

THINKING SUSTAINABILITY RESEARCH



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How can we treat our eco-anxiety?

Translation in English

Faced with the daily flood of bad news about the state of the planet, how can we not feel concerned, afraid or anxious? What can be done about this anxiety? If the work on stress carried out by the neurobiologist Henri Laborit is anything to go by, it is essential not to let the situation continue. After various experiments on the subject, Laborit came to two clear conclusions, masterfully illustrated by Alain Resnais in *My American Uncle* (1980). Firstly, repeated stress is potentially very dangerous for animals, including humans of course. A stressful situation ultimately disrupts the immune and cardiovascular systems. Secondly, to avoid the risk of developing more or less serious pathologies in such cases, according to Laborit, the best remedy is flight. You simply need to get as far away as possible from the source of the stress in question¹.

But how can we escape the current ecological disaster and its various manifestations? There is currently no place on Earth where we can consider ourselves truly safe from this catastrophe². Even if the intensity varies from place to place, climate disruption will affect the entire globe and the living beings that inhabit it. Furthermore, some forms of pollution are already present all around the world. This is particularly true of microplastics, which can be found both in the Antarctic ice and in our intestines. The same applies to a number of chemical particles, which saturate our living environments and are already seriously disrupting another of our bodies' regulatory systems: the endocrine system. Many of the lifestyle diseases that affect a growing number of us and are undermining our healthcare systems today have one of their causes in this area³.

However, unlike the rats on which Laborit conducted his experiments, humans have another escape strategy when faced with a stressful situation: mental escape. If we cannot change the world in which we find ourselves, we can always change our

awareness of it. And we have developed all sorts of ways of achieving this. As well as legal and illegal drugs, which can help us cope better with the stresses of everyday life, we can also discipline ourselves in various ways to take a less anxiety-inducing approach to our world, by practising positive thinking or certain forms of meditation. Another option is to escape into imaginary worlds. Art is full of them. And cyberspace too. Finally, we can focus only on reassuring 'stories', realities that reduce the anxiety-inducing nature of the news we receive about the state of our planet. This is the case with information promoting "sustainable development", "green growth", "energy transition", the "circular economy" or "ecological redirection". While acknowledging the ecological dangers we face, these stories reassure us that the worst can be avoided, without calling our civilisation into question. Like children's stories, they help you sleep. Hence their considerable success.

Internal flight offers two undeniable advantages. It's relatively easy to practise and, if Laborit is to be believed, it's a pretty effective way of keeping yourself in good health. The problem is that while we are escaping into our imaginary world, the catastrophe remains very real, and continues all the more easily because we are not putting up any resistance to it, since we are in some way elsewhere. As a result, it may well end up catching up with us and jolting us out of the torpor in which we keep ourselves. So what can you do if fleeing is not possible? Laborit argued that it was essential not to fall into "inhibition of action", a kind of paralysis imposed by the conviction that there was nothing we could do about the ills that overwhelm us. It is in this state that certain diseases develop, such as high blood pressure, cancer, depression and many others. So how can we avoid somatisation?

FIGHT YES, BUT FIGHT WHAT?

The experiments carried out by the author of *In praise of flight* suggest a possible solution. They reveal that two rats subjected to small electric shocks in the same cage will tend to fight each other. Of course, this fight does not eliminate the cause of their torment but it does seem to prevent them from developing pathologies, unlike rats which have to endure the same situation on their own. To avoid somatisation, you have to fight. To combat eco-anxiety, we should first of all be "eco-furious", as Frédéric Lordon invites us to be, which should at least prevent us from falling ill. The question is who to fight. This is undoubtedly where another danger lurks, that of hitting the wrong target. One of the most common mistakes made in the West is to blame the Chinese for our ecological horrors. China's industry is presumed to be too polluting but we forget that we are the main consumers of their products. Perhaps even more seriously, there is also the omnipresent idea, once again in the West, which denounces humanity itself, and maintains that the best way to face our ecological dangers would be to have no more or fewer children...

First of all, this last proposal is something of a paradox. The ecological struggle is not about "saving the planet". It is not in danger. The challenge is to protect the living world, humanity in particular. Isn't it contradictory, then, to claim to be ensuring the future of our species while inviting us to stop reproducing? But most importantly, it's on the wrong track. Historical analysis clearly shows that the cause of the ecological catastrophe is not demographic - or not primarily demographic, in any case. Over the last two centuries, the number of people living on Earth has risen dramatically, from around 800 million in 1800 to around 8 billion today. However, the quantities of energy and materials mobilised by these same humans over this period have grown at a much faster rate, as have the quantities of capital accumulated and waste produced⁴. This data suggests that a force other than numbers is at work in this great ecological upheaval. What is it?

This force is known as "economic growth". For a given human population, it represents producing and selling more and more goods year after year. It seems to have taken hold of European nations from the late medieval period onwards, before extending its domination over almost all human societies today. Its action is generally considered to be a necessary condition for improving

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human well-being. However, producing more and more goods means consuming more and more materials and energy, and generating more and more waste, which ultimately degrades the Earth's habitability, even to the point of threatening the future of our species. Promises of "green" or "clean" growth have never been kept and look far from being kept in the near future⁵. It would therefore be prudent to try and put a stop to it. If we have to fight to cure our eco-anxiety, then it is against this race for growth that we should be fighting, especially as it poses many other problems, particularly on a social and political level. This is the thrust of the call made in the public arena just over twenty years ago for sustainable or convivial "degrowth"⁶.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

How do we fight this battle? To win, it is important to identify where this force comes from or what underpins it. The most common explanation, supported by orthodox economics, is that the origin of economic growth lies in the nature of human beings. Faced with the problem of scarcity, they would have no other solution than to try to produce ever more resources to satisfy ever more needs⁷. From this point of view, economic growth would never be anything more than the composite effect of everyone's efforts to improve their lot. This explanation is based on a strong anthropological assumption: that human beings are driven by unlimited needs, and therefore always exceed the resources available to satisfy them. Yet history, archaeology and anthropology have uncovered human behaviour that does not support this assumption. In any case, it has to be said that growth is, after all, a very recent phenomenon, and initially very limited in geographical terms⁸. Therefore it is hard to see it as an expression of human nature.

Another common explanation for this phenomenon is that it is based on a certain vision of the world, an ideology. The race for growth is said to be the result of an evil passion that has taken hold of our minds to the point of becoming a kind of dogma⁹. It is undeniable that the quest for growth is partly based on shared beliefs. As mentioned above, it is generally seen as the sine qua non of human progress, whether you are on the political left or right. There are disagreements about how to generate this growth and how to redistribute the benefits. But there is almost unanimous support for it. And it has to be said that this is a relatively well-founded belief. Admittedly, economic growth does not necessarily translate into an improvement in our individual or collective lot, as many studies now attest¹⁰. But when it slows down or stops, things go wrong. People lose their jobs and therefore their livelihoods, the public purse is emptied and the State's capacity to act is reduced. The political climate is certain to deteriorate and instability increase. The imperative of the race for growth does not only originate in our heads and our representations of the world. It is part of the nature of our societies.

These societies are determined by a fundamental social phenomenon which took hold in Europe at the end of the medieval period and which Marx summed up in a very simple formula: $M - C - M'$. Accumulated money (M) is used to produce commodities (C), not to satisfy any need, but primarily to try to make more money (M') by reselling these commodities. In other words, our societies are capitalist in the sense that their future depends on the ability of their members to promote, individually and collectively, the accumulation of capital. And the preferred strategy for achieving this is to produce and sell ever more goods, to generate economic growth¹¹. If we want to stop the ecological disaster that is underway and put an end to the eco-anxiety we are experiencing, we need to stop the capitalist circulation of money. In short, we need to get out of capitalism, which is obviously no easy task. However, it seems that this is the only way to put an end to the current disaster, despite the hopes of those who believe that "green capitalism" will emerge one day soon¹². All the evidence suggests that this is an oxymoron.

ABOLISH ENTERPRISE, REDISCOVER JOINT OWNERSHIP

What concrete targets can we set ourselves to curb the capitalist dynamic? We need to stop its main driver, namely "free" enterprise, whose purpose is to accumulate capital by producing and selling ever more goods. And to do that, we need to call

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into question the social relationship on which it is based, i.e. the wage system. As history and ethnology show, if given the choice, humans will never strive to produce without limits. For them to do so, they must be forced to¹³. This is made possible by the wage relationship, which places the owner of production resources, and therefore life resources, in a position of strength over those who have no choice but to sell their labour in order to survive. In this way, the business owner can get more work from those he employs than is necessary for their reproduction. This is one of the main conditions for economic growth¹⁴.

The solution to ending wage-labour is not to transfer the production resources to state control. The socialist revolutions of the twentieth century showed quite clearly that this form of collectivisation only produced a kind of state capitalism, aimed above all at catching up with Western economies, and which ultimately proved to be no less production-driven than free capitalism. The solution is to ensure that everyone has access to life resources, according to the socialist principle that is still incredibly relevant: from each person according to their means, to each person according to their needs. This does not exclude a form of private property. However, it reduces it to what is necessary to live and excludes the right of “abusus”, notably the right to destroy possessed goods. In reality, it is less a question of appropriating the production resources than becoming co-responsible for them, with a view to sustainability and justice. The aim is to ensure our subsistence rather than produce (or co-produce) commodities in the hope of making a profit. Finally, when the production resources in question are managed by several people, the decisions concerning them must be democratic and the collaboration between these people must be based on mutual support, as opposed to the principles of capitalist enterprise¹⁵.

These principles make up what we call the “commons”, which would therefore be the preferred form of social life if we were to envisage a way out of capitalism and, consequently, a real slowing down of the ecological disaster underway¹⁶. Obviously, such a general sharing approach seems a very distant goal and the enterprise economics of the world are what seem to be continuing apace today¹⁷. The fact remains that “commons” are flourishing just about everywhere in the West at the moment. Not only is it not necessary to overthrow the existing order to introduce them, but they are a way of living together that tends to emerge spontaneously in times of crisis. It should be emphasised that “commons” are not an invention of our time, but a social form that has been omnipresent throughout human history, as the seminal work of Elinor Ostrom reminds us¹⁸. Their virtual disappearance from industrial civilisation may therefore have been no more than a brief eclipse. However, there will be no real sharing approach without political efforts to support it. And it is these efforts, which may involve drawing up a coherent political project, developing commons or exerting pressure on the authorities in place, that seem to me to be the best way of curing our eco-anxiety¹⁹.

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2 See in particular the series of studies on planetary limits carried out by the Stockholm Resilience Centre, the main results of which are presented in: Aurélien Boutaud, Natacha Gondran, *Les limites planétaires*, Paris, La découverte (Repères), 2020.

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