

# Sustainable Human Development

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BRIEF ON TRUE DEMOCRACY AND CAPITALISM

# Crisis or collapse? Overshoot and degrowth

The Energy Agency estimates that the green transition will require a seven-fold increase in rare earths, a 19-fold increase in nickel, a 21-fold increase in cobalt and a 42-fold increase in lithium mining over two decades.

# Asier Arias

he delicate juncture of the Earth system has been described as a crisis or a set of crises: 'ecological crisis', 'climate crisis', 'biodiversity crisis'. Our ecosocial situation has also been described as a crisis. In recent months, a controversy has arisen in Spanish environmentalism that contrasts this crisis notion with 'collapse'. Some of those involved in this controversy have suggested it would be time to jump 'from truth to emotion', to mobilise politically, recruiting affection rather than examining reasons. However, it is not lost on anyone that political mobilisation is likely to be achieved by different means. Not all means may lead to the same kind of mobilisation, and I think there is every reason to insist on the reasons.<sup>1</sup>



Photo by Vlad Chetan - Pexels

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> When faced with these extremes, I tend to think of Noam Chomsky. His explicitly enlightened affiliation, his expressed intention to leave emotions aside in his political activities, his monotonous barrage of 'merely' factual analyses—all of these we must parallel with the question of whether there has been any other figure who has had a greater impact on the political education of the last couple of generations. If we wanted to get rhetorical, we could counter the rationalism of his legacy with the fervent affectivity of the new fascistic spawn.

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I will, therefore, return to these notions - crisis, collapse - after devoting a few lines to trying to explain and help us understand. I will outline an overview of our ecological situation - shall we avoid the ambiguity between

June 2023 was the warmest month ever recorded globally (0.5°C above the 1991-2020 average). 'ecological' and 'ecosocial' (Riechmann, 2023) - by focusing on three of its central elements: the climatic symptom of our ecological overshoot, that of the sixth mass extinction and, finally, the main material source of each of the symptoms, namely the fossil potlatch that is now coming to

an end (Santiago Muíño, 2018: 64). I will try to avoid the usual 'carbon tunnel vision' (Escrivá, 2021; 2023) that equates 'ecological crisis' with 'climate change'.

### An overview

### Climate chaos

A couple of recent events invite us to start with the climate symptom. Copernicus - the European Space Agency's Earth observation programme - reported that June 2023 was the warmest month ever recorded globally (0.5°C above the 1991-2020 average). Also, during the first week of July, while the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) was making it official that El Niño had come on top of strong thermal anomalies in the Atlantic and Pacific, the average surface temperature record was broken three times: in other words, Monday was declared the hottest day in the history of climate monitoring by the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, but the next day immediately came and relegated it to a second place where it could not remain for long. The WMO would later announce that the first week of July was the hottest ever recorded.

The consequences of climate change are well known: an increase in the frequency and intensity of major fires, floods, droughts, heat waves, and massive snow storms. Unfortunately, this increase would take a miracle to cease in the coming decades.

The latest IPCC report (AR6) is the consensus and reference document on climate change. Its contents were optimistically echoed in the press.<sup>2</sup> Once again, it was interpreted as a 'profitable' investment opportunity (Planelles, 2022a) the call for a 'brutal reduction' in emissions that 'should have started yesterday' (Planelles, 2022b) and celebrated the demonstration of the existence of a window of opportunity to stay within the limits of

Emissions should have started to fall yesterday. The problem is that emissions, far from falling, are increasing year by year. non-catastrophic warming (Plumer & Fountain, 2021). The report makes clear the shape of that window: 'rapid, profound and, in most cases, immediate emission reductions in all sectors' (IPCC, 2022: 24). There is, in fact, something of a

snapshot of that window in the report (IPCC, 2023: SPM.5, p. 22; see et. al. IPCC, 2022: TS.9, p. 69).

In effect, what this picture tells us is that emissions should have started to fall yesterday. The problem is, of course, that emissions, far from falling, are increasing year by year, and all indications are that they will continue to be strongly coupled with the rate of global GDP (cf. D'Alessandro et al., 2020; Hickel & Kallis, 2019; Jackson & Victor, 2019; Nature, 2022; Parrique et al., 2019).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> We can leave aside here the 'conservative' bias of this consensus, the well-known tendency of the IPCC to err on the optimistic side (cf., e.g. Brysse et al., 2013), explicitly admitted by the IPCC itself (IPCC, 2019, p. 83).

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# Limiting warming to 1.5°C and 2°C involves rapid, deep and in most cases immediate greenhouse gas emission reductions

Net zero CO<sub>2</sub> and net zero GHG emissions can be achieved through strong reductions across all sectors



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Year of net zero emissions

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Among the scenarios considered in the report on the possible evolution of emissions, only the most optimistic

Every tenth of warming means an increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, but it also translates into an increase in the likelihood that we are hurtling down the slope of dangerous points of no return. scenario would allow us to keep warming below 1.5°C above the pre-industrial average. In that scenario, emissions plummet to zero by mid-century. In the next most optimistic scenario, zero is reached in the last quarter of the century, thus enabling the possibility of staying below a 2°C increase over the pre-industrial level.

Every tenth of warming means an increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, but it also translates into an increase in the likelihood that we are hurtling down the slope of dangerous points of no return (Lenton et al., 2019; Harvey 2021a). The goal of limiting global average temperature increase to 1.5°C has sometimes been discussed as arbitrary (Shaw, 2016); cf. (Harvey, 2021b), but there is evidence that points to that figure as a point above which it would be impossible to stop positive feedback loops that would lead to runaway climate change: loops such as melting ice, loss of permafrost or the vegetation-soil system - there is also evidence that these loops may have already been triggered, or are about to be triggered (González Reyes & Almazán, 2023: 34-36). With the idea of the vegetation-soil system loop in mind, let us now turn to the second of the symptoms mentioned.

### Sixth mass extinction

There have been five mass extinctions throughout the history of life on Earth. Today, we are in the midst of the sixth, and it appears to be by far the most rapid. The conclusions of the IPBES Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, an analogue of the IPCC report in the context of biodiversity, are quite clear: 'The global rate of species extinction is already at least tens to hundreds of times higher than the average over the last ten million years, and it is accelerating'.<sup>3</sup> The main 'direct driver' of this acceleration is found in 'land-use change', mostly due to agribusiness (IPBES, 2019a: 12, 24, 28). Mark Rounsevell, head of the European section of the report, was equally clear about the causes of this destruction: 'The food system is at the root of the problem' (Vidal, 2019).

The vast majority of wildlife loss is due to food production, specifically the increasing trend to burn and bulldoze millions of hectares of forests and rainforests into monocultures to fatten billions of industrially raised animals (Lymbery, 2017). While there are other important drivers of biodiversity loss, this transformation of major terrestrial biodiversity reservoirs into monocultures at industrial livestock's expense is the most significant. The land needed to produce a given amount of animal protein is ten times the amount needed to produce the equivalent amount of plant protein, and livestock is the most land-intensive sector. Around 80% of agricultural land is used for livestock farming. This disproportionate land use makes industrial livestock farming the main driver of deforestation: agricultural expansion induced by industrial livestock farming's thirst for grain is responsible for 80% of deforestation worldwide.

In a country that produces more than three times as much meat as it consumes and imports from Brazil more than half of the soya with which it feeds its livestock - and which takes on the EU-Mercosur agreement as a priority issue for its presidency of the Council of the European Union during the second half of 2023 (EeA, 2023) - it is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> No, life is not viable on Trantor: this 'unprecedented global decline' in the planet's biological wealth poses a 'direct threat to human well-being in all regions of the world' (IPBES, 2019b).

If tropical forests were not degrading at an alarming rate, they would contribute to climate change mitigation by removing carbon from the atmosphere. interesting to remember that the fine green declarations of our representatives run parallel to the discussion among specialists about the point of no return from which deforestation of the Amazon will accelerate to leave behind something similar to the African savannah, but with much less

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### biodiversity (Amigo, 2020).<sup>4</sup>

It is also interesting to note that if tropical forests were not degrading at an alarming rate, they would contribute to climate change mitigation by removing carbon from the atmosphere (Popkin, 2019; Lewis et al., 2019). However, given that degradation, instead of absorbing carbon, these ecosystems would start to emit it (Baccini et al., 2017; et al. Hubau et al., 2020; Resco de Dios, 2020).<sup>5</sup>

Already in its special report on the risks and foreseeable impacts of a global average temperature increase above 1.5°C, the IPCC reproached governments for their inaction on the main cause of biodiversity loss: 'At present, there is little evidence of effective policies in place to achieve the required large-scale changes in food choices, and observable trends point to an increase rather than a decrease in demand for livestock products globally' (IPCC, 2018: 327; v. et. Schulte et al. Schulte et al, 2020).<sup>6</sup>

'2020 was the year in which biodiversity loss was to be halted, as signed ten years ago by 195 states (...), establishing specific targets to achieve it: the so-called Aichi targets. Of course, these targets have not been met (Martín Hurtado, 2020, p. 26).

During COP26 in 2021, 145 countries pledged to implement effective policies to reverse deforestation by 2030. So far, the commitment has not translated into appreciable progress, but rather the opposite: according to data recently presented by the World Resources Institute, the loss of tropical primary forest was ten per cent higher in 2022 than in 2021 (Weisse et al., 2023).

### The decline of the fossil potlatch

The eloquent notion of the Great Acceleration refers to 'the comprehensive and interrelated nature of post-1950 changes in the socio-economic and biophysical spheres of the Earth system' (Steffen et al., 2015b: 2). All indices that account for human activities on the planet shot up in unison shortly after the Second World War. Such a thing does not just happen: economic growth, industrial expansion, globalisation of trade and the rest of the features of the Great Acceleration took place on the basis of a dramatic increase in fossil energy consumption. Our total energy consumption is eight times higher than in the decade before the Great Acceleration, and four-fifths of it is due to fossil fuels - a proportion that has not changed significantly over the past four decades (IEA, 2021a).

Therefore, the extraordinary material expansion that characterised the second half of the 20th century must be described as a potlatch that is now coming to an end and for which there are no viable alternatives in sight: no

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The joint and independent impact of various stressors has likely been considerably underestimated until now. Thus, ecosystem collapse - and even some sort of domino effect of ecosystem collapses - could occur more rapidly than has been assumed (Willcock et al., 2023; Dearing et al., 2023).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> In addition, tropical forests' capacity to store carbon declines with increasing temperature, as does their resilience (Sullivan et al., 2020).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Joseph Poore, one of the leading specialists in the field, points out the obvious: 'a vegan diet is probably the simplest way to reduce human impact on the planet' (Carrington, 2018). Indeed, 'there is no way to conceive of a sustainable world [if not] in terms of agroecology, food sovereignty and basically vegan diets' (Riechmann, 2012 p. 46; v. et. 2019; 2022a: ch. 7).

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energy source that, in isolation or in coalition with others, can replace fossil fuels with comparable yields (Turiel, 2020).

Modern 'renewable energies' — photovoltaic and wind power — are the main source of optimism regarding the possibilities of building an alternative energy system to fossil fuels with comparable yields. However, this project is burdened by a number of problems. While there is no consensus on the 'energy transition' of the kind embodied in the IPCC and IPBES reports, evidence and logic indicate that 'fossil fuel civilisation' (Smil, 1999: 271) is unfeasible without fossil fuels.

What modern 'renewables' offer is electricity, which represents only one-fifth of our global energy consumption. Meanwhile, large segments of the industrial economy - from agro-industry, construction or mining to transport - depend on processes that are more than doubtful they can be electrified. Moreover, electricity production from these 'renewable energies' is barely more than one-twentieth of the total - one-twentieth of one-fifth of our energy consumption, in other words. On the other hand, all 'renewable energies' - including, to be sure, the main one, hydroelectric power - account for about half of the net increase in electricity demand (IEA, 2021b).<sup>7</sup>

This brutal gap between where we are now - essentially stagnating for decades - and where we intend to go with the 'green energy transition' is just one of the problems with this 'transition' project. The International Energy Agency estimates that such a transition would require a seven-fold increase in rare earths, a 19-fold increase in nickel, a 21-fold increase in cobalt and a 42-fold increase in lithium extraction over the next two decades (IEA, 2021c: 9). Clearly, such an extractivist expansion would be far from innocuous: the ecosystem effects of mining for renewables are expected to be even worse than those of climate change in the coming years (Sonter et al., 2020). It is not easy to 'make sustainable what is unsustainable' (Duch, 2023).

Be that as it may, the biggest problem of this project is that the mineral resources that condition its viability are already scarce and will become increasingly scarce, so obtaining them will require increasing energy investments to feed extractive processes whose impacts will increase while the quality of the extracted resource is progressively reduced (Almazán, 2021; Valero et al., 2021). Modern 'renewable energies', in short, 'have high material requirements, many of them scarce, enjoy a half-life of 15-30 years [and] depend for their construction on fossil fuels' (Almazán & Riechmann, 2023). Fossil fuel civilisation is unlikely to outlive fossil fuel civilisation.

### Crisis or collapse?

The short answer is that words do not matter. The long answer is that the words come hand in hand with uncertain

Europe is, as far as the 'critical raw materials' for the 'green transition' are concerned, a wasteland. and fuzzy prospects and even more uncertain and fuzzy transition programmes. There are, however, some points that are crystal clear. First, the precautionary principle invites anything rather than programmes based on the most optimistic foresight.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, in

conventional terms, optimistic prospects for the 'energy transition' are inseparable from purely colonial

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> 'Variations in fossil fuel use have been broadly linked to variations in GDP for decades, and global demand for fossil fuels has remained around 80% of total demand for decades' (IEA, 2022: 43).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> 'As Manuel Casal Lodeiro has once observed, the difference between the scenario of 'the catastrophists were right, but we did not act drastically' and that of 'the catastrophists were not right, but we went ahead to make post-growth/post-fossil/resilient societies' is so brutal that it should lead even the most radical-averse to action' (Riechmann, 2022b).

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programmes: Europe is, as far as the 'critical raw materials' for the 'green transition' are concerned, a wasteland. So, 'green transition' for how many, for how long, and at whose expense?<sup>9</sup> Thirdly, the increased media presence of 'sustainability' does not set the context for moderating the environmentalist message as a hypothetical means of gaining political ground - how much ground have the German Greens, a party with 'hardly any common ground with what once was' (Scheidler, 2023), gained and lost us - but perhaps rather for making explicit, actively and passively, the limits, risks and contradictions of the standard 'green transition' project and discourse.

Time is short - Jorge Riechmann often says that we are 'in a time crunch' - but that does not mean we should not devote it to reflection and strategic debate; quite the contrary. However, on the left, debate and reflection do not usually lead to agreement, so sincere empathy and close collaboration with those who do not think exactly as we do will undoubtedly be more fruitful than the usual trenches. What matters now is organisation and mobilisation, and it is clear that we need synergies rather than confrontation in these contexts.

The answer to the dilemma between crisis and collapse could, in the end, consist in the conjunction between the incontrovertible diagnosis of severe ecological overshoot and the urgent need for degrowth - to avoid, hopefully, that it is the consequences of overshoot that forces traumatic degrowth.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> In the North, the decisive moral standard will henceforth have to be sought in our policies and attitudes towards the territories of the South and migrants. For now, the standard is worse than shameful.

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