmetrical wars has not encountered any strong or effective restraint (Russo, 2019). On the contrary: the proliferation of drones has accelerated unhindered, further heightened and demonstrated by recent conflicts in Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine (Cole, 2023). Unmanned military technologies allow the development of a riskless warfare paradigm in its fullest expression: they permit the total immunity of the operator, and contribute towards reducing the moral and social cost of conducting wars (Walsh and Schulzke, 2018), while the precision of drone strikes provides compliance with the principles of *ius in bello*. In this vein, former U.S. President Obama remarked how "conventional airpower or missiles are far less precise than drones, and are likely to cause more civilian casualties and more local outrage" (*Remarks by the President at the National Defense University*, 2013), highlighting the ethical and collateral damage-reducing nature of armed UAVs. Drones and precision weaponry would thus be the "silver bullet of democratic warfare" (Sauer and Schörnig, 2012), an ethical weapon that finally makes warfare less violent and more humane.

The utopia of the silver bullet, however, might just be a double-edged sword. With the tragic exception of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the paradigm of industrial interstate warfare has been largely replaced by conflicts termed non-trinitarian wars, wars amongst people (Smith, 2012), new wars (Kaldor, 2005) and asymmetrical wars. Asymmetry manifests as a differential in strength and capabilities – including technological ones – and one of its results is an unequal distribution of vulnerability. This very concept was highlighted by the remote warfare that was waged against Al Qai'da and other rogue non-state actors during the Global War on Terror and counter-insurgency campaigns.

Remote and riskless warfare has revealed a paradox. Technological and military superiority seem to preclude the possibility of waging a just war, as they deny the party that is being attacked the possibility of retaliating in compliance with the principles of *jus in bello*, creating a morally unacceptable situation. As highlighted by some scholars, the relentless pursuit of asymmetry for the sake of achieving total safety for a state's own forces erodes the principle of reciprocity (Kahn, 2002).The riskless warfare increasingly characterising U.S. military policy, pushes up against the limits of the traditional moral justification for combat (Kahn, 2002) as it envisions a scenario of "David versus Goliath", in which the former is stripped of his slingshot and unable to fight back. The enemy is no longer fought: it is eliminated like a prey. Even worse, as maintained by Professor of Philosophy at Monash University, Suzy Killmister, remote weaponry "restricts the moral options for retaliation available to the state under attack" (Killmister, 2008) because the attacked can no longer respond by targeting combatants on the battlefield, as there aren't any. Short of surrender, the only option and risk that such a practice leaves, is for the enemy's

general population to retaliate by means of terrorism (Killmister, 2008).

The boundaries of war become increasingly blurred and overstretched, rendering it extremely difficult to draw a clear-cut line between what is war and what is peace at a legal, operational and even ethical level. The rules set out in the Presidential Policy Guidance (PPG) – also known as the "drone playbook" – authorise the use of lethal force outside areas of active hostilities, creating a perilous grey zone that stretches and thins the boundary between what is war and what is not (Russo, 2019). The very notion of war enters a crisis. If drone warfare can no longer be classified as fully-fledged conflict, what forms of violence does it correspond to? Drone warfare ushered in the emergence of a new ethical and political norm for war that is neither war as we know, nor is it peace (Chamayou and Lloyd, 2015). It is a phenomenon that takes on a guise akin to international policing, more than traditional conflict (Strawser, 2010).

Another worrying trend is surrogate warfare: this is the outsourcing of parts of – or the entire – strategic, operational or tactical burden of war to surrogates, be they human forces or technological means, in order to minimise the human, material and political costs of war (Krieg and Rickli, 2018). This phenomenon can include the arming of rebel groups such as the Yemeni Houthi, the use of private military contractors (PMCs) such as Blackwater or Wagner Group, the use of armed drones engaging in remote warfare, or cyber and hybrid warfare activities. The organisation of force has shifted from the deployment of soldiers as the primary bearers of the burden of war, to methods of warfare in which technological and human surrogates enable the state to remotely and painlessly manage and delegate the risks of post-modern conflicts (Krieg and Rickli, 2018). Technological advancement enables and encourages

stronger surrogacy practices as witnessed by drone warfare: the armed drones engaging in targeted killings are controlled by soldiers thousands of miles away from the battlefield; and advances towards autonomy are even making the total removal of the human element from warfare possible.

Remote warfare manifests a further controversy and paradox, as it ultimately comes up against the democratic peace theory. Liberal democracies may have no motivation to fight those they consider as fellow liberal democracies; however, they do mistrust governments they perceive as too illiberal and may think that going to war with them is in the national interest (Owen, 1994). This, coupled with the ethical and political imperative to protect the lives of a state's own military forces (which are given extreme value), is exemplified by expressions that have been widely used since the late 1990s, such as "no body bags", "phobia of losses" and "aversion to risk". While armed and possibly autonomous systems may seem to be a "silver bullet" for democracies seeking an ethical way to conduct warfare, some have expressed concern that democracies that rely on these systems might expose themselves to a paradoxical drawback, as they might make themselves more vulnerable and prone to belligerent tendencies in the long run (Sauer and Schörnig, 2012). With the physical removal of "boots on the ground" from the battlefield, public opinion in democratic states would be less reluctant to accept a decision to wage war, as long as there was no risk for their own people and decision-makers in terms of political drawback. Precision-guided munitions and remote weaponry may overall reduce the threshold for decisions to use force, as the political and human price of war decreases with the subrogation of warfare to technology (Walsh and Schulzke, 2018). In this vein, those democratic interests and norms that would usually be considered the cornerstone of democratic pacifism, would paradoxically lead to a

more belligerent tendency underpinned by a decreased political and human cost of war (Sauer and Schörnig, 2012).

4. *The Paradox of Unmanned Technology: Reflections on the Ethical Implications of Remote Warfare*

Wars are inherently painful and violent events, and throughout history, up till World War II, their ferocity has been restricted to the battlefields. Even though some have claimed that wars are limited in nature (Powell, 1992), it is undeniable that with the advent of hybrid and asymmetrical warfare, war has crawled well beyond the boundaries of battlefields. This phenomenon has exacerbated the long-standing quest to anesthetise war by seeking total safety and immunity for one's own armed forces and population. This renders unmanned technology a perfect ethical weapon for realising the utopian democratic ideal of a war that can be just in its conception, and fair and flawless in its execution, while also minimising the human, material and political risks and costs of conflict. Unmanned technology and its seemingly natural progression toward AI-driven autonomy appear to be the realisation of a democratic utopia – the U.S. being the prime case – that needs to bring two contradictory ends together: the increasing reluctance to risk the lives of one's armed forces and the need to resort to using force. While remote warfare does give governments a relatively inexpensive and effective tool for conducting wars, it is unlikely that it will represent the much-anticipated cure-all for each and every contemporary and future war. Furthermore, it represents a dangerous, double-edged sword: the immunity it provides to combatants may result in democracies developing a more belligerent behaviour, which will see the "democratic utopia" of waging bloodless and riskless wars turn into a dystopia that

witnesses the erosion of the principles of a just war. Remote warfare displays a complete transfer of risk to the enemy, whose lives are *de facto* worth less than the armed forces and people of the stronger party, and who are stripped of the chance to retaliate in just war-sanctioned ways. Furthermore, the physical removal of men and women from the battlefield gives rise to even more extreme tendencies towards delegating the "dirtiest," most hazardous and traumatic aspects of combat to autonomous systems and even autonomous weapons.

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The crisis of globalisation, the rise of autocratic competitors to the liberal-democratic model, the return of symmetric warfare on European soil, the problem of energy resources and global disparities in accessing them, the consequences of the Anthropocene on the lives of millions of people around the World, are just some of the problematic issues that new generations of scholars and academics are called to answer in the next decades. This impressive conjuncture of critical phenomena reveals the exhaustion of an entire mindset, which belongs to the Twentieth Century and, in particular, to the illusion that the History was over, together with some of the most harmful Nineteenth Century's legacies: industrial pollution, economic and social inequalities, radical nationalism and imperialism. In other words, it looks like the Utopian visions of the past – and especially the ones related with the Western liberal thought – have come to terms with their limitis which, in their turns, have produced a series of dystopic effects in the real World. Given this general picture, it is not so surprising to note a revival of dystopian narratives in literature, tv series, film-making and a variety of other cultural products. Placed within a broader interdisciplinary research project focused on the penetration of dystopian narratives in the Twenty-First century's collective imagery (as well as the analysis of the political role played by dystopias in present times) this collective work brings together the thoughts of seven young doctoral students, who read some of the most crucial issues of our times through the lenses of utopia and dystopia, as well as by different disciplinary perspectives. From the challenges related to the natural resources management and the energy transition to the rise of alterative political models to the Western liberal-democracy, each essay accounts for the long term impact of utopian theories and ideas over time and their eventual dystopic effects.

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