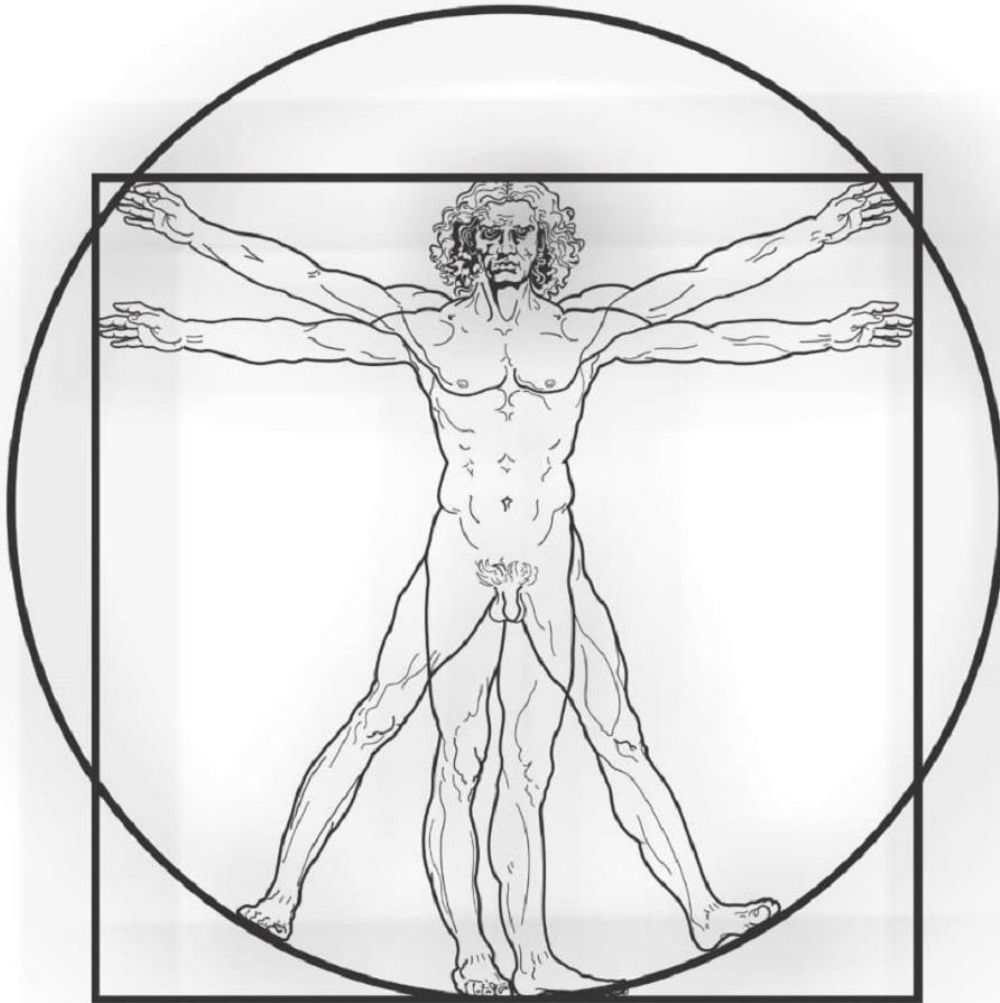# Your Struggle:

Humanity vs. Existential Opportunism

Denes Kurucz

An enormous storm is brewing. One that human civilization has never seen during its thousands of years of existence.

Our lives have now accelerated in an incredible way, our population has grown tremendously, while our only habitat, the seemingly vast but actually limited capacity planet Earth, is far from having inexhaustible resources. Not only do we use up our shared home to the extreme with our ever-increasing need for food, fresh water and energy, in addition to large-scale agriculture, we continue to pollute and damage our environment through our industry, as well as our wasteful and irresponsible lifestyle. Much of what has now been proven to be caused by human activity, global climate change directly threatens – or, at least, adversely affects – the lives of millions and even hundreds of millions of people, and indirectly, through local humanitarian disasters and far-flung refugee floods, can make a decisive difference in the destiny of all of us.

Moreover, the stability of our societies is also severely undermined by stagnating, from time to time even increasing social inequalities, in a disproportionate, unfair and, last but not least, unsustainable manner. While the majority of people are pulling the yoke and are getting bogged down in a squirrel wheel, trying to meet the demands of consumer society – or just barely vegetate, trying to survive the next day by existing on the periphery –, the latest advances in fast-paced technology benefit only a small segment of the population. What's more, the increasingly critical technological crisis is threatening to render masses of jobs redundant due to the widespread use and proliferation of mechanization and artificial intelligence, which could lead to even greater social inequalities and tensions and, ultimately, to the complete bankruptcy of the economy, through a drastic drop of solvent demand.

And, if all that wasn't enough, instead of working together to overcome the problems, smaller and larger nations and their alliances continue to play petty and shortsighted power games with each other. Either way we look at it, in spite of all our knowledge and modern tools accumulated over millennia, it is still the existential opportunism aimed at getting the better of each other and basically surviving that defines our daily lives. And this can be particularly perilous in a fast-paced and unstoppable world of globalization, functioning as a collection site and, at the same time, a collision field of intertwined but often conflicting cultures, religions and philosophies of life, which is potentially a source of conflict on a catastrophic scale.

Insofar as current tendencies do not change soon, chances are we will have to face a situation similar to war: famine, epidemics, increasing conflicts and burgeoning violence, actual wars, and, in the most extreme case, the disintegration of social order and our present civilization – a post-apocalyptic world that has so far been confined to the pages of books or movie frames. I fear that for a long time our civilization may fall back to a level similar to the 'Dark Ages', from which if it emerges again, the process may become cyclically repetitive, with the hope of real breakthrough and ascension being rather faint and

incidental. Thus, the vast amount of unnecessary deaths and suffering we already have today can soon multiply, if we fail to unite and work together to overcome the crisis that threatens us all and, at the same time, our offspring.

The good news is that we still have some, albeit rather short, time for change – it also seems certain, however, that we only have a realistic chance to successfully confront the global problems listed and their potential consequences in a much more sustainable world that is much more humane, inclusive and organized. As social and environmental sustainability go hand in hand, we must first put our societies in order to achieve the latter, for which it is essential to clarify and redefine our values and priorities, in order to ensure equilibrium and stability instead of unsustainable growth and inequality.

In these most critical of times, when it all depends on whether we succeed in putting an end to the existential opportunism associated with more primitive creatures, so that we can finally focus on things that are so much more significant, humanity is in sore need of a new, common identity. But in order to make a difference, we ought to be aware that much of our world is shaped by ourselves, therefore we can no longer rest on our laurels, but we must act, and act right now. Time presses increasingly, and if we are not prepared for the global challenges ahead, then we may even lose in our lifetimes everything that is important and dear to us.

The danger is very real, but we don't have to live in permanent insecurity – since humans are intelligent and adaptable beings, it is only up to us. Therefore the only really important question concerning our future sounds like this:

What kind of world do You want to live in?

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Foreword

Despite humanity's countless problems and its extremely difficult general situation today, I have good news for You, Dear Reader: You have the power to change the way the world works, and thereby your own future prospects, those of your loved ones and all of us. You and everyone else.

To do this, however, You need to be ready to do something about it. What could You possibly do alone? Perhaps not much. But You should know that You are not alone. There are many people around the world who would like to see changes towards a more livable, just and sustainable future. Towards a future where insecurity, living from day to day, deprivation, being at the mercy of others no longer threaten. Where our everyday lives are not defined by the constant pursuit of material goods and the pursuit of one above the other, or by the pursuit of profit and consumption at the expense of each other and our constantly degrading environment. Where there is stability and predictability, but also real opportunities for all of us to lead useful and meaningful lives.

If You believe that human dignity is something that all human beings are entitled to, that is a common starting point to go by. The bad news, however, is that it is highly doubtful that either this or the above mentioned aspects can be realized by themselves. We need to take conscious action for them, both as individuals and in smaller and larger groups, working together as a community. If only because these groups and communities are no longer independent of each other, but are part of a much larger whole, just as much as the individuals who make them up.

Whether You like it or not, Dear Reader, You live in an incredibly fast-paced, crowded (and increasingly populated), globalized world that You can never ignore if You want to be good to Yourself. There are, of course, plenty of people who try to remove themselves from the hustle and bustle of the world – either by living in seemingly isolated communities or as hermits somewhere, or by trying to make their way in the hustle and bustle themselves, while simply ignoring what is going on around them.

But in an age like ours, this is only possible for a while. In such a densely populated, constricted world, with our Earth's interconnected man-made and natural systems, everyone is affected by various processes, whether it is climate change, environmental disasters, epidemics, migration, political decisions or sudden economic turns. Therefore, for the sober and forward-thinking person, the only rational option in the long term is to try to consciously participate in the processes that determine the lives of our own, our loved ones, our descendants, and all of us, to control – but at least influence – them, and in making common decisions.

Just as national borders and all kinds of territorial divisions are artificial constructs created by humans over time, so too are social distinctions based on class or race. The distinction between man and man, however, does not end with pigeonholing based on appear-

ances, history and prejudice. In our so-called civilized, often even referred to as modern rule of law societies, we encounter homeless people, beggars, minorities neglected or living in ghetto-like blocks, and other groups and individuals vegetating on the margins of society, on a daily basis.

Unfortunately, many people think that this is a natural part of life. But may I ask, to what extent can they be called normal conditions of *civilized life*? Shouldn't civilization, or being civilized, be about the fact that no one should have to worry about their very existence, their basic conditions of living? So that instead of drastic differences, we can live under balanced conditions that are much more equal for the individual?

Or do You, my Dear Reader, think it is normal that while some people are working day and night at their jobs, others have no job at all? Is it normal that while some people are working hard in three shifts or even on weekends, others are earning several times as much just by royalties or investing their money? Is it normal – and not least sustainable – that while some people have so much income or wealth that they don't even know what to spend it on, others can't even afford to meet their most basic needs?

But is it normal at all that our whole lives are pretty much about nothing but chasing money, of which there can never be enough? Or, for example, is it normal for leaders and public figures, including politicians and celebrities, to constantly hurl all sorts of epithets and indiscriminate comments at each other in public, often in a vulgar style, so that it ends up looking more like a circus or a farce than a civilized communication between people? Or the fact that some of these same leaders believe that we must get used to the constant threat of terror in our cities, which they believe is now an inevitable part of our lives?

The word 'normal' in all the sentences could be replaced by 'civilized', because I think that if You are reading these lines, You Yourself probably imagine living Your life in such a world. In my vocabulary, however, what is listed above is not at all compatible with the concept of civilization, which is why I believe it is time to put them behind us. But I will go further: I believe that we can thank most of the pain, suffering and deprivation in the world today to each other, and therefore much of it is unnecessary and could be avoided. But if there are no radical, systemic changes soon, I fear that the time may come when we will have to fight not for civilized conditions, but for our very existence.

So if You say the situation could be worse, my answer is definitely yes. But to the question of whether we can do better, I also have no choice but to say yes. I believe that it is the natural way of development, and a legitimate human desire and expectation, to always strive for better, to expect more and better than before, and that is how it should be. If this is not the case, it will not take us forward, but will lead to stagnation or decline – and, in extreme cases, downright catastrophe.

You win some, you lose some – so the saying goes, and generally speaking it is absolutely true. Nevertheless, as intelligent beings, it is natural for our intellect and experience to increasingly determine our actions, while our primal instincts, fears and prejudices gradually take a back seat in our decision-making. Moreover, our accelerated, 'shrinking', over-

crowded and exploited world also requires us to act in a more rational and cooperative way for a livable future.

So the question, Dear Reader, is what kind of world You want to live in. Do You want to be part of a civilization where You don't have to worry about what will happen to You in your old age if You don't have the money to pay for the care of others? Where You don't have to worry about losing your job and not being able to pay your bills, or simply end up with no roof over your head? Or if You are forced to flee because of a natural or other disaster, no one will help You, or You will be just a tolarated 'guest'? Would You rather be part of a society where You do not have to fear retaliation for differences of belief and opinion, oppression, marginalisation, inequality, lack of opportunity and deprivation?

Do You want to live in a world where You are not threatened by hunger and insecurity due to unemployment? Where the constant pursuit of money is not the most important activity that fills and consumes most of your life? Where the constant pressure to consume and grow does not plague our societies and threaten our environment with destruction? Where politics is not about factions and parties of all kinds living off the people's money while primitively scheming and squabbling with each other? Where public communication is not defined by hypocrisy, pretence and the perpetuation of lies?

While it may sound like a dream for now, I can say with certainty that it is possible – and I sincerely believe that it is the only path that will lead to peaceful coexistence and a sustainable civilization in the long run. But looking at current trends, I am also sure that such a desirable future will not just fall into our laps. So You, my Dear Reader, cannot expect others to take care of it for You, either. For your own sake and for the sake of all of us, You ought to do something for it!

One person alone may not usually be enough to bring about change on a larger scale, but even a small change is much more than nothing. And if many, many people contribute just a little, they can have a bigger impact on the whole – like drops in the sea that can come together to form huge waves and massive currents. That is why You and all those who do not want to be the pawns of other groups that are essentially a minority against the long-term interests of the majority are needed. Who choose instead to take their destiny into their own hands and do their utmost to create a more livable future for us all.

With my book, I want to help You do just that. I can only promise You the truth, or what I believe to be the best of my knowledge. Of course, reality is far from always being nice and shiny, but seeing the world and ourselves in it as it actually works is essential for change. So reading on will be a bit like choosing the red pill instead of the blue one, to leave behind the illusion of the 'Matrix' that surrounds us all.

The book starts with a brief overview of the general state of our societies, followed by the first part, which lists the main threats to our civilization today and in the near future. I will then discuss in detail the existential opportunism that is identified as our main enemy

in the title, and how we can move from it to a much more conscious way of thinking about our individual attitudes that also takes into account the interests of our communities and of humanity as a whole. Finally, parallel with the outlining of the problems of our economic and political systems, I will propose ways to reform them for sustainability and discuss the role of the common man in the process.

If You feel, Dear Reader, that You are fully aware of the threats to human civilization, You can skip the first part titled 'Gloomy Prospects', or at least the listing and explanation of the various threats within. I estimate that this is not the case for the majority of people (probably over 80%), but of course I could be wrong. If You still find this kind of seemingly gloomy discussion too depressing, You might as well skip straight to the second major part – especially if You can't wait to find out what I mean by the catchy term 'existential opportunism' after reading the title.

However, I can't recommend this with any comfort, because I think this section of the book offers a fairly comprehensive picture of the way our world works at the moment – which, as I've already pointed out, is quite important for understanding how we should relate to it if we want it to change. If you are able to approach the reading with the necessary openness, with your mind emptied, then I think you will not find anything in the text too extreme, offensive or indigestible, and you will understand everything – including the reasons why I think the way I have described.

I sincerely believe that the greater part of the 21st century will be about communities based on solidarity and cooperation, which are more sensitive to sustainability and justice issues and more directly interested in addressing them in a sustainable way, rather than profit-driven corporations and banks and rivaling nations. To this end, it is time to unveil the greatest threats to our civilization, the details behind them, the intricacies of society, economics and politics, and our possible futures – what they might be if we change current trends, and what they might be if we don't.

Civilized Insecurity?

What is freedom? Of course, since everything is relative, it means different things to different people. But what does freedom mean in an organized society?

In 1948, the United Nations Organization (UNO) published the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a thirty-point summary of the fundamental rights of all humanity, which are intended to guarantee the personal freedom of all of us. And although they define many different rights, one thing is certain: in a civilized society, freedom does not mean that everyone does whatever they want, whenever they want. Such an approach is rather the result of an extremely self-centered, reality-distorting approach that overlooks some basic aspects of civilized coexistence. But in the absence of the necessary social order, accepted and maintained by its members, we can only speak of 'social disorder' or chaos.

Classically, there are two different interpretations of the concept of social order, which can be traced back to Émile Durkheim and Karl Marx. The latter explanation comes from the Marxist tradition within the discipline of sociology, and looks at unity from a materialist rather than a cultural perspective. As widely known, Marx stressed the inequality of material wealth and political power in capitalist societies. He recognizes that the distribution of material and political resources is a source of conflict between different collectives, i.e. social classes, which want a greater share of these resources than they already enjoy. The constant conflict that this creates, however, means that there is no moral consensus, and therefore social order is always precariously maintained. The status quo is always the result of power relations between competing groups, whereby the powerful constrain weaker groups, and cohesion is maintained by economic, political and legal constraints and bureaucratic routine (i.e. the inertia of the system and society).

In contrast, the French sociologist Durkheim's approach, which can also be linked to Talcott Parsons and functionalist thinking, focuses on the role of shared norms and values in ensuring the unity and cohesiveness of society. According to Durkheim, the 'mechanical solidarity' of pre-industrial societies rested on shared beliefs and values, which were located primarily in what he called the 'conscience collective'. With the emergence of industrial society, however, it was essentially replaced by 'organic solidarity', based on interdependence resulting from socialization and differentiation. In this new social order, the moral restraint of individual interests and self-centred tendencies derives from the association of people, and forms the basis of social cohesion.

Whichever interpretation You feel closer to, Dear Reader, You might agree that living as part of a community always comes with advantages and disadvantages, gains and sacrifices, like virtually anything else in this world. *Quid pro quo* – Latin for 'what for what', or 'someting for something' –, the old saying goes, and for good reason. In order to be part of society, we voluntarily give up our individual freedom to a certain extent, regularly compromising and adapting to others. We work to participate in meeting the needs of all of us, we queue up for shops or services when we have to, we put up with the occasional traffic

jams and congestion in exchange for roads and public transportation, we don't mess with other people's portals so that they don't mess with ours, and so on.

In return, however, we get plenty of things that are well worth the sacrifice and effort, rather than, say, hunting and gathering in the wild to provide for ourselves and our loved ones without the benefits and blessings of civilization. In addition to providing the basic necessities, thanks to the knowledge accumulated over thousands of years and the achievements of technology, we can enjoy a myriad of amenities and the whole world is practically open to us, so that we can explore and discover its secrets and wonders, both physically and spiritually.

So in a truly civilized society, freedom means – at least in part – not having to fear that You won't have anything to eat or drink, that You won't have anything to wear, that You won't have anywhere to live, that no one will help You if You get sick or hurt, or are robbed or abused. That You don't have to be afraid of being trapped in a 'box': living Your whole life in the same place and in the same way, repeating the same mechanical activities day after day, not knowing for sure what tomorrow will bring, and certainly not what You will do in Your old age. Just as You have the right to expect that You should not suffer any disadvantage compared to others because of your gender, color, origin, religion, language or any other affiliation, as long as You do not cause any harm to others. So, while You should not have to live in insecurity (or at least as little as possible), the care for a level playing field should be the most important thing in any civilized society.

But even now, at the beginning of the third millennium, reality is at least dubious, and often even in societies that are supposedly developed, there are no guarantees. Presently, it can make a world of difference where You are born – and this is not just a question of geography or sovereignty, as in virtually any country you can witness the almost immeasurable coexistence of wealth and poverty. And this is not only the case in more underdeveloped countries or less democratic societies, as extreme differences in status are just as visible in New York or London as they are in, say, Mumbai or Rio de Janeiro. (At most the proportions are different.) While some people live in palace-like houses and can buy almost anything they want, others who live just a few steps away, who have serious problems securing food for themselves and their families every day, often have to live in dilapidated and dirty shacks that lack basic hygiene or comfort.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the global hunger rate was estimated at 8.4% in 2019, covering a population of around 655 million people. Although the rate was reduced from 12.4% in 2005 to 8.3% in 2015, the number of hungry people remained roughly stable until the late 2010s, only to rise again in 2020, when the pandemic struck. But just as worrying is the fact that some 2.4 billion people suffer to a greater or lesser extent from the effects of food insecurity, which means that they do not have access to sufficient and nutritious food on a consistent basis. And this latter problem is far from being confined to countries with lower average incomes, since

the populations of North America and Europe, which are considered developed, are also more than 7% affected. There are similar inequalities in access to drinking water and basic sanitation: around 2.2 billion people on Earth today lack access to sufficient and completely safe clean water, 3 billion are unable to clean themselves properly, and cca. 4.2 billion lack access to healthy toilet, sanitation and waste management facilities. (Even in 2017, a preventable and treatable disease such as diarrhea caused almost 1.6 million deaths worldwide, including more than half a million children.) In essence, the problem affects at least half of the world's population in some form. In addition, due to the increasingly extreme weather caused by climate change, the situation could get much worse over time...

The overall economic development fostered by globalization has brought so many positive results over the last three decades that the number of people living in extreme poverty has now been less than halved: while in 1990, almost 2 billion people had to live on less than $1.90 a day, in 2015 the estimated number was 'only' 736 million. At the same time, it is extremely worrying that the rate of decline has slowed down in the following years and has started to increase again thanks to the pandemic caused by COVID-19. As for extreme wealth inequalities, they show a steadily increasing trend. As a result, in 2017, the 42 (!) richest people in the world had more wealth than the poorest half of humanity combined – just one year later, in 2018, the number was only 26. And looking back over the longer term, it is telling that the wealth of the richest 1 percent has grown twice as much since 1980 as the poorest half of humanity combined. By the end of the 2010s, this elite group owned twice as much as 6.9 billion people – almost 90% (!) of the total population – could afford.
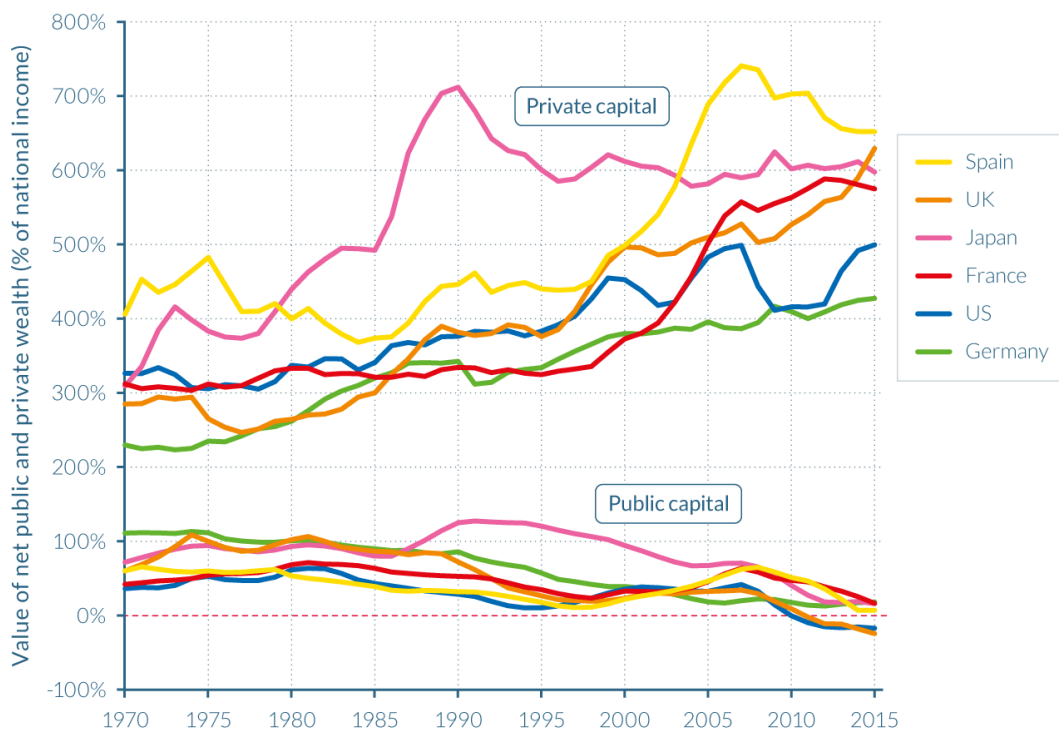

Figure 1 - The rise of private capital and the fall of public capital in rich countries, 1970–2016
Source: World Inequality Report 2018

The current trends, the ever-widening gap, are also illustrated by the fact that in recent decades, the size of private wealth has increased significantly at the expense of public wealth. As shown in the graph above, total private capital in the (so-called) advanced economies has increased by roughly 200% since the 1970s, almost without exception, while the amount of money available to the state and public institutions has shown a somewhat less steep but equally marked downward trend. But when public wealth in a society declines, the state usually becomes increasingly indebted, and thus even more dependent and vulnerable to the relatively small number of private actors, its corporations and banks.

Existential vulnerability is experienced even more directly by the 2.6 billion or so of our fellow human beings who belong to the lower-earning section of society in Black Africa, the Middle East, India and Brazil. While here 10% of the population takes home around 60% of the total national income, 90% of people have to make do with the remaining 40%.
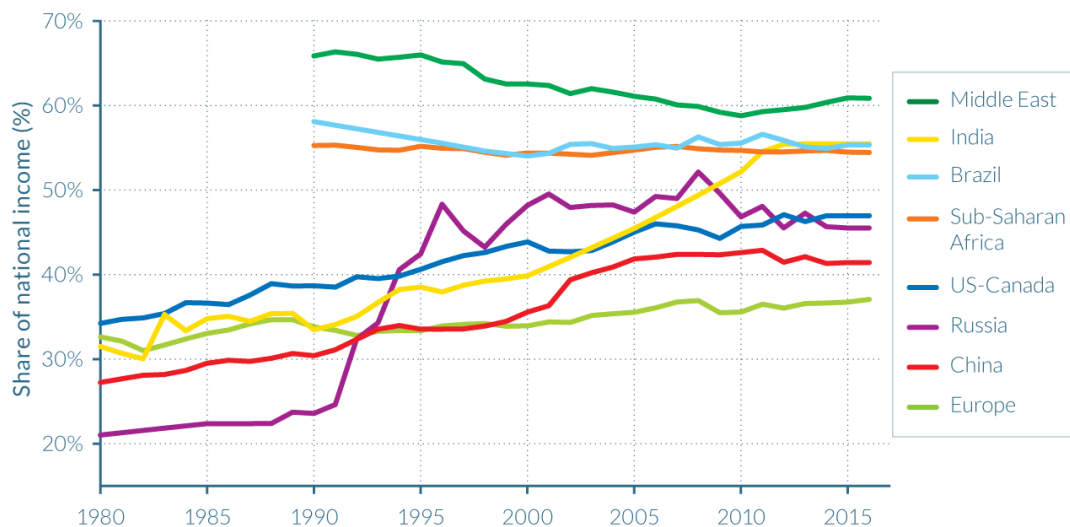
Figure 2 - Top 10% income shares across the world, 1980–2016
Source: World Inequality Report 2018

But the situation is not much better in other populous areas of the world, such as Central America and much of South Asia. Moreover, the population of these developing regions is still growing, with sub-Saharan (Black) Africa facing the worst prospects: the UN estimates that the population could rise from around 1 billion today to 2-2.5 billion by 2050. If current rates persist in the future – and it is difficult to imagine them changing radically at the moment – the number of low-income earners in the region could increase dramatically.

"It's all so far away, it doesn't affect me at all," may say those who live in economies much better off than the above regions, where GDP (Gross Domestic Product) per capita is not a few thousand or even a few hundred(!) dollars, but tens of thousands. But even in one of the largest and most developed countries in the world, the United States of America, there are significant income and wealth disparities: for example, in 2018, 20% of the high-

est earning families took home more than half of total earnings, while only the top 5% was able to claim 23% of the total annual income. Moreover, the latter rate was 'only' 16% in 1968, which rose sharply partly after the credit crisis of 2008 – showing that inequalities tend to widen even in more advanced economies in times of crisis.

Yet even the richest cannot sit back in great satisfaction. On the one hand, because the large number of people who live in poverty or deprivation, but who are increasingly informed in our globalizing world and through the rapidly expanding World Wide Web, may not tolerate their own miserable situation indefinitely, compared to the debauchery of the privileged. On the other hand, while there are indeed major differences between countries, it is common in all regions of the world for the top ten percent to take home a significant portion of earnings.

So there are people everywhere, even if they are in a minority, who have to deal with far fewer existential problems than the average. They, even if they are not consciously aware of it, probably know first-hand what makes one most free in today's material societies: having a lot of money. If You are in such a position, You can decide for Yourself what You want to do with your time and energy – You don't have to worry about self-preservation at all, for example, if You choose not to. And the more money You have, the more this is true, because then You are not, or at least much less, dependent on others. (Sudden wealth also has its dangers, however: a lottery billionaire who may not have had nearly as much money before can't necessarily control it, which can easily turn his good fortune around.)

But since a large part of wealth and income is concentrated in a few hands, it is clear that the majority of people are not really free, being able to enjoy the blessings of freedom provided by civilization to a much lesser extent than the minority. In other words, we are everywhere, for the most part, slaves of money, in a system in which, instead of money – which is now much more of an end –, man himself has become the means, the instrument in a rather one-sided game. Have You ever felt, Dear Reader, that it is not really the economy for us, but us for the economy? Because I am almost constantly. But it could also be said that for a narrow minority of people, whether as purchasing power or as labor, we serve the interests of the top ten percent.

In addition, besides the typical running in the squirrel wheel or repaying mortgages, we are also drawn into other categories that fundamentally define and limit our lives and opportunities, whether it is social class, education, work experience, gender, skin color or origin. For example, as a result of negative discrimination rooted in prejudices, outdated views and power relations, women and social minorities tend to have to settle for less than standard wages, virtually regardless of geographical location. Even in OECD countries that are mostly considered socially developed, with stable and well-performing economies, this means an average 15% lower income. However, in the US, also a member of the organization, the income of black families is only around 60% of that of white families, while the wealth gap continues to widen. And of course, this only applies to those who have a steady

income at all – the more than 200 million unemployed worldwide are typically not even in that favorable situation. But even if You have a job, You may not always be able to cover the cost of health care: some 100 million people are forced into extreme poverty every year, while an average of 10,000 die every day simply because they do not have the medical help they need (and can afford) to save their lives. But there is also a lot to complain about, for example, for women who spend a large part of their time doing caring jobs and tasks for which they receive no compensation. It is estimated that if they were paid an average worldwide salary for all this, they would earn a total of more than $10 trillion, or $10,000 billion a year – roughly three times the value of the entire tech sector.

So the question seems absolutely legitimate: does everyone get what they deserve? Are we all equally given the opportunity to rise and succeed? To begin with, one in five children today are denied the opportunity to go to school (most of whom, once again, fall into the female camp.) In many countries, education is still the privilege of the rich, while obtaining one or more degrees is a major expense for families almost anywhere in the world. But if You just think about that debt and poverty are usually inherited in the same way as huge fortunes, it's really hard to believe in equal opportunities. It is extremely difficult to break out of poverty, if only because it is the easiest to 'make' money with money these days – and if you don't have much of it, you have very little chance of getting ahead.

Some people can succeed, of course, if they have the talent, determination, perseverance – and often luck. As was the case, for example, with J.K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter books, Howard Schultz, the founder of Sturbucks, or Oprah Winfrey, the popular and now also very wealthy TV personality, the latter despite being female and black. Sadly, however, they are the exception rather than the rule – or do You, Dear Reader, believe that the opportunity is actually there for everyone, as the much-talked-about vision of the American dream, for example, still proclaims to us today?

Well, my own view is that, following the Western model, in most countries today we live in societies where, typically, one person can only get by at the expense of others. So when one of us succeeds, many of us fail, even if we try hard. And who or what will be viable in the long run is often decided by a few random little things other than ingenuity and insistence – which is probably where the popular turn of phrase "being at the right place at the right time" originated from. (Not to mention possible fraud.) But all of this is not merely a matter or problem of an established habit or culture, but fundamentally of the system on which our entire lives and economies are built.

In theory, everyone can have their own business, but if that were the case, wouldn't that be a bit too many enterprises in an economy? And if only a fraction of them can stay afloat and survive in the long run, what about the opportunity supposedly given to everyone to make their own fortune? It is clear that the principle is to 'naturally' liquidate unviable businesses, but what happens to those people who never make the breakthrough? Well, in essence, they are also being singled out and can go back to work for the top ten percent...

On the other hand, if virtually everyone were owners of a business, who would perform a bunch of other essential and indispensable tasks as employees, which usually goes with much less attention and glory? Without them, almost any kind of company or business would be unviable, yet lower-ranking employees rarely share in the benefits generated to a similar extent as managers and owners. Not only does a significant part of the wealth go into the pockets of the latter in case of most businesses, but we have also seen numerous cases where managers have 'left the till' with shameful sums of money even in a bankrupt or near-bankrupt company. And in large corporations, which often talk about cost-cutting and optimization, executives and major shareholders take home similarly staggering amounts of money (until a major crisis might put them out of business, too).

Moreover, some corporate giants save incredible amounts of money by moving their wealth to so-called tax havens, countries that offer them extremely favorable tax conditions. This shortens the budgets of individual states to no small extent, again contributing to national indebtedness and reducing common wealth. It is also part of the problem that only 4% of tax revenues come from the taxation of wealth, while the richest successfully evade around 30% of their tax liabilities. In comparison, most charitable or environmental initiatives they launch involve minimal sacrifice on their part, and their real purpose is usually more to maintain and improve their personal or corporate image than to promote any fundamental change.

It is all part of a culture of elitism and celebrity that has become prevalent, guaranteeing disproportionately high incomes not only for CEOs and star managers, but also for the celebrities and star athletes who are so much in the news these days. Some well-known, often world-famous, star athletes, actors, television and other celebrities make millions or even tens of millions (!) of dollars a year with minimal investment of time and energy, simply thanks to their advertising contracts with well-established companies. Meanwhile, the average citizen toils for at least eight hours a day to be able to get the bare essentials, and sometimes a little more – like a new household appliance or a holiday. Not to mention the fact that if he happens to need a more expensive medicine or medical treatment, he is completely at the mercy of society...

So despite all the public facilities and services, the general social situation on our planet today – with a few exceptions, regardless of geographical location – is that the many pay the price for the well-being of the few. Some people have disproportionately more income, wealth and privilege than the average – by which I do not mean the almost always distorting arithmetic average, which is deceptively inflated by the values that occur in much smaller numbers but are significantly higher than the majority. (After all, if each of, say, 1000 people earns $5,000 per month, they will have an average income of $5,000 per person, just as if 900 people had an income of only $2,500, while the other 100 people each had an average income of $27,500 a month.) When I talk about average, I mean more the average income of the majority, as opposed to many times more money for the few. But

even if we don't look at things humanely, simply realistically, is there anything in the world that can earn the latter?

In your opinion, Dear Reader, how civilized is it for some people to pocket hundreds or even thousands of times the amount they need to make a living, while others can be happy if they are paid the average for their decent work, and some spend their lives as unemployed or homeless? Realistically, is it possible to deservedly earn such a disproportionate difference in income and status with any amount of work, or a previously acquired name, or even a brand built up over a long period of time, or whatever?

Most certainly not! It's fine that they deserve some reward, but definitely not on this scale! Such a privilege would perhaps not be worthy even of one who, let's say, would save all mankind alone... But even if she was worthy, it would not be psychologically good for her personality (her distorted values could easily make her think of herself as superior), and her integration into society could be seriously hampered. On the other hand, because it would seriously violate the principle of solidarity, which is (or should be) one of the most important and fundamental values of any civilized society.

So, without further ado, we can say that there is nothing in the world that can rightfully earn you a hundred or even ten times more wealth or income than the average, and the freedom and 'consumption potential' that comes with it, especially while even the basic necessities are not secured for many people. Such income inequalities do not happen to reflect people's true worth or merit by any means, and can only be the result of the distorting effect of the supply and demand market, which also creates severely distorted values in our societies. This is how we have come to measure success primarily in terms of money, which is also the reason for our extremely materialistic and neglectful approach to life.

The unregulated nature of the market economy, which allows – and often even promotes – extremes, is responsible for many kinds of distortions in value, such as when workers in strategically important, core sectors (e.g. education and pedagogy, health, policing and disaster relief) earn on average much less than workers in other, more upmarket sectors (e.g. finance, pharmaceuticals, IT) – not to mention managers and executives in the latter. (This is also a big problem, because it is not good for a society at all if extreme differences in rewards lead many of its decent but underpaid citizens to believe that they are worth much less.) And in our current world, which encourages constant growth and buying, and is thus widely and popularly known as consumer society, an egocentric culture that puts the individual and his (virtually unlimited) needs and desires first has become so dominant that it is no wonder that young people – who are particularly susceptible – are socialised in this way.

For these reasons, however, aspects such as humanity, equality or long-term common interests play at best a secondary role in the Western-style civilization that is dominant worldwide, and – if not in all respects, then in many – is now considered the one to be followed. (At the same time, the financial sector, for example, which has become the primary

driver of the global economy over the last few decades thanks to deregulation, has been put at the forefront.) Charity and volunteering may be on the rise today, and many countries have some sort of more or less developed or extensive social network, yet exploitation and the often resulting insecurity seem to determine the lives of most of us on a daily basis. But even if there are efforts to the contrary, if the system itself still works along the same principles, there is little hope for substantitial change.

In spite of all the progress and development, instead of substantial change, we humans have in fact done nothing more over many millennia than save and carefully preserve the laws of the jungle in our societies, which, however, nominally operate in the spirit of civilization. But civilization and insecurity are fundamentally contradictory, mutually exclusive concepts – just as it seems obvious that there will never be real equality (of opportunity) until society takes care of its every single member, including the very last one.

In other words, in a civilized society, the real value is that people always care for and look after each other, and help each other in an organized way wherever they can – what we might call an all-encompassing social safety net –, leveling out social inequalities instead of exacerbating them. And it's this kind of reciprocity that really sets us free: when we don't really have to worry about our own future or the future of our loved ones, about what will happen if we're left to our own devices in times of trouble. And while the right to private property, freedom of movement, freedom of thought and expression, and all the human rights listed by the United Nations are all extremely important, they are worth very little on their own if they exist only on paper, or if they are accompanied by unequal opportunities and constant insecurity.

In the light of the above, if You had to give an honest answer to the question of how free You are, what would You say, Dear Reader?

GLOOMY PROSPECTS

When Push Comes to Shove

It's one thing what we have now, it's another what lies ahead. There is no need to think too far ahead here, because life in our global civilization has become so fast-paced, and because everything is so interconnected with everything (or everyone with everyone), that a rapid chain of events can change almost everything around us in a matter of an instant, from one day to the next. What was taken for granted one week may not seem so evident the next – just as the credit crunch of 2008 or the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, among others, have shown.

The latter outbreak, which started in China, spread to most countries of the world in just four months thanks to intense international passenger and freight traffic, sickening hundreds of thousands of people and killing tens of thousands. To slow the pandemic and thus minimize the number of victims, governments were forced to severely restrict people-to-people contact, leading to a drastic decline in both production and service industries and on the consumer side, with the exception of a few sectors. As photos made in many of the world's cities showed, life came to a standstill almost everywhere in those few months, which lead to the world economy and the global supply chain, if not completely shutting down, then slowing down considerably compared to their usual pace.

But in an economy that produces much less and runs many different services (in tourism, hospitality, logistics and so on) on a shoestring or not at all, where people mostly spend only on food, medicine and essentials, incomes in other sectors plummet. And as the reserves run out, more and more businesses are forced to lay off their employees, leaving them with less money to spend, as well. Without external intervention, this cycle could eventually turn into a self-perpetuating process that could bankrupt the whole economy.

To avoid this, governments around the world took extraordinary economic measures in 2020, diverting huge amounts of money to bail out people and businesses in trouble. Thanks to this intervention, the economic downturn, if not the national or even global bankruptcy, was finally averted. However, it is important to be clear that if such a crisis is prolonged and the economy is unable to recover, sooner or later states will be caught in a trap: while on the one hand, their resources are diminishing due to tax reductions and exemptions, on the other, the need for support from the state is increasing. And although the state will always have the means to keep the economy alive (through aid, basic income, money printing, etc.), if there is no real production and economic output to back it up, so to speak, then money will lose its value.

Actual hyperinflation and general price controls by the authorities is something You probably haven't yet had to experience either, Dear Reader. Can You imagine, for example, basic foodstuffs and commodities being sold on tickets, like in the old days, during the wars? That you can't buy anything you want or need, on the one hand because it's not available almost indefinitely, and on the other because your money isn't quite enough for it (if you have any left at all)? That after a while not only the internet, which can be over-

whelmed by the masses who have a lot of free time and turn to the web for information, entertainment and social networking, but also other services such as electricity, gas and water supply in your area are disrupted or even completely cut off? That Your street is overrun by a mob of desperate and angry rioters, possibly breaking Your window among others? Or maybe even Your door, to take what You have left still...

Even if we have not gone that far, if a similar crisis is prolonged, the leadership of the countries concerned may increasingly find themselves in a situation where they have to decide: either further restrict people's freedoms and the functioning of the economy, or risk an increase in the numbers of illness and death cases. Indeed, as similar decisions have been taken on many occasions around the world, and because of the uncertainty surrounding the expected course of the pandemic, governments have often hesitated or taken less than optimal measures. But because of this, tens or even hundreds of thousands of people have lost loved ones who could have been prevented from being infected... In addition, as time goes on, people become increasingly impatient with restrictions, so strict quarantines and curfews are no longer a viable solution, and the pressure to restart the economy is growing. After all, governments cannot finance and satisfy people's consumption indefinitely on their own, while on the other hand, the economy, constrained by restrictions, is producing much less and is edging closer to bankruptcy.

In the case of a long-lasting, difficult to control or recurrent, severe pandemic, the problem may persist until there is an effective medicine or vaccine that is universally applicable, and reaches a sufficiently high percentage of the population. If this fails for whatever reason, after a certain period of time the basic needs of the people may be jeopardized and, in extreme cases, a situation may arise where nothing or no one can save the economy and society from total collapse. Especially in a world where most of us have been socialized to step on each other's necks to get what we, our family, our loved ones or anyone in our immediate sphere of interest needs. Let alone in a situation that threatens our very existence, which can awaken the creature of instinct in even the most intelligent person...

Even if You do not belong to a lower class of society with a more modest income, You would not necessarily be saved from having to go through all this. In the long run, even those who have amassed huge fortunes may have serious problems, especially if the economy collapses, the rule of law breaks down, and even the nowadays almost idolized but then rapidly depreciating money is worthless. So no matter if You earn loads of money, accumulate as much as You can, or build up a seemingly secure material existence around Yourself, there is absolutely no guarantee that it will always be a protection for You.

A global economic crisis, however, can be triggered by many different causes these days, be it directly economic or financial (see the 2008 credit crunch), or even a completely different source, such as a pandemic, a natural disaster, living conditions made impossible or unbearable by climate change and the resulting refugee crises, struggles over dwindling resources or escalating civil wars. In fact, any protracted conflict can have a global

impact if it affects many parties for one reason or another, as the offensive launched by Russian President Vladimir Putin against Ukraine in 2022 proved.

The war, which Putin referred to merely as a 'special operation', but which was strongly condemned by most countries in the world, led to a significant reduction in trade with both countries concerned, and to a serious setback for the world economy as a whole, as a result of the sanctions imposed on Russia, mainly by Western states and economic partners. The situation had an immediate negative impact in many countries around the globe, not only in the case of listed securities and currencies, but also in much more tangible areas such as the food and energy sectors. Given that inflation had already been soaring and the energy crisis had been worsening before the war, its outbreak did not make it any easier, but rather made it much more difficult to recover from the crisis.

So the world (economy) couldn't even really recover from the shock of COVID-19, it was already facing another blow. Nevertheless, what happened serves as an excellent example to show once again that cumulative crises are the greatest threat to the stability of our societies, regardless of whether they have a direct causal link or not. And it was also a timely reminder that even if it does not lead to a general collapse, a major crisis can have an extremely negative impact on the lives of many of us, or even bring us into economic and existential bankruptcy.

In order to be adequately prepared for what may await us in the coming decades, it is worth taking stock of the main threats that current trends suggest we will certainly or probably face. Several of these have a big enough potential to shake or even destroy human civilization, and the kind of comfortable lifestyle that many of us have become accustomed to, while many others only look on with longing. But the most important filter through which we need to look at each phenomenon is none other than sustainability – or, if You like, the unsustainability of our own current attitudes.

Social Inequalities

Extreme and rising inequalities, as we have already seen, are a growing problem worldwide. Living in a virtually ever-revolving 'squirrel wheel' and the hopelessness of lifting oneself out of poverty has caused billions of people over generations to suffer long-term despair, or even depression and permanent ill-health, which is not only disturbing, but outright unacceptable from a human rights point of view. But even if we approach the issue dispassionately, looking at the bare facts, we can see that extreme inequalities are not at all good for the sustainability of our societies in the long run.

In academic circles, a distinction is usually made between social and economic inequality, which are in fact closely related. Social inequality is understood as the unequal distribution of resources in a society, typically through norms that create particular patterns along socially defined categories. This creates a differential preference for access to different goods in society, determined by power, religion, kinship, prestige, race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation and class. As a result, however, in addition to basic goods, social inequalities also have a major impact on voting rights, freedom of expression and assembly, the extent of property rights, employment, and access to education, health care, quality housing, transportation, travel, holidays and more. Depending on who has access to these goods, services and institutions, we can talk about different social statuses and their complete hierarchy.

At the same time, our social – or, as it is often called in the literature, socioeconomic – status is nowadays very much dependent on Your income and the wealth You own. (Dependence is therefore reciprocal: Your social 'classification' can have a positive or negative impact on Your earnings through discrimination, while Your status can change very quickly depending on Your financial situation, if You suddenly become poorer or even richer, for example.) It is exactly the size of one's income and wealth, often combined with the extent of one's consumption, that is used to measure economic inequality.

Huge wealth and income disparities, on the other hand, carry the risk for the economy that overall consumption will decline over time as solvent demand falls. (After all, rich people stop consuming beyond a certain point and invest or save instead.) This in itself would not be a problem, but in the current system it happens to be the constant maintenance or even increase of consumption (growth imperative) that keeps the economy moving, which may not be sustainable after a certain point, when society becomes too impoverished. That's because a permanent decline in consumption is also a problem on the producer-supplier side, as has already been mentioned, which could lead to the decline or even bankruptcy of the whole economy.

Our economies are currently threatened by a number of factors (which will be discussed shortly) that could lead to a significant drop in consumption, either directly from the consumer or from the producer side, which could also widen the social gap further. And in times of prolonged crises, it is especially true that it is the largest and strongest compa-

nies, banks and other organizations and families with the most money and resources that can stay afloat, while those who are already disadvantaged and more vulnerable suffer even more. For example, the huge number of employees who are made redundant because of the crisis could fall even further down the social ladder, increasing the number of people living in extreme poverty.

An existential crisis, with the vision of total social collapse as a realistic possibility, may have seemed almost unimaginable for many before the 2020 coronavirus epidemic, especially in a Western population growing up in peace and relative prosperity – which, in the light of what is happening in our world today, seems rather ironic, even morbid to me. Why? Because many millions of people on our planet have already lost their lives prematurely or have been condemned to suffer, simply so that some can live a much better life than the average. Masses of people have been and continue to be victims of otherwise preventable phenomena such as hunger due to unequal distribution, lack of sanitation and medical care, diseases and epidemics caused by environmental pollution, inadequate and sometimes inhumane working conditions, political and religious reprisals, or violence and warfare for the benefit of the few. But even some of the natural disasters can be clearly attributed to human activity, most of which is global climate change mainly caused by the use of fossil fuels.

The distinction between man and man is a given, however, and nothing proves this more than when we talk about the different classes of society, or when we think of the neglect of the suffering and destitute masses, whether in our own countries or in other parts of the world. In a historical context, this kind of passive neglect is also much more dangerous – apart from the fact that it has probably already claimed far more victims overall than any major war or authoritarian regime – because, on the one hand, it is not always easy to recognize, and, on the other, it can prove much more difficult to confront in the long run than a more concrete threat, such as a pandemic or a credit crunch.

Sad as it is, however, we can take it as a fact that much of the human suffering and death in our world in the past and today is completely unnecessary. Even if not directly responsible for the majority of deaths across the planet, much of the suffering can be traced back to the way we humans treat each other and the way we relate to each other and our environment.

This alone could be enough to make us seriously question our own civilization, but it may not be enough to change anything fundamental in the long term. But if You think about what will happen when the masses of exploited and misused, harassed and humiliated, vulnerable, outcast or ignored, and the people who are deprived of almost everything good, being destitute and in a hopeless situation all over the world, realize that in these modern times, it is neither God, nor fate, chance or misfortune, but in fact the selfishness, egoism, arrogance, insensitivity or sheer carelessness of other people is responsible for their situation, then perhaps You, Dear Reader, will now understand why this is incompat-

ible with social sustainability. So the question is: how far can we push the envelope, how far can we escalate what are already extremely serious concerns?

Perhaps the greatest danger is that extreme economic and social inequalities continue to have negative effects, often in less visible or obvious but insidiously accumulative ways. The results of research carried out by Professors Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson at the University of York, among others, clearly shed light on this. The gap between rich and poor has a major negative impact on the health and well-being of people all around the world, as well as on the development of human capital and social cohesion. The problems range from reduced life expectancy and higher infant mortality to low educational attainment, lower social mobility, and increased levels of violence and mental illness.

Generally speaking, those who have the least or the worst in life are usually less able to protect themselves from the unexpected, which basically means that the ones who suffer the most are usually the ones that suffer anyway. In turn, the more we live with a constant need to count money, the more we are likely to be in trouble in the coming decades, and it is somewhat natural that this will hurt many people's sense of justice. And the fact that the unequal and highly disproportionate distribution of wealth generates general discontent, or that it naturally increases the number of crimes in a society, is not at all conducive to the stability of our economies or societies.

Inequality is thus one of the main obstacles to creating sustainable economies that optimize the health and well-being of the people and the planet. As consumption is largely a matter of self-fulfillment and status competition, its excesses are exacerbated by significant income and wealth disparities. High levels of inequality lead to a lack of trust, solidarity and unity in society (or, in extreme cases, to its collapse), and reduce people's willingness to act for the common good.

Because inequalities are present at both local and global levels, they exacerbate tensions and conflicts within and between our societies at the same time. While in the case of the former, the phenomenon can be observed in a striking way even within a single settlement (see the example of poor and rich neighborhoods and city districts virtually next to each other), the increasingly unmanageable mass migration is the most striking symbol of global inequalities. Every year, millions of workers and their families move across borders and continents to reduce the gap between their own situation and that of people in other, wealthier places – but migration does not necessarily reduce inequalities in the way many immigrants would like. If the majority of migrants were from the poorest sections of society and realized a net gain from migration, then it would in principle reduce economic inequality, all other things being equal. But immigrants are by no means always the poorest, they don't always gain from migration, and other factors are not really equal in our societies, either.

Another commonly used method to reduce inequalities is the provision of aid, which is becoming increasingly popular both domestically and internationally. Nevertheless, the various forms of aid – whether state benefits or charitable donations – that are now wide-

spread or even trendy, while undoubtedly worth more than nothing, are more of a temporary patch-work on the system than a permanent solution to the problem of social inequalities. On the one hand, they often do not reach those who need them most – but even when they do, they do not usually provide adequate assistance to enable their beneficiaries to achieve financial security and thus security of livelihood.

In order to ensure long-term stability, we need a socio-economic system that is not driven by consumption and the constant growth of the economy, but by a system determined by our real needs and possibilities. An economy in which the distribution of both the burden and the wealth produced is much more balanced and equitable, and which is much more optimized and less wasteful than the current one.

But we will have to give up constant growth, extreme luxury and quasi-unlimited consumption in any case, not just to restore and preserve social order, but to restore and preserve the natural balance of our planet. Just as everyone will have to accept that less, or at least stagnating, overall consumption is not in itself a bad thing, but how it is distributed in society, i.e. the system of redistribution of wealth, is at least as important.

Overpopulation

It matters a lot how much we consume also because our Earth is not a bottomless bag from which we can pull unlimited quantities of everything, from the goods we need most to the things we covet to an endless supply of rabbits. While the planet has some virtually inexhaustible, permanent or continuously renewable resources (e.g. seawater, solar and wind energy), and resources that can be renewed over a longer or shorter period of time (plants, animals, freshwater etc.), it can only provide us with limited quantities of others (e.g. certain metals and minerals).

The latter category includes fossil fuels, such as coal, oil and natural gas, which were created over millions of years from plants and animals that died in prehistoric times and then decomposed. By comparison, it seems to take humanity only a few centuries to use up all of our planet's stocks, and in a way that the explosive rise of industry and transportation has relied mostly – and still relies heavily – on these resources. This is true even if we are now using more and more renewable energy sources, but their share of the total energy consumed is not or barely increasing, due to the growing demand for energy. It is a telling fact that we still rely 84% on fossil fuels globally to meet our energy needs.

But, as we know, we do not have unlimited supplies of the plants and animals we use for food and all kinds of raw materials, nor of the freshwater we use for drinking and sanitation in general, and for processing and other purposes. While we mass produce the crops and livestock we need to meet our needs – contributing in no small part to global climate change –, the habitat and numbers of wild species are in steady decline, with the result that natural diversity and balance are increasingly under threat.

So our human civilization, now numbering almost 8 billion people, needs a huge amount of resources – in somewhat simplistic terms: land, water and air – to be able to sustain itself and absorb the waste it produces, what we fashionably call our ecological footprint. (Ecology basically examines the relationship between living things and the environment.) Closely related to this is the so-called Earth Overshoot Day, which refers to the day in a given year when we reach the biological (or simply bio-) capacity of our planet that we should have used by the end of the year. According to the latest data from the Global Footprint Network, the world's scientific research organization for sustainable development, Earth Overshoot Day in 2019 fell on 29 July, the middle of the year for less than a short month.

Even if not for precise statistics, these estimated figures are enough to warn You that, Dear Reader, we are currently using far more of the natural resources on average (i.e. per capita) that are continuously renewable, but take time to replenish, than we have available. (Obviously we haven't used it all up yet, because regeneration doesn't actually happen in annual cycles, but on a constant, ongoing basis. In other words, if we reach Earth Overshoot Day before the end of a given year, our resources are depleting, but if not, we are theoretically building up a 'reserve'.) Data for individual regions and countries also show

roughly how their ecological footprints compare – which can be much larger in (more) developed economies than in less industrialized parts of the world.

The point of the above is that in the long term we cannot exploit the Earth at a faster rate than it can regenerate – yet we do. Based on researchers' estimates, we have been able to say for decades now that we use up each year our 'available budget' for a given year earlier and earlier, with a virtually steadily increasing trend in the speed of use. As the following graph shows, in the mid-1980s, Earth Overshoot Day was in early November, but in the space of three decades it has moved forward by three months to early August. And while the date seems to have stagnated somewhat since then, we should in fact gradually push it further back if we want to avoid local and global crises and disasters with scarce or insufficient resources.
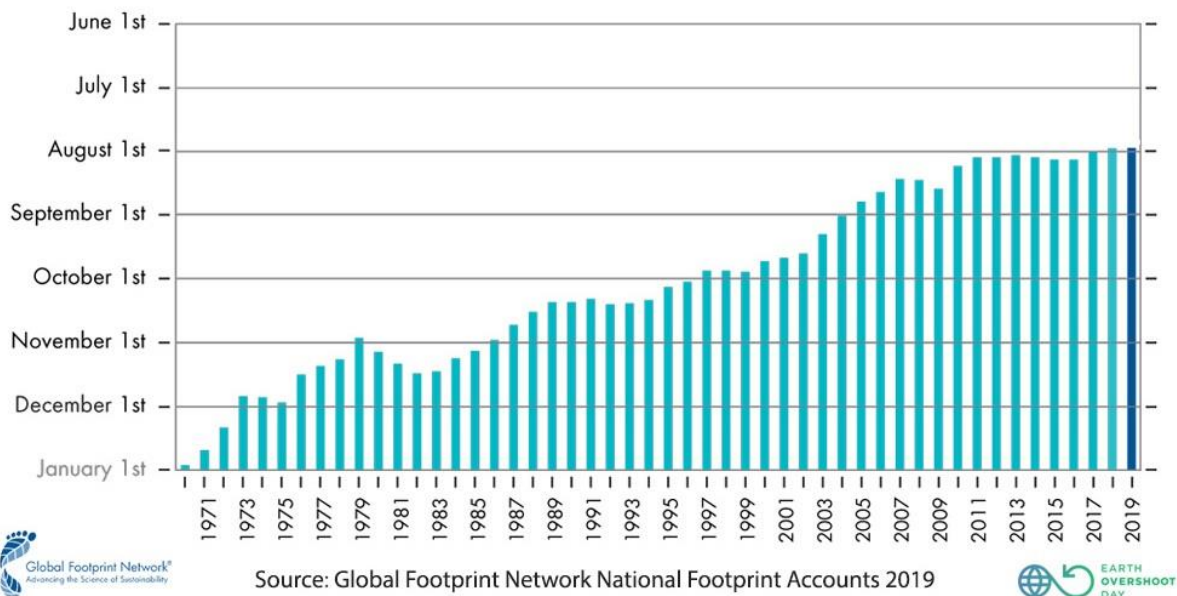
Figure 3 - Earth Overshoot Day 1970-2019

The size of our ecological footprint, however, is closely linked to the population of humanity, which has been growing rapidly for decades. How rapidly? Well, between the mid-1960s and 2010, the world's population grew from 3.5 billion to 7 billion – doubling in less than half a century! This is certainly a thought-provoking figure given that 150 years earlier, at the beginning of the 19th century, humanity counted only 1 billion souls, while at the dawn of our era the same number was 200 million the most. And although the global growth trend now seems to be slowing somewhat, the UN estimates that by the end of the 21st century the total population could be as high as 11 billion – but by mid-century it will almost certainly be around 10 billion.

Overpopulation
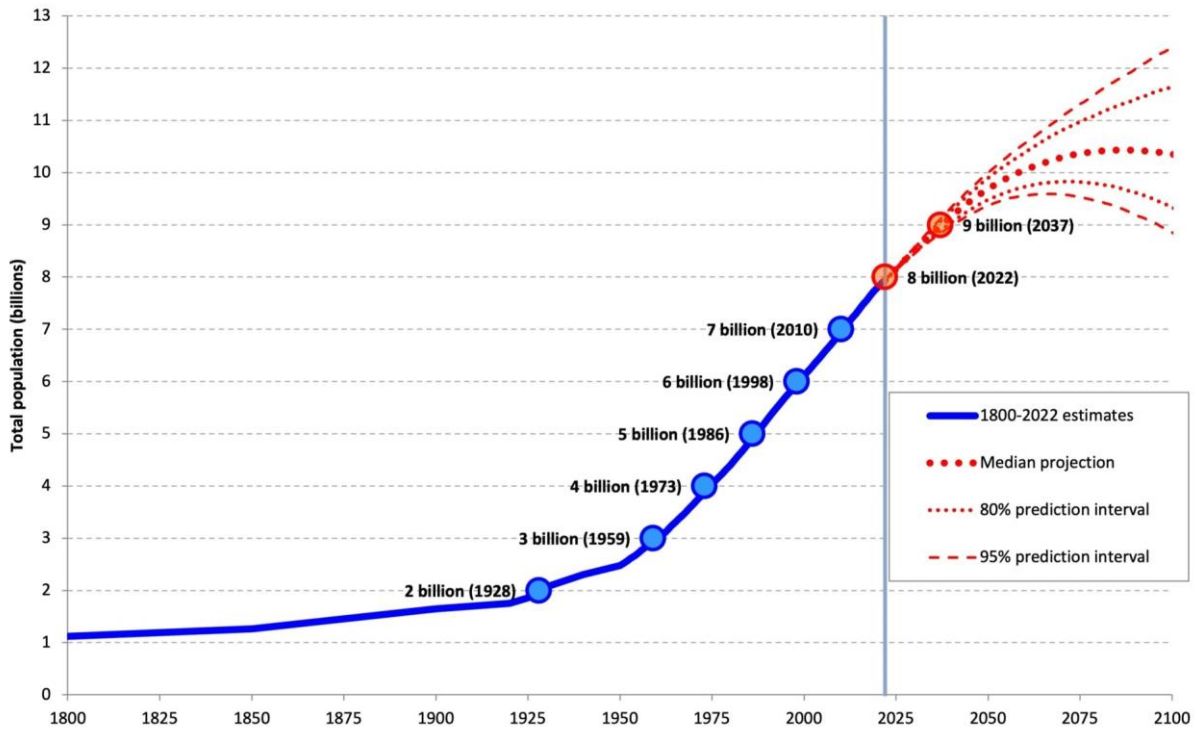
Figure 4 - World population estimates 1800-2022, and medium-variant projection with 80 and 95 percent prediction intervals 2022-2100
Source: United Nations, DESA, Population Division (2022). World Population Prospects 2022

If we compare the two graphs, we can clearly see the correlation between our ecological footprint and the size of our population. Even if we are optimistic and hope that our per capita consumption will decrease somewhat over time, we should not be complacent, as it is far from certain that this will be enough for (environmental) sustainability. Truth be told, we are already putting too much strain on our only habitable planet, and as the population continues to grow, we will have to optimize or we will be in more and more trouble. If we continue to use up the Earth's natural resources at the same rate, there will be more and more people who will have to do without them: people who do not have access to enough drinking water, food or even energy.

We should also invest much more in harnessing renewable energy sources and developing energy storage, because they could help us meet our needs much more efficiently. According to a study, to provide a comfortable standard of living for one person – one that is not short of anything but not overly wasteful (including housing, food and drinking water, travel, education, healthcare and telecommunications) –, we would only need about 4,000 KWh of energy per year. This is less than a tenth of the average consumption of the citizens of New Zealand, one of today's wealthier countries, and could in principle be met by the exclusive use of renewable energy sources. This is possible not only because our average consumption is currently too high, but also because a lot of energy is wasted in the use of fossil fuels. (Due to the energy requirements of extraction, refining and transportation on the one hand, and the often very low efficiency of use on the other.)

In addition, the burning of fossil fuels is a major contributor to the acceleration of climate change, with the dreaded threat that extreme weather will mean that we will have even less food production capacity over time, with potentially serious or even fatal consequences for masses of people around the world. As a result, social inequalities and tensions can continue to grow, even to the point of intolerability – both within our societies and between countries and regions that are affected to varying degrees. In the long run, this again points towards social instability and unsustainability.

And, as we have seen, shrinking resources are only one side of the coin, as the other is the threat of increasing pollution, the intense destruction of the natural environment (forests, seas, etc.), and the potential acceleration of climate change. Even though more and more people congregate in the world's major cities, they are putting the same burden on the environment, while the size of natural habitats is rapidly shrinking with the constant expansion of agricultural land. Therefore until we can drastically increase the efficiency of our drinking water and food production methods through technological (e.g. economical seawater desalination) and methodological (e.g. climate-resistant crops) innovations in such a way that we are curbing the destruction and pollution of nature at the same time, the claim that the more of us there are on the planet, the greater the burden we place on our environment, will remain true.

The significant increase in population has been made possible largely by the shift from a hunter-gatherer to an agricultural lifestyle, with major advances in medicine and social safety nets over the last century and a half, which has not only increased the human population, but also our average life expectancy at birth. (Although longer life expectancy also contributes to population growth, it is to a certain extent a natural result of, and an inherent part of, human evolution.) It is important to note, however, that birth rates today depend by no means only on our material well-being or health, as they are affected at least as much by cultural conditions and habits, and of course by birth control.

The most relevant measure is the fertility rate, which shows the average number of children a woman will have in her lifetime – for example, if 4 million women in a country have 14 million children, the country's fertility rate is 3.5. If we assume for simplicity that their average life expectancy is the same as the life expectancy of their children, then two parents need two children to keep the population constant in the long run. (The number and distribution of deaths in a society is, in fact, constantly changing and depends on a number of factors.) So, in general, if the fertility rate is above 2, the population is increasing, and if it is below 2, the population is decreasing.

Nowadays, in a significant part of the (more) developed countries, the fertility rate does not even reach 2, and the population of these societies has been in steady decline for some time. (This is also the reason for the phenomenon of social ageing that has become common in the richer countries of the world, where there are fewer children and youngsters as opposed to more elderly people.) So the general trend is that as a country gets richer, its

population gradually stagnates or declines – thus the problem of the projected rise in world population over the coming decades is clearly not to be found here.

In fact, population growth is most pronounced – with a few exceptions – in the countries of the poorest regions (Africa, South and South-East Asia, Central America). The annual rate in most of the countries of the previously mentioned sub-Saharan Africa is 2% or even above 3%, which is why the population there is expected to at least double in the next few decades. But feeding so many people and meeting their other basic needs places an unrealistically heavy burden on these countries, which are not well-off and often plagued by unstable climates and economies, political situations, civil wars, ethnic and religious cleansing – which also explains the influx of refugees since the early to mid-2010s, mainly to Europe but also to the US and Australia, for example. And if births do not fall or continue to rise, the number of people suffering from malnutrition and disease, losing their lives to hunger and war, fleeing their homes and homelands, and desperate to the point of despair could rise by hundreds of millions.

In order to avoid this, it will be essential for the economies and societies of these regions to gradually catch up, rather than being left on the periphery of self-serving economic globalism and imperialism, or to be relegated to aid in the future. Today, many foundations and charities (nowadays known collectively as non-governmental organizations or NGOs in short) are already doing useful work in areas such as health and education, which is much needed and appreciated, but by no means enough. As many have already recognized, the education and awareness-raising of young women and girls is one of the most effective ways of reducing the birth rate, and therefore should be extended to all regions of all countries concerned, if possible. This must be accompanied by adequate and free medical care, including contraceptive supplies.

At the same time, there is a great need to raise awareness and educate people in general, so that they can broaden their often very limited vision to recognize the problem of overpopulation in the first place, and have the chance to overcome cultural differences and discord. Through proper education and job creation, those living in less developed regions of the world must also be given the opportunity to become useful members of society, but they will need much more and better organized international support and involvement than is currently the case.

Climate Change

One of the main reasons why population growth poses a serious problem for our future is the much talked about climate change. More specifically, it is essentially a general, global warming process, but it does not end with the fact that the average annual surface temperature will be 1-2 or a few degrees Celsius higher than ever seen in the history of our civilization. That's because our planet's atmosphere, oceans and land form a complex, interconnected system that has a major impact on both the weather and the conditions necessary for life on Earth.

Wherever You live, Dear Reader, You have probably noticed Yourself that the weather is becoming more extreme and unpredictable. A decade or two ago in the temperate zone, for example, we had a clear idea of what to expect from each season, and even without knowing the date, just by looking out of an open window, we could probably tell whether it was spring, summer, autumn or winter outside. But nowadays it is no longer surprising if trees and plants bloom in February, and then for a few days in April there are night frosts so severe that many buds and flowers fall off because they cannot bear it. Or if we are greeted with summer warmth in May, only to experience unusually cool temperatures for long periods during the actual summer months, followed by a sudden warm front that brings almost unbearable heat for several weeks. Or when it hardly snows at all all winter long, and the weather is often more like autumn or spring, but there is a short period when it is surprisingly cold, and the sudden blizzard literally overswarms us.

But even if you live elsewhere in the world, you may have experienced the effects of climate change, just in a different form: In South and South-East Asia, for example, with the postponement of the summer monsoon period and the reduction in total rainfall, in Africa, among other things, the gradual desertification of formerly savannah grasslands, or the increasingly intensive thawing of the so called Arctic permafrost, the previously ever-frozen soil of the tundras. But even if You can't see much change in your immediate environment, You may have noticed that reports of devastation caused by storms, floods, droughts, landslides and wildfires are becoming more common in the news from around the planet.

The link between the increasing trend in the number of extreme weather events and global warming is very real, as there is concrete evidence that the average temperature of the Earth is rising, albeit only slightly, year-on-year. Nothing shows this process more clearly than the fact that since 2001, our planet has had 19 of the 20 hottest years on record. Average annual temperatures have already risen by a full degree Celsius since the middle of the 20th century, and scientists say it is very likely that we will see another rise of this magnitude in the next three to four decades. While this may not seem so dire on its own, if You think about the heatwaves we have experienced as a result of just a few tenths of a degree Celsius warming, and how 'crazy' the weather has become almost everywhere in the world, You can get some idea of the consequences of a further rise by 1-2 degrees.
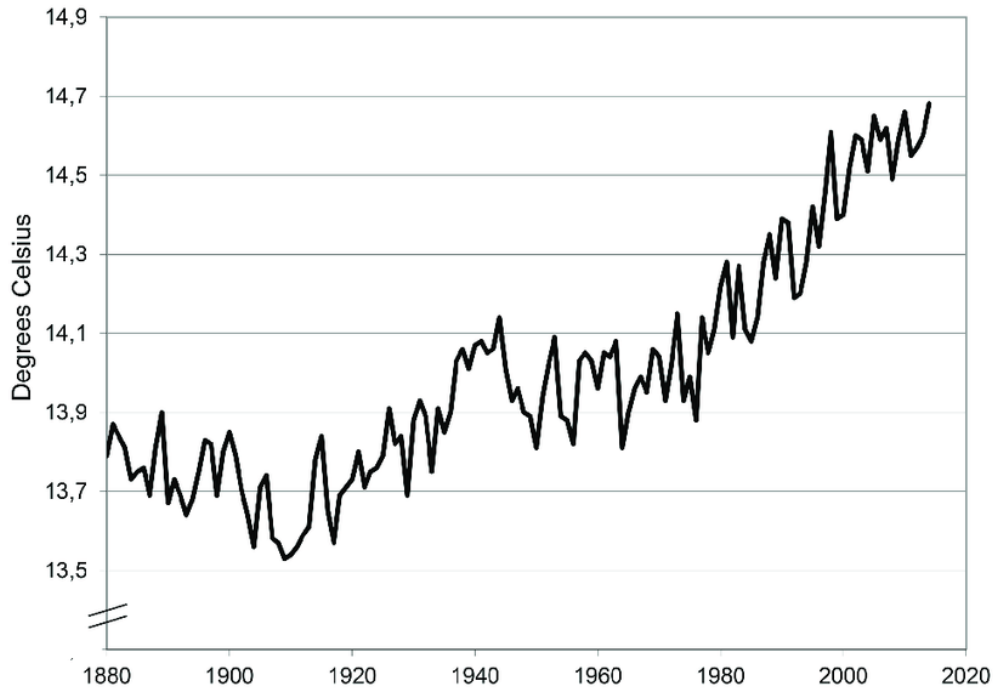
Figure 5 - Average global temperature 1880-2020
Source: Earth Policy Institute, 2015

The effects of climate change were also directly felt in the summer of 2021, when people in the United States and Canada, North Africa and parts of Europe experienced prolonged, unseasonably hot weather. Such extreme heat waves are caused by a complex combination of atmospheric processes, and although they may vary from year to year, climate change is a major contributor to their increasing frequency. If average temperatures rise every-where, even if only slightly, this will increase the likelihood of similar extreme weather events, such as droughts and wildfires. But it is not only the fires raging in Siberia, the Mediterranean or the western US and Canada, but also the catastrophic floods in Western Europe, which like the heat wave have killed hundreds of people, that are clearly attribut-able to global warming.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration of the US has revealed that July 2021 was the warmest month in the world since records began 142 years earlier. So cli-mate scientists have been studying the changes in the Earth's climate for a long time, and they predicted the increase in the frequency of extreme weather events about two decades ago – yet most people were unaware or did not attach much importance to it. But the out-look for the future is even bleaker: the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report of 2021 warns us to expect even more extreme weather events in the future. Extreme heat waves, which used to occur on average once every 50 years, are now likely to occur every decade. Furthermore, a recent study published in the journal Nature Climate Change found that the probability of record-breaking heat waves could increase seven-fold by 2050, and more than 21-fold (!) between 2051 and 2080.

Heat waves typically occur when high-pressure air is persistently drawn over a region, suppressing cloud formation and causing the air to compress and heat up. The resulting heat domes have been linked by scientists to the activity of tropical cyclones, which can change the air flow over the northern hemisphere and cause unusual weather patterns. When the air is warmer, our waters evaporate more, which increases the amount of water vapor in the atmosphere, which then falls on us in the form of heavier precipitation with higher yields. Depending on where we live, this can take the form of violent thunderstorms, hurricanes, hailstorms or blizzards, which can sometimes lead to unprecedented flooding.

As the Earth's complex weather systems are thrown out of balance by climate change, intense and often devastating rainfall is increasingly followed by prolonged periods of drought. Because of the heat and less rainfall, forests are being hit by more and more wildfires, some of the land is slowly being desertified, and crop production cannot be continued in many places due to changed conditions. In addition, the shrinking of natural habitats is pushing many already endangered species to the brink of extinction, while others, such as insects that spread infectious diseases, are conquering new, previously avoided areas. (All the while the overall abundance of insects has declined by around 75% in just a few decades, including species critical to the balance of wildlife, such as bees, dragonflies and the seven-spotted ladybug.)

Decades of research have now clearly established that global warming is mainly due to the rapid increase in the so-called greenhouse effect. Greenhouse gases are gases found in the atmosphere around the planet that absorb heat-carrying infrared radiation from the Sun and radiate it back to the Earth's surface, preventing some of the heat from escaping into outer space. The most important greenhouse gases are water vapor, carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide and ozone, the more of which are present in the atmosphere, the greater the greenhouse effect, which also results in higher average surface temperatures. If the greenhouse effect is too small, the planet will be colder, and if it is too large, it will be warmer than what would be ideal (or even livable) for the life forms on it, including humans.

Greenhouse gases therefore carry out a kind of regulation of the climate, which we humans can also influence through our actions. As several independent research groups have already concluded, carbon emissions have increased by a third, or more than 30%, since the Industrial Revolution of the mid-18th century, with a significant share of this increase occurring after the mid-20th century. Another important measure is the concentration of carbon dioxide, which shows the number of carbon dioxide molecules in the atmosphere out of a million particles. Although the current global average – officially measured at 407 ppm in 2018 – looks very low for the uninitiated eye, it represents a 45% increase compared to the pre-Industrial Revolution level of around 280 ppm. And when You consider that it had never exceeded 300 ppm for a million years or so before that, the current trend

looks particularly alarming. (Research shows that the last time atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide were as high as they are now was about 3 million years ago, when the Earth's average temperature was 2-3 degrees Celsius higher than before the Industrial Revolution, and sea levels were 15-25 meters above current levels.)
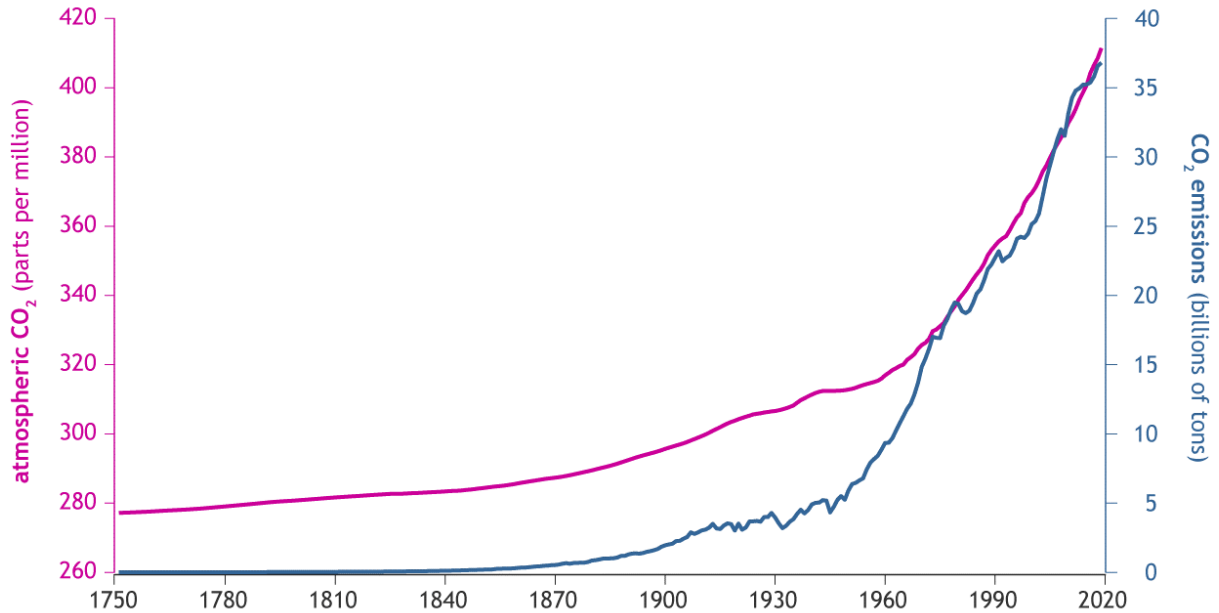
Figure 6 - CO2 in the atmosphere and annual emissions 1750-2019
Source: NOAA Climate.gov (Data: NOAA, ETHZ, Our World in Data)

If we compare the above graph with the graph showing the increase in average temperature, the link between the steady rise in our planet's surface temperature and increased carbon dioxide emissions becomes clear. But we know that the latter is due in large part to the explosion of industrialization and the 20th century revolution in transportation, which has seen us burning vast quantities of fossil fuels in our factories, power stations and various vehicles. Burning the carbon content of plant and animal remains fossilized (basically petrified under high pressure) millions of years ago releases carbon dioxide into the air in the same way as burning living forests, for example, so it's no wonder that the continuous supply has caused a huge increase in the concentration of this greenhouse gas over the last hundred years. (Moreover, in the last few years the annual increase has been over 2 ppm, compared to well below 1 ppm in the 1960s.)

The parallel between intense industrialization and sudden global warming (on a historical scale) is therefore clear, so there can be little doubt in Your mind, Dear Reader, that we humans are largely responsible for the current climate change. Although our planet's climate has changed a lot over time, those changes have never been as rapid as they are today. It is now a scientifically proven fact that the Earth's climate has changed more in the last two centuries – and particularly in the last 50 years – than it had in tens of thousands of years before. Indeed, the process is accelerating even as we speak, and its effects are now being felt virtually everywhere in the world.

Nevertheless, I do not wish to dwell on the reality of the dangers of this phenomenon that we all face, or reasons for it that can be traced back to human activity. Firstly, because it would be superfluous, as many people and scientists more competent than me have done it before – including through the IPCC 2021 report –, and continue to do so almost day after day. On the other hand, because it doesn't really matter whether You believe them or me. Why am I saying this? Well, because I believe that if there is even a remote chance that we are responsible for the sudden climate change, or that it is due to our current lifestyle, then it is our duty as citizens to do everything we can to avert and prevent the potential consequences and dangers, for the sake of our children and the generations yet unborn after them.

So there is no way we can avoid dealing with the consequences of global warming and its future evolution, which is as serious a threat to our civilization as any other. The severity of the problem is only exacerbated by the not-so-favorable projections of even greater warming in the second half of this century if we do not phase out fossil fuels very quickly, within a decade or two, and drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions from our other activities. Due to the uncertainties of various estimation methods and climate models, the only disagreement among experts is whether we will remain at an increase of 2-3 degrees Celsius by 2100, or even 4-5 degrees cannot be completely ruled out...

Most of all, perhaps, we need to fear that the current (relative) balance between the globally connected weather systems of our planet will be upset. In that case, compared to a finely controlled state that has existed for hundreds of thousands of years, a runaway chain of causally linked processes could theoretically lead to changes in the Earth's climate that result in a sudden temperature surge. The following phenomena may all contribute to this effect:
- warming oceans can absorb less carbon dioxide;
- melting permafrost releases even more greenhouse gases into the Earth's atmosphere;
- the land and sea water surfaces that replace the melted ice caps can reflect much less sunlight, so they retain heat even better.

But on an Earth with an average temperature several degrees Celsius higher than before the Industrial Revolution, humanity will face far more difficult conditions than we are now forced to endure. The most serious problem of all could likely prove to be that increasingly extreme weather has a confoundly negative impact on agriculture, leaving less food available in many regions of the world, while the population continues to grow. At the same time, freshwater supplies used for consumption or even in the food industry are expected to decline due to droughts, drying rivers and lakes, and disappearing glaciers. Where these cannot be at least partially remedied, the number of hungry and thirsty people is likely to increase by billions, with a prospect of many millions of refugees fleeing their homes and countries.

There is another reason why life could become impossible in many regions of the world by the end of this century, and that is the slow but steady rise in global sea levels. On the one hand, this is due to the large-scale but rapidly melting snow and ice cover on our landmasses, especially in Antarctica and Greenland, which mostly increases the volume of water in the World Ocean. The other main reason is simply the fact that warmer water, like most other materials, has a larger volume, so the oceans have no choice but to expand upwards.

According to research, sea levels have risen by 20 to 25 centimeters (8 to 10 inches) since 1880, a third of which has occurred in the last two and a half decades. So here too we see an increasing trend, but we cannot be sure at what rate the warming and melting will take place in the future. The most optimistic estimates suggest a further rise of at least 30 centimeters (12 inches) by the end of the century, but the uncertainty of warming projections means that this could be much more, up to 2.5 meters (8 feet) at worst.

In other words, the rise in the level of the world's oceans is also a reason, Dear Reader, why the rate at which the Earth's average temperature increases will make a huge difference in the coming decades. As Antarctica is home to the largest expanse of snow and ice on our planet, the amount and volume of ice sheets falling from the sixth continent could determine the rate and speed of the rise in water level. A study by scientists at the University of Reading, one of the most detailed on the subject to date, showed that 34% of the entire Antarctic ice sheet (about half a million square kilometers or 193 thousand square miles), including 67% of the Antarctic Peninsula ice sheets, is at risk of destabilization in case of a 4°C warming. Conversely, if the temperature rise could be limited to 2°C instead of 4°C, the size of the area at risk would be halved, and a potentially significant sea-level rise could be avoided.

Dr. Ella Gilbert, a researcher at the University's Institute of Meteorology, summed up the problem rather graphically: "Ice shelves are important buffers preventing glaciers on land from flowing freely into the ocean and contributing to sea level rise. When they collapse, it's like a giant cork being removed from a bottle, allowing unimaginable amounts of water from glaciers to pour into the sea." To underline the seriousness of the situation, she also added: "The findings highlight the importance of limiting global temperature increases as set out in the Paris Agreement if we are to avoid the worst consequences of climate change, including sea level rise." And the Paris Agreement she referred to is nothing less than an international climate agreement that is binding in principle, which has been created with the goal to keep the global average temperature rise below 2°C. The Agreement was adopted by 196 parties at the UN Climate Change Conference in 2015, but many signatory countries have already failed to stick to its targets in the few years since then.

Nevertheless, sea-level rise has already caused serious hardship and damage to people living along the world's coastlines: 'nuisance flooding' caused by storms and high tides, damage to infrastructure (roads, bridges, tunnels, reservoirs, power plants, sewage treatment plants, landfills, etc.) and associated pollution, soil erosion and damage to buildings,

and many others. So it is already a huge effort and cost for coastal countries and cities to keep salt seawater out, but in case of a rise of several meters it is hard to imagine that they will be able to cope for long.

Thus, many metropolises such as Miami, Houston, New Orleans (USA), Jakarta (Indonesia), Bangkok (Thailand), Lagos (Nigeria), Alexandria (Egypt) or Rotterdam (Netherlands) could be completely submerged by the end of the century. However, the total (current) population of these cities of more than 50 million is still only a quarter of the almost 200 million people who could be directly affected by sea-level rise by 2100. In addition, it is estimated that flooding linked to sea-level rise alone could make the livelihoods and security of an additional 160 million people more difficult or impossible. Therefore, due to this aspect of climate change alone, hundreds of millions of additional refugees and displaced people could be expected by the end of the century.

But that's not all, as unbearable heat, storms and natural disasters of unprecedented intensity, and other consequences of global warming could also lead to large-scale population movements, and death and suffering of a similar magnitude. Our prospects regarding our dependence on nature are not great, either, if we do not change current trends: ocean acidification, the rapid destruction of flora and fauna, mass extinctions and ecological imbalances pose a threat to our future that we cannot yet even begin to imagine. But what we can already be sure of is that climate change is causing enormous damage to many of us in terms of the present, and grave uncertainty for the very near future.

While there is no way we can prevent global warming from happening, we must do everything in our power to keep it to a minimum. Every tenth of a degree can make a huge difference to the living conditions on our planet, and the amount of suffering that humanity may face in the future. Moreover, if the Earth's climate changes drastically due to runaway greenhouse and other systemic effects, the consequences will be irreversible for centuries or even millennia. So we need to act very quickly and make radical changes – the sooner the better, but we certainly don't have decades to procrastinate, ponder or adapt at a slow pace.

The key to the solution, according to many, is to achieve the so called net-zero economy, which is about balancing the total amount of greenhouse gases emitted into the atmosphere with the total amount of greenhouse gases removed from the atmosphere. To do this, we can release no more greenhouse gases into the atmosphere in the short term than we can extract. The ultimate goal is to reduce the amount in the atmosphere as quickly as possible so that global warming can be stopped and reversed. This means that once we stop emitting greenhouse gases from fossil fuels and the use of other resources, we will still have to deal with all the accumulated emissions that we have pumped into the atmosphere over several decades.

In practice, this can be achieved by steadily increasing the capacity to capture greenhouse gases through various means, while reducing emissions. (This can be done, for ex-

ample, through afforestation or through technologies that, like plants, extract and neutralize carbon-containing gases directly from the air.) We must not forget, however, that the larger the scale and duration of greenhouse gas emissions into our planet's atmosphere, the more we will have to extract in order to achieve net zero emissions. To prevent this, it is essential to phase out fossil fuels (coal, oil, natural gas) from industry, transportation and other areas.

As stated at the annual World Economic Forum 2020 meeting, 1.5% of global GDP would be sufficient to achieve the transition to a carbon-free economy and net-zero emissions by 2050. This is, of course, an immense amount of money (roughly the annual domestic product of Australia, Spain or Mexico), but it would not be an insurmountable obstacle if resources were allocated and used according to the importance of the problems. The trouble is that in today's economic and political systems, money is far from always going where it is needed the most. But unless we invest much more in green, carbon-free solutions, the rise in average global temperatures could reach or exceed the extremely dangerous 3 degrees Celsius by the end of the century.

One of the most important and seemingly inevitable steps is, as has already been mentioned, to switch to renewable energy sources as soon as possible. Of these, solar and wind energy are the easiest and most widely available, while the use of biomass or hydropower is more specialized and requires greater care. At the same time, geothermal energy from our planet's internal heat is available in virtually unlimited quantities, we just need to find a way to harness it intensively, even independently of thermal waters or other intermediaries. Research is also underway to develop fusion power plants that harness the energy of fusion rather than fission of atoms, which could later prove to be a pioneering way of providing an abundant, cheap and sustainable source of energy. Nevertheless, until we have a lasting environmentally friendly solution to meet our growing energy needs, we should not turn away from the tried and tested nuclear power option.

I am well aware, Dear Reader, that nuclear power plants represent for many people a technology that is outdated, dangerous and discardable – a conviction that, in addition to the Chernobyl disaster in 1986 and the Fukushima accident in 2011, is probably fuelled by a fierce public awareness campaign. Yet we should not ignore the high efficiency of nuclear fission (a single reactor can power several counties or even a small state), on which we are very much dependent, alongside the much less efficient solar, wind and other renewables, which are far from being able to meet our needs. Another very strong argument in favor of nuclear energy is that outdated and obsolete power plants can be replaced by newer, completely safe solutions.

Former Microsoft CEO Bill Gates, now known primarily for his philanthropic activities, offers such a solution in the form of a project called TerraPower. The idea aims to use the latest technologies and computing innovations to recycle the thousands of tons of spent nuclear fuel, whose storage is a major environmental issue nowadays, as it will likely continue to be so. Although the high cost of the venture and the self-important political wran-

gling has made it slow to take off, I think it would definitely be worth more attention and money if it could replace a significant proportion of fossil fuel power plants in the foreseeable future.

Radically transforming, rationalizing and optimizing transportation, freight and our travels also seem inevitable to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. However, a gradual shift from fossil fuels to electric and other environmentally friendly means of propulsion may not be enough, and could require a rethink and a complete restructuring of the transportation sector. We also need to improve energy efficiency and the 'cleanliness' of the energy we use in other areas of our lives, including our buildings, homes, appliances and equipment, our consumption habits and waste management, and many more. Although various technologies are already being developed to remove carbon dioxide and other carbon-containing gases from the atmosphere, their maturity, cost-effectiveness and efficiency are all highly uncertain, thus we should not rely on them in the knowledge that they will solve global warming on their own.

In order to minimize greenhouse gas emissions (leaving aside the ethical and dietary aspects), it would also be advisable to reduce our consumption of meat and the number of livestock that allow it, especially cattle and pigs, which emit considerable amounts of methane gas (contributing many times more to the greenhouse effect than the same amount of carbon dioxide) in large-scale farming. Furthermore, water management in many regions will need to be rethought and optimized – just as waste will certainly need to be cut back, even if in many places this will not be enough. Optimizing supply will also be essential in the future, with the likelihood of dwindling quantities of drinking water and food, and a growing population. In essence, this means that we need a much fairer distribution system than we have now, otherwise we could see more warfare on Earth than ever before.

Climate change, like every other scourge that afflicts humanity, has the greatest impact on the most disadvantaged, who have the least to blame for the whole problem. Global warming is due in large part to energy corporations, and the elite and industrial activities of the (more) developed, economically advanced countries, especially the burning of fossil fuels. The rest of the world's economies are only trying to follow in the hope of similar growth, but they are now expected to reduce, or at least not increase their carbon emissions very much – a true reflection of the equality of opportunity, or rather the lack of it, between developed and developing countries. It is no coincidence that governments have invested only about a third of all the money needed to fundamentally transform the energy system, and that the biggest gaps can be found in developing countries.

While the expectations for a significant reduction in emissions are somewhat understandable in the current context, they should also be accompanied by the opportunity for less developed countries to catch up and raise living standards, which should be facilitated by richer regions on the basis of the reciprocity principle (something for something). In return for reducing their carbon emissions, developing countries could in the first instance

receive benefits such as cheap imported electricity, food and necessities at a discount, or even the abolition of tariffs on their exports. In the long run, however, much more selfless support may be warranted, especially in terms of protecting against and repairing the damage caused by natural disasters attributable to climate change.

In addition, more advanced countries, which were early starters and are therefore primarily responsible for atmospheric pollution, should provide financial, technical and professional support to help their less developed counterparts catch up by relying less on cheaper but emission-harmful solutions. International funds set up for this purpose (see Global Environment Facility, Green Climate Fund) can also be used to promote the deployment of renewable energy technologies – in Africa, for example, the very high number of sunny hours makes the widespread use of solar panels almost self-evident. As the priority in developing countries is often to grow as fast as possible and mitigate poverty by relying mostly on fossil fuels, technical and financial assistance needs to be accompanied by coordination, negotiation and cooperation at global level, so that geographical disparities can be reduced within the context of sustainable development, without further increasing carbon emissions.

As we have already seen, however, the injustice of climate change is not clearly manifested only in an international context. The problem of people fleeing the increasingly intolerable effects of global warming will be as much a burden within a country as it could be across borders. If, for example, sea-level rise, desertification or any other cause forces masses of people to leave an entire region, a significant proportion of those affected will become homeless and unemployed. While the wealthy (at least the well-prepared) will simply buy another house or apartment in a safe place and relocate, the majority will have a serious problem selling their property. (Despite this, for example, the majority of moving Americans still prefer popular areas of the country over longer-term environmental concerns.) But if the situation becomes untenable, they will all be forced to pack up all their movable possessions and rely on any savings to look for a new home – and, in all likelihood, a new job or source of income.

At the same time, it is highly questionable who will provide sufficient drinking water and food for the potentially millions of refugees – especially when the affected or host countries themselves are facing similar or other serious problems. Who will provide people with jobs or income if companies cannot cope with the loss of revenue from falling demand, and increasingly indebted states are no longer able to finance the economy? And in general, how will the current global economic system be able withstand the extremely severe crisis of climate change as a whole, when much milder and less protracted crises such as the COVID-outbreak of 2020 are already posing very serious challenges?

Polluting and Destroying Our Environment

The release of greenhouse gases that cause global warming, although an extremely serious problem, is far from the only way we are polluting the air, water and land with all kinds of harmful substances. Whether it be the by-products of various industrial and agricultural processes and procedures, the gases emitted from transportation, or the constant production, direct and indirect spread and impact of waste in all aspects of our lives, the human lifestyle we call modern is damaging our only livable world in countless different ways.

The burning of fossil fuels in industrial plants, power stations and our vehicles not only releases large amounts of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, but also carbon monoxide. This colorless, odorless gas can be harmful to our health in high concentrations – for example, inhaling it in confined spaces in homes in the event of a gas heating failure still regularly causes deaths, but it won't prolong our lives walking through the busy streets of a big city, either. Cars, trucks and factories also emit other gases that can be detected in the air, such as nitrogen monoxide, nitrogen dioxide, sulphur dioxide or various hydrocarbons (methane, propane, etc.).

These substances react with the help of sunlight to form smog, which is essentially a visible haze that, along with airborne dust and soot, often fills the air of cities. (For example, the smog over Linfen, China, home to around 4 million people, is so thick that residents can rarely see the sun because of it.) As well as causing breathing difficulties in some, smog is also clearly linked to an increase in the number of people suffering from asthma. And the increased concentrations of fine particulate matter in the atmosphere are now the leading environmental cause of respiratory problems, poor health and premature death. Human-induced air pollution is estimated to have killed 5.5 million people prematurely worldwide in 2019, while its adverse health effects affected many times that number.

The production and use of various chemicals, although a less common problem, can have even more serious consequences in a direct way. In 1984, an accident at a pesticide plant in Bhopal, India, released deadly chemical fumes into the environment. Within a few days, more than 8 thousand people died, while hundreds of thousands more suffered permanent damage. This is one of the reasons why the costs and the rigor of controls cannot be skimped on when it comes to the safety of similar plants...

Moreover, air pollution is not only directly harmful to us, but it can also be linked to climate change. It is not only greenhouse gases that play a role in causing or accelerating the latter – for example, soot released into the atmosphere by burning fossil fuels, especially black carbon, is deposited on land still covered in snow and ice, reducing its reflectivity. (And, as we already know, the increased amount of solar radiation absorbed further melts the already thinning snow and ice cover, which further intensifies the warming.) And even though sulphate aerosols (mixtures of the gaseous medium and the tiny solid particles or liquid droplets that are dispersed in it) reflect sunlight back into the upper

atmosphere to cool the planet, we are forced to cut back on their emissions because of their harmful effects on our health. So in essence, we need to gradually reduce the amount of aerosols in the atmosphere in the same way as we do for greenhouse carbon dioxide.

The continued release of pollutants into the atmosphere, on the other hand, can cause serious damage not only to people but also to the natural environment. When gases such as nitrous oxide or sulphur dioxide mix with moisture, they sometimes fall to the ground as acid rain. Acid rains can kill plants and even trees, but they can also be a serious blow to the biota of rivers and lakes. In Sweden, for example, the phenomenon has created thousands of 'dead' lakes that are no longer inhabited by fish or other larger animals. Acid rain is a good indication that pollution knows no borders: for example, pollutants released into the atmosphere by a power plant in Spain can bring acid rain to as far as Norway, thousands of kilometers away.

But we pollute our water in many other ways, whether it's acids from mining, pollution from oil and gas extraction, liquid chemicals produced in our factories and released into natural waters or leaching into the ground, untreated sewage, fertilizers and pesticides regularly used in agriculture, radioactive pollution, the mass of waste from industry, households and other areas of our daily lives, and many more. On the one hand, the toxins that enter our waters directly damage and destroy wildlife, and on the other, the chemicals can create a favorable environment for cyanobacteria, which can lead to the rampant bloom of algae in both our freshwaters and seas. However, extensive algal colonies make life impossible for plants and fish, thus creating 'dead zones' where almost no living things other than algae are found.

Contaminated waters are unfit for drinking and often even bathing. Various bacteria and microscopic aquatic organisms can cause disease, and regular consumption of water containing dangerous chemicals can make some people ill even years later. The UN estimates that about 4,000 children die each year from having to drink dirty water. At the same time, water contamination can also cause health problems indirectly, through the consumption of animals or even leaching from the soil into drinking water. In the 1970s, for example, Niagara Falls in New York State, USA, saw a dramatic increase in cancer cases and birth defects. As it turned out, an inadequately sealed chemical landfill was constantly poisoning the area's drinking water supply, eventually forcing 800 families to leave their homes in 1978.

Although such incidents are no longer common (at least in more developed countries), plastic pollution has become a very serious problem all over the world. The biggest problem with plastics is that these man-made materials, which are used in mass quantities because they are cheap and easy to mould, are very slow to degrade completely in nature, but often break down very quickly into tiny pieces that are barely visible to the naked eye. PET bottles, nylon films used for packaging, advertising bags, straws, plastic cups and cutlery, pots and lids – these are just some of the most common types of waste, millions of tons of which are now floating in our landwaters and seas. There is a place where the plastic litter

clumped together by currents covers an area of the ocean surface as large as the US state of Texas, with its almost 700,000 square kilometers.

Plastic litter, however is not only disappointing to the eye, as many marine and terrestrial animals (fish, whales, turtles, birds, etc.) see and swallow it as food, or consume it with their own food. It is estimated that around 100,000 marine mammals die each year as a result, but the number of animals otherwise harmed by plastics is several orders of magnitude higher. In addition, millions of tiny pieces called microplastics enter the bodies of living organisms, and humans are no exception. Plastics that are consumed with animal meat, inadequately cleaned food and drinking water, or even inhaled from the air, gradually accumulate in our bodies, and the long-term health effects are still anyone's guess. (What is certain is that the average of about 74,000 pieces of microplastic that enter our bodies every year is not good for anyone.)

On top of this, 1.8 billion tons of greenhouse gases are currently emitted into the atmosphere every year from the production of plastics and waste processing, which is more than that produced by aviation and other modes of transportation. While plastics contribute to the acceleration of global warming through these emissions, poorly managed plastic waste can threaten the oceans' ability to absorb carbon dioxide, further exacerbating the climate crisis. Not to mention that dealing with the growing volumes of plastic pollution – both on land and in our freshwaters and seas – is consuming huge amounts of resources. A 2021 report commissioned by the World Wide Fund For Nature (WWF) shows that the lifetime cost to society, the environment and the economy of plastics produced in 2019 alone is around US$3.7 trillion – more than India's entire GDP –, and if current trends are not changed, this cost could double by 2040.

The best and most effective solution to the problem of plastics is therefore to produce and use much less of them. According to WWF, close intergovernmental cooperation and a legally binding global agreement would be needed to address the crisis at the systemic level. Such a treaty should cover all stages of the life cycle of plastics, giving us a chance to essentially stop pollution leaking into the oceans. The more difficult part of the problem, however, could be that in practice it is likely that only through social cohesion can we achieve radical change against the wealth and power of chemical corporations and other large companies, which often have a worrying ability to influence political decisions.

Stronger and more organized action is needed, if only because other waste and chemicals that are not properly treated pose another serious problem in terms of pollutants. The countryside around our major settlements is often littered with large mountains of rubbish, containing not only organic, rapidly decomposing waste but also a wide range of other pollutants (metals, rubber, glass, etc.). Moreover, it is not uncommon to find particularly dangerous chemicals, oils and inks in the garbage, which, if they seep into the soil, can harm plants and animals, and indirectly harm us humans, too. Although the incineration of waste largely prevents similar problems, the combustion process releases various chemicals and heavy metals in the form of gases and vapors, which in turn pollute the air again.

Along with the kind of 'passive destruction' that we discussed above, we are engaged in a number of activities today that are actively destroying our environment. Of these we have already mentioned the 'overuse' of nature's resources, whereby the planet's non-renewable or renewable materials and goods are rapidly being depleted to meet our needs. A typical phenomenon is overfishing, which means that more fish of a species are caught in a year than the number the species can reproduce to replace its own population. (In addition, extensive offshore fishing nets cause the suffering and death of countless animals, including marine mammals, which are not even among the targeted prey.)

But an even more serious global problem is the exploitation of soil and farmland by industrial agriculture, which ploughs up land in ways that are invasive to our natural environment, and uses large quantities of pesticides that are toxic to many living organisms. As a consequence, most of the beneficial bacteria and other microbes living in the soil are destroyed, and the majority of the previously teeming fauna – bees and other insects, birds, mammals, etc. – disappear or are displaced from these often expansive areas. However, all this leads to rapid and increased soil erosion and degradation: the productivity of the soil is drastically reduced without microbes, worms and other organisms, the natural water cycle between the soil and the atmosphere is completely altered, rainfall is reduced, the land dries out and becomes desertified. (Which, incidentally, also contributes to climate change.)

In addition to significantly reducing our chances of providing sufficient food in the long run, such activities can upset the balance of individual ecosystems and food chains, leading to mass extinctions of other species not directly affected. The food chain is essentially the way in which nutrients and energy flow in nature, usually through a number of actors, in a constant cycle. One of the many possible variations is the following: the grass produces nutrients through sunlight; the grass is eaten by the rabbit; the rabbit is eaten by the fox; and when the fox dies, bacteria break down its body, which is then returned to the soil to provide food for plants like grass. If the cycle is broken or disrupted somewhere – say, the number of individuals of a plant or animal species is reduced for some reason –, the balance of the food chain is upset, which can threaten the survival of individuals of each species. (Overbreeding of one species can also be a problem, as it usually leads to the decline of one or more of the others it regularly feeds on.)

Of course, many animals eat grass, and rabbits don't feed only on grass – just as foxes don't get their nutrition and energy from eating rabbits alone. In other words, each of them can be part of several food chains at the same time, called a food web. The more diverse such a network is, i.e. the more species there are, the greater its resilience, since in this case the reduction in the number of individuals of one will not or less threaten the flow of nutrients and energy. On the other hand, if there are species in the food chain that feed on only one or a few other species – such as blue whales on krill in the oceans –, then

the depletion or eventual disappearance of the latter from the food chain will lead to a drastic reduction in the abundance of the former.

If, however, several interdependent species find themselves in a similar situation, this can, over time, lead to the failure and collapse of the system as a whole, leaving behind a desert in a real or figurative sense. Parrotfish and similar algae grazing species, for example, are crucial for coral reef equilibrium, as algal blooms result in the destruction of corals, which can create extensive dead zones. But as coral reefs become depleted, their beneficial role in protecting shorelines from wave action, storms and floods is also lost. This is one of the reasons why it is so important to maintain biodiversity, i.e. biological diversity or the variety of living organisms, and to keep the number of individuals in each ecosystem above a certain level.

Although strict regulation, such as the introduction of quotas, can more or less remedy or mitigate the problem of environmental destruction, in some cases it is not enough. While the burning of forests and felling of trees is heavily restricted in many countries around the world, there are places where large-scale, legal destruction is taking place to free up land. Whether it's palm plantations run by multinational companies in Southeast Asia or areas in Latin America occupied by farmers primarily for livestock farming, the destruction of rainforests is now reaching alarming proportions. According to estimates and satellite measurements, in 2018, for example, 12 million hectares of rainforest disappeared from the face of the Earth, the equivalent of around 30 football fields per minute. Even though this figure is less than the 15.8 million or 40 football fields in 2017, it has unfortunately started to grow rapidly again due to changes in the political situation.

Deforestation is currently one of the most serious environmental problems in the world: it causes more and more catastrophic landslides due to soil erosion, increases the number and severity of floods, and even contributes significantly to the increase of greenhouse gases (mainly carbon dioxide) in the atmosphere. In the long run, the loss of natural habitats could be an equally serious concern, due to the continued expansion of our towns and villages, and the relentless expansion of transportation and the infrastructure that supports it.

The degradation, pollution and loss of entire ecosystems are following essentially the same trend as global warming: they have accelerated dangerously in the last few decades, in parallel with the growth of human population and industrialization, in most parts of the world. In addition, the two often have a simultaneous impact on wildlife, as the survival of animal and plant species that are increasingly displaced, hunted, poisoned and otherwise thinned by humans can be severely affected by changing temperature and weather conditions due to climate change. Because many species are adapted to the conditions of a particular habitat, drastic changes or fluctuations in these conditions can completely disrupt their feeding and reproduction habits. Cold-blooded reptiles, for example, are able to with-

stand extreme temperatures physiologically for very short times, and a heatwave killed around a third of the flying dog population in Queensland, Australia, in 2018.

Just as security experts see climate change as a risk multiplier for human societies – a factor that can exacerbate existing threats and transform potential conflicts into real ones –, so too do biologists and ecologists view its impacts on other species that 'compete' with humans for habitats. According to WWF's Living Planet Report 2020, the combined impact of climate change and land use change is much worse than land use change alone for all biodiversity indicators assessed. It is no coincidence that, in addition to overexploitation of natural resources, unsustainable changes in land use (deforestation, large-scale agriculture, industrial pollution, etc.) were the primary causes of biodiversity decline in the 20th century.

One of the biggest problems is that in many places the climate is changing faster than natural systems can adapt. As human civilization has expanded, however, natural habitats have become increasingly reduced and fragmented, making it much harder for terrestrial animals to move to more suitable conditions. (But even for migratory birds, changing and lengthening migration routes can pose increasing challenges and threats.) If, on the other hand, they cannot adapt quickly enough, and the combination of climate change and shrinking habitat gradually limits their feeding and reproductive opportunities, the direct consequence is a reduction in the number of different species and, over time, their eventual disappearance from the area. And when more and more ecosystems become similarly endangered, it could even permanently seal the fate of many species.

An IPBES (Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services) press release in 2019 already pointed out that around 1 million species of animals and plants are on the brink of extinction, far more than at any given time during our history. Since the 16th century, more than 680 vertebrate species have disappeared from the face of the Earth, and at least 9% of all domesticated mammal species used for food and agriculture had become extinct by 2016. The abundance of native species in the largest terrestrial habitats has declined by at least 20% since 1900, and more than 40% of marine species are endangered.

The desperate situation could hardly be better described than in the words of Professor Josef Settele: "Ecosystems, species, wild populations, local varieties and breeds of domesticated plants and animals are shrinking, deteriorating or vanishing. The essential, interconnected web of life on Earth is getting smaller and increasingly frayed. This loss is a direct result of human activity and constitutes a direct threat to human well-being in all regions of the world."

In addition to living up natural resources at a rapid pace while constantly occupying natural habitats for our own purposes, sometimes even You may wonder, Dear Reader: who has more right to be there, man or the flora and fauna that had already lived there? I think that if You are able, even for a moment, to subdue the immodest arrogance of the human

idea of superiority, You already know the answer... (But if You are interested in my opinion specifically, I believe that inherently no one and nothing has more rights than anyone else – so neither do we.)

In fact, over hundreds of millions of years of the Earth's history, millions of species have already died out and disappeared for good, and there is a chance that at least as many more will do so in the future. Being sentimental creatures, however, most of us may still feel hurtful by the thought that we are responsible for the extinction of most species today, which, in turn, could be at least partly avoided for the very same reason. Not to mention the disruption of the delicate balance of nature and its significance to us...

To restore the balance, however, it is necessary to slow down and even reverse the current trend, focusing on conservation and regeneration rather than destruction and eradication of natural habitats. We can do this in several ways: by creating nature parks and marine protected areas (with stricter controls than at present), by increasing the protection of endangered plant and animal species, by keeping out, eradicating and preventing the reproduction of invasive, i.e. non-native species, by reforestation instead of deforestation, and by conscious and well-organized landscape planning. But it is equally important to ensure that people's relationship with nature itself and its balance is positive, reciprocal and sustainable everywhere.

In agriculture, restoring the natural cycle, and aligning animal husbandry and farming accordingly, can also be key to a much more holistic, detailed and system-wide approach than is currently the case. By eliminating or minimizing the use of fertilizers, pesticides and other chemicals, and through multifunctional and regenerative farming, we can restore the balance of the environment, in contrast to industrial agriculture and livestock farming, where the two sectors have become largely separated to maximize production and profit.

Perhaps the best example to follow in terms of sustainable farming is that of Dutch agriculture, which, despite its modest size, is now the world's second largest food exporter. This is mainly due to their innovative methods, developed using a combination of scientific knowledge and technology, which have enabled them to produce more food with fewer resources. The country is home to countless greenhouses that minimize gas, electricity and water use, as well as greenhouse gas emissions, while maximizing the use of sunlight and nutrient-recycling. The special design and equipment of the buildings contribute greatly to their success through carefully chosen building materials, lighting, heating and cooling systems.

Nevertheless, not all of the strategies used by Dutch farms involve high-tech, as there are plenty of methods that harness the power and benefits of nature. For example, to reduce the use of pesticides, many farmers have turned to so-called 'biological control' to protect their crops by using insects, mites and microscopic worms to get rid of pests. In some cases, tomatoes are rooted not in soil, but in fibers spun from basalt and chalk, which also results in a variety of vegetables that satisfy the tastes of even the most de-

manding. As for nutrient deficiencies, those can be compensated by growing plants that produce their own fertilizer in symbiosis with certain bacteria.

Methods like this could greatly facilitate the sustainable production of much-needed food elsewhere, as well, rather than polluting, depleting or displacing local wildlife to the point of extinction. The required knowledge is provided by Dutch universities, among others, where thousands of foreign students are currently graduating, with the chance to benefit their nation or community after returning home. Although these universities and research institutes, private producers and breeders, and even the Dutch government itself are now involved in food system projects around the world, it would not hurt to create a similar level of education everywhere to speed up the process.

Even though the trends concerning the Earth's fauna and flora are rather discouraging, it is already quite certain that our efforts to halt – and possibly reverse – them are not entirely in vain. We have already managed to save some species from the brink of extinction, including the Siberian tiger, peregrine falcon, blue whale, sea otter, and plants such as the fen orchid and pygmy Rwandan water lily. Although they remain threatened, their numbers have slowly started to grow, mainly due to the persistent work of dedicated conservation organizations and communities. However, the destruction of the planet's flora and fauna is by no means a problem that can be easily solved, because in addition to the practical obstacles and difficulties, there are also differences in status between the various regions and countries of the world in the field of environmental protection, due to their different characteristics and economic situations.

Can we rightfully expect Brazil, for example, not to clear and burn the rainforests in its territory, mainly in the Amazon basin, either legally or illegally, or to do so in a much more restrained way? While I would not wish to sanctify deforestation there by any means, I believe that globally no one should be expected to make a sacrifice when they cannot benefit and prosper, or even provide for their basic livelihood. Therefore, on the one hand, it should be made possible for the people living there to find other ways to earn an income, and on the other hand, food, technical equipment, knowledge and active assistance must be provided in return in the spirit of reciprocity.

At the same time, Brazil and other developing countries in a similar situation must accept that they cannot destroy forests and the natural environment on their territory without limit. That's partly because climate change knows no borders, but also because borders are in fact artificial formations that did not exist in their present form in the past, and there is a good chance they will not last for very long in the future... And in the long term, no country or community can appropriate the common heritage of humanity. A heritage that we must preserve in such a way that we exist in the greatest possible harmony with the nature that provides us with our lives.

To achieve this, we should consider it an inevitable goal to ensure that people, even in the poorest parts of the world, can earn a living without having to cause significant dam-

age to the environment. And the involvement of open-minded indigenous peoples and local communities is essential, if only because conservation efforts and sustainable solutions must go hand in hand for the peaceful and productive coexistence of people and the environment. For all this to happen, however, we need much better organization, much closer cooperation and international collaboration than at present. And although different economic situations and interests are significant obstacles, such cooperation is by no means unprecedented, which could be encouraging for the future.

We can consider such a success story – at least in part – that the size of the seasonal ozone hole over Antarctica has been significantly reduced over the past few decades. The ozone layer is essentially the shield of the Earth, located in a layer of the atmosphere called the stratosphere, which protects us and other living things from harmful ultraviolet radiation from the sun. However, there are substances that chemically break down ozone, which, when released into the atmosphere in large quantities, reduce the thickness of the ozone layer, in extreme cases even creating large holes (such as the one over Antarctica, but sometimes also observed elsewhere).

The use of such substances, mainly freon (CFC) gases – previously employed in a variety of ways from solvents to refrigerators and air conditioners to hairsprays – was restricted or banned by the 1987 Montreal Protocol, which is still the only convention ratified by all member states of the United Nations. The measures foreseen took into account the different situations and responsibilities of (more) developed and developing countries, for which the so-called Multilateral Fund for the Implementation of the Montreal Protocol provided financial and technical assistance.

The impact of the Protocol, which phases out the use of ozone-depleting substances rather than getting rid of them immediately, is still commendable: by significantly reducing the emission of freons, which also function as a greenhouse gas, global warming expected by 2100 is estimated to have been reduced by 0.5 degrees Celsius, and the ozone layer itself is expected to fully regenerate by mid-century. Without the convention, the damage could have increased roughly tenfold by then, causing up to 2 million more cases of skin cancer and even more cancers and other diseases (such as cataracts) every year. And while much remains to be done to regulate and control substances that threaten the ozone layer, it is now a fact that the Montreal Protocol remains one of the most successful environmental conventions of all time.

Nevertheless, there are other signs that changes in human activity can make a real difference to the state of pollution in our environment – even if these changes are not always deliberate. Perhaps the most obvious recent sign of this is the spectacular drop in air pollution in 2020, following the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, due to reduced production and transportation worldwide. In China, for example, where emissions fell by a quarter at the start of the year, the proportion of days with 'good air quality' increased by 11.4% year-on-year in 337 cities across the country. But the air in big cities around the

world has also become visibly cleaner, with perhaps the most striking change in New Delhi, India, where the sky went from dark grey to blue at long last. Satellite images also showed that nitrogen dioxide pollution had almost completely disappeared over densely populated, industrial regions in other countries, such as northern Italy, which had been severely affected by the pandemic.

So in 2020, we were able to get a very effective taste of what happens when we burden our environment much less with of our technological achievements, many of which use fossil fuels. Corresponding carbon emissions fell by 5.6% globally over the year, according to the UN's United in Science 2021 report. But at the same time, we must also recognize that the high concentrations of greenhouse gases in the Earth's atmosphere have not decreased (and have in fact increased somewhat), due to the accumulation of greenhouse gases in previous years and decades.

Moreover, the decline in emissions was only temporary, as after the first months of 2021, global emissions in the industrial, energy, manufacturing and construction sectors were at the same or even higher levels than in the same period in 2019. However, the trend is not at all surprising in view of the fact that, although emissions fell in a similar way to 2020 due to the decline in production during the 2008-2009 economic crisis, they set a new record in 2010, with carbon dioxide in the atmosphere rising by 5.9% in one year.

As the pandemic situation improves, consumption and production are back on track, and although there are difficulties in meeting the increased demand, it is still in the interests of industry to keep the wheels turning. As the demand for mass production, freight transportation and travel is not expected to decrease in the future, we can hardly predict substantial changes compared to pre-pandemic trends. In any case, what we can take away from what happened is that the strength of social cohesion and community spirit has once again shown that if the majority of us consider a problem to be serious, if we feel directly threatened, we are able to join forces and take the necessary steps to solve or at least alleviate the crisis. But to bring about lasting change in the prevention and management of threats such as climate change and pollution, which seem far less urgent than a pandemic, it is logical that more permanent solutions and a fundamental change of mindset are needed.

This includes, for example, radically reducing the use of plastics and food waste, which require a major effort from the economy and from all of us. The extent of the waste is duly illustrated by the fact that while hundreds of millions of people are starving or undernourished, according to FAO figures for 2011, around a third of the food produced for human consumption is lost or disposed of worldwide, amounting to around 1.3 billion tons per year. Meanwhile, our use of natural resources also suggests that we are cutting our coats longer than our cloth: while in 1990, a person used an average of 8.1 tons of resources for his or her own needs, by 2017 the figure had risen to 12.2 tons. (Just remember the ecological footprint and the Earth Overshoot Day!)

The problem of food loss and waste starts at the point of production, i.e. on crop fields and farms. According to WWF's 2021 estimate, the total amount of food wasted worldwide is close to 2.5 billion tons, of which around 1.2 billion tons is lost on farms alone. (This essentially means that the amount of food produced on a field the size of the Indian sub-continent never leaves the farm.) Losses occur at harvest, during storage, warehousing and packaging, and when moving crops. However, the loss of some of this food, in addition to the resulting shortage, is effectively equivalent to the waste of the resources – land, water, energy and human labor – used to produce it.

As the problem is global in scale, solving it is key to achieving global environmental and social objectives. These include minimizing deforestation and forest conversion, preventing epidemics from agricultural encroachment (see next chapter), conserving freshwater resources, feeding a growing world population, plus meeting the Paris Agreement's target of limiting the global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius (but definitely not more than 2 degrees Celsius). While waste is a practical problem, it can be largely attributed to poor or incomplete planning. Therefore, to develop a better and more efficient food supply system that minimizes waste at all stages of the supply chain, companies and governments ought to place maximum emphasis on proper planning and set targets to reduce food loss on farms.

In the United States, for example, the No Food Left Behind initiative launched by WWF is taking an in-depth look at the causes and incidence of food loss, using data-driven research and human-centered design. Local measurements and interventions such as this are essential to manage and prevent waste – especially at the level of private farms, where data capture is often a major challenge. At the same time, governments everywhere should prioritize policy action in this area, not just through regulation, but by providing the necessary tools and resources. In the US, this is the aim of the Zero Food Waste Act, a bill submitted to Congress with the intent to provide grants to state, local and indigenous governments to implement and expand programs and infrastructure to measure and eliminate food loss and waste.

As the problem is far from being confined to farms and the basic levels of agriculture, it needs to be addressed and solved along the entire supply chain. The vulnerability of the system as a whole was starkly underlined by the conditions that emerged worldwide after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, when we heard of masses of food being destroyed, milk spilled and crops rotting in the fields, while consumers were often faced with empty shelves in shops. And it was even more heartbreaking when American farmers slaughtered millions of their livestock as farms and factories closed, while many would have been happy to just put a little more food on their tables. (It's another matter that the animals kept for consumption would have been slaughtered sooner or later anyway, at most without the associated fuss and public outcry.)

Once the initial losses have been minimized, it is therefore also a matter of how we use the food we produce and the various natural resources in different sectors and in our daily lives, which is again primarily a matter of planning and organization. A practical solution could be the concept of circular economy, which has three pillars:

- efficient use of natural resources,
- minimize waste and pollution (including through recycling),
- introducing sustainable economic solutions in all sectors of the economy.

The idea is to try to keep all materials in the system as long as possible, as opposed to a linear economy, where you simply dispose of each product after use. Separating natural resource use and environmental impacts from economic benefits and growth is key to a circular economy. The involvement of technology, science and innovation is essential for success, as is the active participation and cooperation of economic actors, decision-makers and politicians, as well as citizens themselves.

The concept, promoted by UNEP, the United Nations Environment Programme, has already been embraced in some places – for example, the Belgian capital Brussels has committed to a complete shift from linear to circular economy by 2025. In practice, this is achieved when all the non-renewable raw materials used in an economy circulate in a closed loop, i.e. are recycled in some form, rather than becoming waste that pollutes the environment. The capital, the two different national regions (Wallonia and Flanders) and the federal government have all given their blessing to the project, and related environmental programs have been in place for several years in the country.

At its core, the concept fits perfectly with the model put forward in 2012 by the English reform economist Kate Raworth, a dissident from the mainstream, and elaborated in her 2017 book Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist. The doughnut-shaped circles that represent the model (see upcoming figure) are essentially a compass for human well-being for decades to come, with the goal of meeting the most important needs of all people within the means of the living planet. One concentric ring symbolizes the social foundation that ensures that no one suffers persistent deprivation in different areas of their lives, while the other represents the ecological ceiling that ensures that humanity collectively does not exceed the limits that threaten the viability of the Earth's life-support systems.

Looking at the figure, however, You can see for Yourself, Dear Reader, that in many areas we have now exceeded the limits provided by the Earth's environment: we have eliminated or converted much of our natural habitats, polluted water and land to a significant degree, already profoundly altered the planet's climate, and critically reduced biodiversity (including through the above). All this while we have mismanaged the resources available to us so badly that there are shortages in virtually all categories of basic social needs, both globally and, in many cases, regionally. If, on the other hand, we want to ensure social prosperity and stability in the long term, we must make sure that we stay as much as possible between the two circles in all factors.
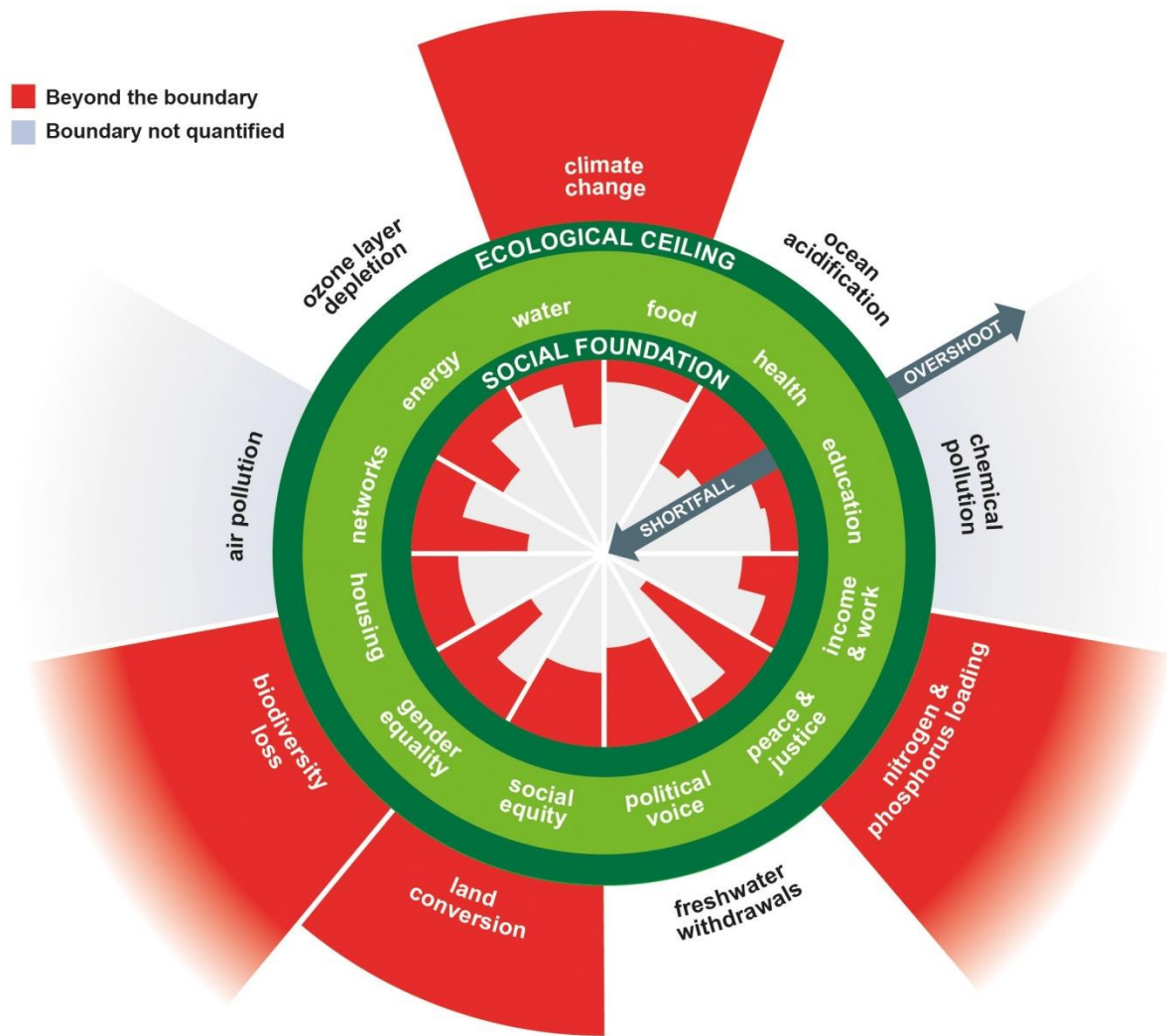
Figure 7 - The Doughnout of social and planetary boundaries (2017)
Source: Kate Raworth and Christian Guthier, The Lancet Planetary Health

That is why the starting point of doughnut economics is to change the goal from infinite growth of the economy and GDP to thriving within the confines of the doughnut. At the same time, economic analysis must begin by looking at the whole picture and recognizing that the economy is embedded in and dependent on society and the living world. But we also need to realize that our economies and societies, and the rest of the living world, are complex, interdependent systems that are best understood through the lens of systems thinking. To achieve this goal, Raworth calls on us to transform the degenerative, destructive and all-consuming economies of today into regenerative ones, and divisive economic systems into distributive ones. While the author acknowledges that growth is a healthy phase of life, she also reminds us that nothing grows forever, and that things that succeed do so by growing until it is time to grow up and thrive instead.

The new approach is supported by many academics, and although it is only just beginning to take off in civil and political circles, even in more developed countries, there are some promising initiatives outside Brussels. The city of Amsterdam in the Netherlands, for

example, which was severely affected by the coronavirus epidemic in 2020, both economically and socially, sees the adoption of a 'doughnut economy' as the way out of the crisis. Nanaimo in Canada also decided to adopt the model in 2020, while Copenhagen in Denmark and several other cities around the world are actively interested in the concept. And while the long-term effectiveness and global impact of such local commitments is still in question, the lesson to be learned is that where there is a shared will and cooperation, there is also hope for change.

However, it will be far from easy to introduce truly radical, time-tested and wide-ranging changes in a system that still prevails in most of the world, where all other considerations, such as product durability, recycling or environmental protection are at best secondary to cost-cutting and profit maximization. Although, as we have seen, there are already initiatives – and even legislation in some countries – to improve environmental integration, so far very little is happening and change is too slow. Economic interests still take precedence over the protection of nature, and will probably continue to do so as long as things work under the current system, i.e. as long as money is king.

Even though the IPBES itself calls for a global economic-political system and cross-sectoral cooperation that 'at all costs' enforces environmental sustainability rather than economic growth, the world is still moving along the same trends towards a general environmental crisis (or even catastrophe). While the growing environmental and climate movements show that in some parts of our planet there is now a significant increase in the need to take the problem to a higher level, it is feared that this alone will not be enough to bring us the reforms we need in time.

Radically reducing waste and fundamentally changing our lifestyles and attitudes is unlikely to happen until a certain level of awareness, education and thus consciousness is achieved. In many places, however, where even meeting basic needs is a constant problem, the masses of people are simply not in a position to participate in environmental protection or community affairs to the extent that could bring forth the necessary changes. That's why one of our most important tasks now is to address this, and the faster we act, the better chance we have of protecting the natural environment, which encompasses the entire ecosystem of the planet. Because, whether we like it or not, we, the human race as a whole, now have the whole planet as our 'household' – our living conditions in the future will be fundamentally determined by how we keep it in order.

Pandemics

There are people who believe that the epidemics we face are in fact nature's response to human intervention and environmental destruction. Some argue that all of this is part of our environment's natural self-regulating mechanisms, which in the long term seek to compensate for extreme changes in the planet's ecosystem, in this case caused by us humans. Others are downright confident that the various epidemics, which sometimes claim many lives, do not simply serve as population control, but as punishment and a warning to us.

While there is no doubt that we should care more about the health of our environment than we do now, we had better not forget about our own. As COVID-19 has shown, we need to pay much more attention to and be much better prepared for epidemics, not just at the level of health care or science, but at the level of society as a whole. The more people we have and the more crowded we live, the greater the threat they pose to us, as they can spread more quickly and easily. In addition, they receive significant support through air travel, with commercial and other flights now reaching almost anywhere in the world within just 48 hours, i.e. two days.

In fact, we could have been better prepared for the pandemic in 2020 – at least in terms of swift and effective countermeasures to minimize the spread –, given the recent example of the 2009 swine flu (H1N1) pandemic, which infected millions of people worldwide and caused hundreds of thousands of deaths. But in the not-so-distant past, the same virus strain caused the infamous 1918 Spanish flu, which is estimated to have killed around 50 million people globally, long before air travel became commonplace. (After the First World War, soldiers returning home from the front carried the pathogen with them and spread it en masse.)

In recent years, however, many other infectious diseases have been circulating in the public consciousness thanks to news reports from around the world. Alongside avian influenza, which spreads among millions of slaughtered domestic birds but is also dangerous for humans, the Ebola, with its alarmingly high mortality rate (around 50% on average) and its painful course and horrible symptoms, is also a recurring topic. But even the HIV virus, which is less common and more difficult to transmit, but which causes a lifelong and sometimes fatal disease (AIDS), has not been completely forgotten, lurking in the subconscious of those who grew up in an era when it was still a frightening novelty.

While epidemics are caused by millions of different pathogens, they often (in about 75% of cases) have in common that they inherently 'jump to' us, humans from animals, what science calls zoonosis. These include, but are not limited to Ebola, avian and swine flu, salmonella, malaria and Lyme disease, while there are also indications that the coronavirus responsible for COVID-19, which research suggests may be derived from a bat species, belongs to the same category. (This is most likely even if the outbreak itself may have been released from a Chinese laboratory, as many around the world assume.) However,

some pathogens, such as HIV, although originally introduced to us from the animal kingdom, have evolved over time to become human-to-human only diseases, regarding their transmission.

Although the ubiquitous, seasonal flu is also a virus that only infects us, animal-derived variants sometimes mix with human strains. Because our bodies are not sufficiently prepared for these new viruses, they are often unable to defend themselves effectively against them, which allows epidemics to spread rapidly, sometimes with much more severe symptoms and far more fatalities than usual. A parallel can therefore be drawn between human activity and the incidence of such epidemics: the more we encroach on the natural habitats where we come into contact with wild animals and from where we bring them into our settlements, the greater the risk of an outbreak. The risk is further compounded by the large number of livestock on our farms, often crowded in small places, which means that pathogens can spread and mutate very quickly, i.e. genetically change and become more infectious.

And, as if that wasn't enough, climate change also affects the migration and geographic distribution of species. From the point of view of pathogens, this means that new areas become accessible and habitable for the animals that carry them, where they can cause serious epidemics among the local human population. These species include, for example, the malaria mosquitoes, which are still mainly found in sub-Saharan Africa and prefer tropical climates. According to the WHO, malaria produced around 228 million illnesses and 405,000 deaths worldwide in 2018 – but it is just one of many pathogens that could pose a threat to even more of us in the future due to climate change.

So the link between a healthy planet and a healthy humanity, whether we attach any other significance to it or just look at it strictly in terms of the facts, is so obvious as to be virtually undeniable. If You ever doubted, Dear Reader, how much we humans are part of nature, and how much we still depend on it, after 2020, You may not need any more evidence. Beyond epidemiological considerations, a healthy natural environment has many benefits: it provides us with fresh water, fertile soil, food, clean air and a stable climate, and, if not 'overused', it underpins our economies. On the one hand, this is another strong argument for greater environmental protection – but on the other, we must not forget the social aspects of the problem, if we are to remain faithful to the principle of analyzing and finding solutions in the spirit of sustainability.

One part of the issue – along with people's awareness – is to raise living standards globally to curb population growth, so that we can successfully minimize the destruction of nature. To which You, Dear Reader, may rightly ask: isn't there a fundamental contradiction? How can we ensure a sufficiently high standard of living for virtually everyone without increasing overall consumption – and thus our ecological footprint? Well, again, the lone answer I can give is that only by drastically curbing waste and by implementing a much more balanced and fairer distribution system. In essence, this means that the

wealthier in every part of the world will need to give up a significant part of their surplus and luxury, whether as individuals or as whole countries.

At the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that epidemics, like most other disasters, hit the poorest and most vulnerable people hardest, and they are again the ones who die and suffer the most. This is a common and – sadly – obvious fact in poorer countries, while the phenomenon it is not unknown in developed countries, either. In 2020, for example, many states in the US had disproportionately high rates of illness and death from COVID-19 in black communities – although only 13% of the total population was black American, they accounted for almost a third of those who became affected. Their financial difficulties, the environment in which most of them lived, the nature of their work, their often chronic health conditions (e.g. hypertension, diabetes) and their disadvantaged position in medical institutions all contributed to the problem.

In general, however, the most vulnerable groups are always and everywhere those living in poor hygienic or congested conditions, the frail and undernourished, children and the elderly, the undereducated, and those who lack access to adequate health care and medicines. And the indirect effects of a pandemic will again make the situation worse, as the economic downturn will leave many without work and regular income, adding to the number of poor and vulnerable people. World Bank data also seem to support this claim, showing that the poorest regions (mainly Black Africa and Latin America) and social groups (e.g. women with many children, youngsters, low-skilled people) have been hardest hit by the prolonged crisis caused by the pandemic – so much so that, after two decades of decline, our planet's population living in extreme poverty has begun to grow significantly again. (It is estimated that their number was around 97 million higher worldwide in 2021 than in 2020, before the pandemic became widespread.)

Although COVID-19 did little new for mankind in terms of the nature of epidemics, it did confirm why similar pathogens should not be allowed to run rampant. And it was just one virus, of not even the most infectious or deadly kind... Although not common in practice, there is no theoretical or statistical obstacle to the outbreak of several epidemics with different pathogens at the same time. In 1918, for example, the Australian Army fighting in Palestine was at the same time struck by the worldwide Spanish flu and a local outbreak of malaria, killing almost as many soldiers.

But we don't need to go that far back in history to find similar cases: even in 2020, there were several places in the world where populations were threatened by epidemics other than COVID-19 at the same time. As of May that year, hemorrhagic dengue fever had infected around 40,000 people in Indonesia, while it also caused serious problems in Latin America – more cases had been reported from Argentina than coronavirus patients, and in Brazil, which was hit hard by COVID shortly after, the dengue epidemic was nearing its peak. The same pathogen was spreading in Singapore, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh. In April, the WHO reported a new attack of Ebola in the Democratic Republic of Congo, while Mexico and Burundi were battling to contain measles cases, and

doctors in Saudi Arabia were trying to control another dangerous form of coronavirus (MERS). And while the likelihood of these becoming pandemics is low, it is not inconceivable that a coronavirus strain and a new type of flu could emerge and spread globally at the same time – which, without adequate preparation, would result in an extremely serious situation that would be unmanageable for most health care systems. And then we haven't even mentioned the economic and human aspects of the issue...

In the event of a pandemic or even a regional outbreak that potentially threatens millions of people, how and how quickly we respond is of course vital. Therefore, after the destruction of COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021, it seems evident that the appropriate protocols are in place to effectively manage the situation, both at national and international level. Although the provision of healthy living conditions and free basic health care for everyone, everywhere in the world may seem less self-evident, I think we should also see it like that as an obvious goal. And a coherent and centrally coordinated global health network with a constant exchange of information and up-to-date knowledge could catch pathogens bound to travel around the world in time, basically anywhere on Earth.

And, of course, we must not forget to increase the resilience of our socio-economic systems to similar crises. The interdependencies in the economy at local and global level only reinforce the domino effect (i.e. the spillover of the crisis), and should therefore be carefully mapped and minimized as much as possible. In addition, making health systems and workplaces safer, including the development of automation and unmanned work, should be an important consideration, focusing on (but far from being limited to) the strategically most important sectors essential for the provision of basic goods and services, and for the maintenance of social order. If this mostly contradicts the market principles of cost minimization and profit maximization, then we have to fundamentally decide: what is a higher priority for social sustainability, for society as a whole?

In the case of epidemics, however, targeted prevention is at least as important. As zoonosis is one of the biggest threats to the emergence of a new pathogen, we need to keep critical points of contact with the animal kingdom as under control as possible. Thanks to some dedicated doctors and researchers, some of this is already happening today, but society as a whole needs to play its part.

One way to do this is through legislation to protect the land and its wildlife, which can go a long way to protecting us from the spread of new epidemics. Through the loss of habitats with significant biodiversity, deforestation can create conditions that increase the frequency of wildlife-human encounters, and with it the potential for the transmission of various pathogens. When rainforests are cleared, for example, livestock kept on the resulting pastures can become a conduit between wildlife and the people living and working in the area. Then wildlife may also be forced to move in large numbers to cities and other densely populated settlements over time due to the loss of their own habitat.

A complete ban on the public trade in wild game – especially illegal and unregulated markets – may also be justified, but keeping trade under strict control is vital. However, regulation and prohibition alone are not enough; they must go hand in hand with proper public information about the epidemics and diseases that we face and how to prevent them. If this were to go hand in hand with the strengthening of health care and control in particularly critical sites, we could take a big step towards successfully averting epidemics from wildlife.

Our leaders should also not skimp on supporting research into pathogens, drugs and other relevant areas – and it won't hurt, either, if more of the resources are spent on actual research, rather than on the often disproportionate rewards for pharmaceutical company executives, distributors and partners. The development of effective vaccines plays a key role in the prevention of epidemics, which is another field that can never be given enough attention. Some scientists, for example, are now working on universal vaccines that could provide virtually lifelong protection against several or even all strains of the flu, with a good chance of preventing new variants from becoming rampant.

Vaccines and their widespread administration are therefore extremely important because, as well as protecting vaccinated people from disease, they can also greatly reduce the spread of epidemics. The essence of immunity is that our body to produces antibodies against microscopic 'invaders' (viruses, bacteria, fungi, parasites, etc.), so that they cannot threaten its functioning. The more immunity a person develops, the more resistant they become to a particular pathogen – vaccines boost this resistance, providing partial or full immunity, depending on their effectiveness. And herd immunity means that once immunity is established in a wide range of people, the whole population will be better protected against epidemics, as pathogens can no longer spread efficiently and rapidly. Compulsory or universally applied vaccination is therefore a mainstay of herd immunity, precisely because it also helps to build up herd immunity through the immunity of individuals.

Although vaccines do carry some risks (in some rare cases they can cause malaise or sickness), these are dwarfed by the benefits for society as a whole. Polio, for example, which can cause permanent damage and in some cases death, used to be a dreaded disease among parents of young children, but thanks to vaccination against it, it is now virtually unheard of, at least in (more) developed countries. Given the clear benefits of vaccines that have been proven to be effective and safe, and their usefulness in preventing and controlling epidemics, there is a strong case for making them available to all worldwide – including in places and among people where and who could not otherwise afford them.

The equitable provision of vaccines is therefore not a purely economic issue, even though they obviously involve a certain production cost, which is made up of development, production and distribution. However, regarding the successful establishment of herd immunity and the rapid spread of pathogens, it's crucial whether vaccines can reach all the places where they are needed – especially in the case of a pandemic as global as COVID-19. An

analysis by the independent US organization Health Metrics and Evaluation in September 2020 found that if an effective vaccine is distributed in proportion to the population of each country, around 61% more people could survive than without vaccination, compared to 33% if it is only distributed to the highest-paying nations. In the longer term, however, the latter option could also be detrimental to richer countries, as a pathogen imported from elsewhere makes a sustained return to pre-crisis life and business just as difficult as if the infection had spread from a domestic source. (Not to mention the lives needlessly lost.)

By comparison, half of the population in the richer countries had already been vaccinated against COVID by mid-2021, while in the poorest regions the overall rate was still only around 1%. Meanwhile, the Delta variant of the virus led to an increasing number of cases and deaths worldwide, with the highest numbers of cases occurring in the US, Russia, Brazil, Mexico and India. Around a fifth of the thousands of deaths a day occurred in South America, which abounds in poor countries, but the African continent, which has the greatest shortage of medicines and health care, also lost 30,000 people in three months. The widely supported WHO and UN target of 40% of the population of all countries receiving the vaccine by the end of 2021 and 70% by mid-2022 was all in vain, however, if the necessary steps had not been taken in practice, or had only been partially implemented, for political, economic, logistical and other reasons.

Of course, as many scientists suggest, COVID-19 may permanently degenerate from a pandemic to a seasonal epidemic, such as influenza. But even if this happens, there is always the risk that another dangerous variant, or even a completely new virus, will be unleashed upon us. What is certain is that the longer we allow a similar pathogen to rage around the world, the greater the chance that it will undergo further mutations (see Omicron and other variants) and become more infectious or deadly over time.

This is partly why, in the case of the current coronavirus pandemic, it seems unlikely that herd immunity can be achieved in our societies in the foreseeable future. As the distribution of vaccines is far from even, getting them to a sufficient proportion of the population is rather difficult (even in more developed countries), and vaccination of children lags significantly behind that of older age groups due to the lack of vaccines developed for them. However, there is a constant race between the ever mutating pathogen and the immunity of our societies, which are more or less in direct contact with each other, and in this struggle, unfortunately, the former has the advantage.

As we do not know for sure how effective vaccines are in preventing the virus from being passed between people, alongside their widespread use, other measures such as frequent hand-washing or social distancing (and even wearing masks when necessary) are also essential to control the outbreak. Nevertheless, there are always some people who are unwilling to comply with them, and as time goes by, more and more will inevitably protest against various measures that restrict their personal freedom. And, as if that weren't bad

enough, many people won't take the vaccine against the virus even if it is available close to where they live.

In general, vaccines can be a double-edged sword if only because if many people do not get them, pathogens that could have ended their career on earth decades earlier can reappear. This is because various viruses, bacteria and parasites, while disappearing from communities that successfully develop herd immunity, continue to circulate among humans elsewhere, infecting people without immunity over time, and thus potentially leading to the occurrence of another epidemic. As a result, even in one of the most developed countries in the world, such as the United States, cases of whooping cough and measles have become increasingly common again in recent years.

The former infection was detected in 695 people in 22 different states (out of a total of 50) in April 2019, after the US officially declared the disease eradicated in 2000. (However, the WHO reports that the disease is on the rise again worldwide, with measles cases quadrupling in a year.) Whooping cough, on the other hand, has been causing 10-50 thousand new cases a year in the country since 2010, while 10-20 babies, most of whom were too young to be vaccinated, have died from the disease. Others may not receive vaccinations due to various health problems or complications (allergies, weakened immune system, etc.) and therefore cannot benefit from such immunity.

And there are others who consciously refuse vaccinations for themselves and their children. This is in no small part due to misinformation circulating among people, on the internet or even through other media, which infects the minds of many in a pathogen-like way. And, of course, there are those who reject vaccinations out of hand for religious or other reasons – including those who are averse on principle to any artificial interference with the human body and the workings of nature, and who do not really appreciate the achievements of civilization (although quite a few of them do use them on a daily basis).

One could react to this in a mean-spirited way: if vaccinated people don't get sick anyway, or at least get over infections more easily, why is that a problem? Apart from the fact that this would be a very questionable attitude in a civilized society, we must also responsibly take into account that not everyone can receive vaccines for other health reasons, and that their effectiveness is not always one hundred percent. This can provide an 'escape route' for pathogens, but as already discussed, if immunity is established in the majority of the population, then there is a good chance that herd immunity will protect the more vulnerable, preventing the disease from spreading. If, on the other hand, the majority of the population and children are not vaccinated, even the virus responsible for polio can cause epidemics again, along with many other pathogens that have now been completely forgotten.

From the above, it is clear that this is far from being just a question of being free to make choices about one's own life, as infectious diseases put many people in a society, and indeed the world, at risk. In relation to their own children, it is generally true that parents

have the right to make decisions – because in most cases, minors are not yet capable of making foresighted decisions for themselves and their future, so these must be made by the parents responsible for them. At the same time, however, all parents must acknowledge that no one can gamble with the lives of other people's children – if we accept that they can gamble with their own, that is, which also rightly raises the question of reasonable diligence.

Nevertheless, we can state without further ado that if someone is not willing to vaccinate themselves or their child, it is perfectly reasonable to expect them not to put others at risk, i.e. not to mix with the rest of society. And that is precisely because civilized coexistence is about compromise and reciprocity, not about everyone being free to do what they want and live as they want, without any responsibility or obligation. In the case of vaccinations, this essentially means that anyone who refuses to vaccinate themselves or their children with a properly tested and widely accepted vaccine is claiming their own freedoms while trampling on, or at the very least completely disregarding, the fundamental human rights of others to health and to life itself.

So, as part of a wider community, we must always be considerate of the other members of that community, respecting the basic rules of social coexistence, otherwise we have no right to claim its benefits. Remember, Dear Reader: true freedom in a civilized society is not the result of doing whatever you want, but of not – or at least as little as possible – having to live in insecurity.

Cultural Tensions

Adherence to the rules of social coexistence is not always easy even within a homogeneous society, composed of a population of the same origin and culture, mother tongue, belief system, customs and traditions, let alone in the case of a mixture of various, apparently very different cultures. Where the latter situation has long existed, ethnic groups and individual communities have had more time to learn to live together peacefully – even if this does not necessarily mean that they have managed to completely eliminate friction or collisions.

Racism and discrimination between people, which incite hostility based on their origin, skin color and other different characteristics are, unfortunately, still a very common phenomenon, even in (more) developed countries. After the Second World War, in which Nazi Germany, led (astray) by Hitler, and the Soviet dictatorship, laden with the personality cult of Stalin, gutted, tortured, humiliated and executed millions of people on the basis of race alone, racism seemed for a time to be on the decline. In the second half of the last century, under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and others, civil and human rights movements made significant progress on equality, pushing for changes in the law that guaranteed, for example, the right to vote and equal treatment – on paper at least – for those who suffered discrimination.

However, racism and the fear and rejection of otherness take many forms and persist in people's minds around the world, from discrimination and atrocities against blacks, Asians and others in the United States and elsewhere, to conspiracy theories about Jews and the calvary of the Rohingya in Myanmar. The latter is a glaring and sad example of religious persecution and ethnic cleansing: members of the Rohingya people, who have been living in Myanmar (formerly Burma) for generations and are a predominantly Muslim minority, have endured decades of harassment and hardship at the hands of the majority Buddhist society. In 2017, however, tempers flared so much – entire villages were burned to the ground, families were separated and murdered, women and young girls were raped – that hundreds of thousands of Rohingya fled the country. Now almost 1 million are living in refugee camps in neighboring Bangladesh, where their situation has been somewhat stabilized, but their future remains extremely precarious.

At the same time, not only 'pure' racism, but even slavery has not been completely eradicated, despite the fact that it is forbidden by law in virtually all countries that consider themselves civilized. Some unscrupulous criminals around the world tend to take advantage of those who are unable to defend themselves and force them into debt slavery, sexual slavery or other forms of forced labor – but the institution of classical slavery is once again common practice in detention centers and slave markets run by certain outlaw groups. In regions of underdeveloped countries that are beset by daily armed conflict, economic and political instability (or even chaos), many people are just as exposed to a ver-

sion of slavery driven by cultural differences as they are to trafficking driven by economic reasons.

Nevertheless, with regard to racism in general, it can be said that it has largely shifted from former racial foundations to cultural discrimination. In other words, it is no longer so much the color of their skin and other external or biological characteristics that make some people think of themselves as superior to others, but because of their views, religion, customs and other internal qualities that are perceived as overly different or inferior. In fact, it is an instinctive reaction on the part of all of us, i.e. it is only natural to try to protect our way of life, and there is nothing wrong with that in itself. But if we are not open-minded or tolerant enough, and cross certain lines too often, it only inflames the divisions and often creates tensions that can undermine the stability of society as a whole in the long run. And in times of crisis, it is generally true that the more rough the situation becomes, the more the conflicts arising from cultural differences are exacerbated.

In our globalized world, the free movement of masses of people and the overcrowding, the meeting and clashing of so many different cultures, languages, religions and ways of life, of course, do not make things any easier. People who have grown up and been socialized in different cultures often have very different ideas about the world, how it works, and their own role in it. In addition, immigrants who are in a minority or who are forced to come in search of a better life are often economically disadvantaged, and their persistently poorer conditions can easily inflame tensions. Indeed, some nations or groups may even feel threatened by others across borders, and this intercultural strife may result in hostilities of various kinds.

One possible form of this is terrorism, which typically disregards human rights – often even the right to life –, and uses violence and intimidation to impose its will and convince others of its truth. While there are, regrettably, many examples in recent history, the most shocking, the most serious and the one with the most repercussions was undoubtedly the terrorist attack on the United States on September 11 in 2001. In the process, members of an extremist Islamist organization, Al-Qaeda, hijacked several commercial flights and hit civilian targets, destroying the World Trade Center's twin towers in New York and part of the Pentagon building, killing thousands of people. According to the organization, the main reason for the attack was a 'holy war' against the US in response to its actions and activities against Muslims.

Although there are undoubtedly political motivations to discover behind 9/11, for example, in so far as it was aimed at challenging the influence and leadership of the United States, the cultural and ideological differences in the background of the event, i.e. views of the world and life itself, are undeniable. While in the case of the Irish IRA or the Basque ETA's national independence movement, the political aim is equally obvious, the ethnic implications are also clear – the separatists, who did not shy away from civilian casualties, feared not only their political freedom, but also their cultural uniqueness from the trend towards a more open society dictated by the higher powers. (The extent to which these can

be considered terrorist organizations is just a matter of detail for the topic at hand.) And terrorist acts of an anti-Semitic nature, which are still worryingly common today, are openly directed against members of a particular religion, but are essentially motivated by hatred based on cultural differences.

Terrorism today, while in many cases motivated by other (e.g. economic or even environmental) goals, is often driven by cultural factors, and is almost commonplace in certain places or societies. Since 2001, the countries most affected include Iraq and Syria in the Middle East, Pakistan and Afghanistan in central Asia, and Nigeria and Somalia on the African continent. In case of the latter two, Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab have been responsible for most of the terrorist attacks that have claimed tens of thousands of lives over the years, while Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have committed most of the attacks in Asia. Even though their origins and immediate goals are different, what they certainly have in common is that they are all organizations with extremist Islamist views, seeking political influence and power, but waging war at least as much on ideological and cultural grounds.

Does this mean that Islam is clearly an extremist religion and all its adherents are radicals or terrorists? Far from it, because fundamentally Islam also condemns the taking of innocent lives, just as most Muslims reject the actions and methods of Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and other similar terrorist organizations. It is merely a matter of some people twisting its doctrines and using them to fanatize others, inciting violence and warfare against Christian and other religions they see as enemies, or even against 'infidelity', Western culture, materialism and globalism as a whole. In essence, they seek to impose their own positions and views on others, based on existing cultural differences, but magnified and distorted, in order to gain the upper hand over the way of life and attitudes they despise or fear. Unfortunately, this kind of radicalization can easily find a breeding ground among vulnerable children and in communities where people's freedom, knowledge and financial resources are severely limited...

As much as some leaders and politicians claim that it is now inevitably part of our lives, terrorism cannot be considered normal or natural in any civilized society. That is why we must do everything we can to combat it – but we must not do so by responding to violence with outright violence, but by looking at the root causes and working to eliminate or at least alleviate them. The civilian population and the innocent must of course be protected as much as possible, but in order to do this, and to reduce cultural tensions in general, we cannot simply put up walls – real or even figurative – between different groups, religions and ethnicities.

This is as true within a country's borders or within a society as it is for migrants and refugees who have often travelled great distances from their home countries. Therefore, the general solution regarding the latter is not to prevent people from moving and mixing freely – if only because the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to safety, to leave his or her country, and even to a standard of living adequate

for human life, regardless of any discrimination based on race, color, sex, language, religion, descent, political or any other opinion. At the same time, to avoid and mitigate future problems, we need to pay close attention to major movements and potential hotspots and sources of danger, be it cultural or security, health (see epidemics) or other aspects.

The influx and integration of a certain number of immigrants into a society over a longer period of time can have a number of positive benefits – such as supplementing professionals, increasing knowledge and expertise, creating a more diverse society with different skills and a more diverse culture, and increasing tolerance and solidarity towards diversity. The United States, for example, is notoriously a country of immigrants, where people have been gradually arriving from all over the world for generations, enriching the country in many ways. (Between 2000 and 2019, 38% of US Nobel laureates were made up of immigrants in the fields of physics, chemistry and medicine.) In addition to the lifelong version, however, migration can also have benefits in case of those who do not intend to settle permanently, including through better opportunities for employment, plus due to the fact that the money migrants send back to their country of origin can help to redress social inequalities.

At the same time, mass, uncontrolled and inadequately managed migration poses a number of dangers and problems for both host and potential transit countries, as well as for migrants themselves. People who leave their homes behind are sometimes waiting in large numbers in refugee camps and temporary accommodation, where living and sanitary conditions are not always satisfactory, especially for a longer stay. If the wait is long, tensions can easily flare up between different ethnic groups within the camps, as well as between foreigners and the local population. An example of the former is the incident in the Greek islands at the end of April 2020, when groups of migrants of supposedly different origins got into a violent disagreement, resulting in three fires that burned several tents and containers, leaving around two hundred people without shelter. And due to their fears of migrants who were staying in the city, but who were not properly housed and were moving freely, citizens of Bihac in Bosnia began protesting in June 2019.

In addition to similar frictions, however, people who leave in large numbers, typically fleeing war and violence, political and economic instability and poverty, often risk their lives in the hope of better prospects. In the early and mid-2010s, for example, a series of anti-government protests in several countries known as the Arab Spring and the civil war in Syria served as the primary catalyst for a wave of migration to wealthier countries in Europe, while the general poverties and insecurity in sub-Saharan Africa continue to drive desperate people to leave their homes and homelands behind.

During the first few years of the wave, millions of people arrived from Turkey and North Africa (in Germany, for example, there were 745,000 asylum seekers in 2015 alone), often crammed into rubber boats and similar primitive water transportation vehicles, for the hundreds of kilometers crossing the Mediterranean. But this journey has cost many

lives: between 2000 and 2014, around 22,000 people drowned at sea, and in 2014 alone, at least 3,000 people – including countless women and children – were lost.

Uncontrolled or illegal migration also leaves travelers vulnerable in other ways, as they often rely on the help of human smugglers, who are primarily interested in transporting refugees for good money, or in sending them on their way with minimal support. That, as we have seen, includes being crammed together in a single boat and thrown into sea with overweight, which shows how much the safety of migrants and refugees is not of any concern. (Which is only reinforced by the phenomenon of 'death trucks' in recent years, where dozens of people who have been hidden and transported in the back of lorries have died from suffocation, accidents or other causes attributable to the inhumane way in which they are carried.) But violence or extortion against those heading to Europe from sub-Saharan Africa is not uncommon, either – there have even been some who have been sold as slaves by criminal organizations, typically in Libya, which country descended into chaos following the rule of Moammer Gaddafi. Although NGOs that support the illegal way of migration directly, with guidance, information, other means or sometimes money, are much more humane than human smugglers, they are essentially just as irresponsible in that they do not discourage but rather encourage people to make the dangerous and uncertain journey.

In the defence of such civil organizations, it should be noted that they are usually driven by ideas which, in the longer term, are aimed at reducing the gap in opportunities and living standards on a global scale. It is also characteristic of these liberal-minded groups to think in multicultural societies that possess all the benefits of diversity mentioned previously. But here's an important question, Dear Reader: is the world really ready for this? Although some societies are already quite open and tolerant, in others there are still many who are afraid of foreign cultures and of people from those cultures – especially when they are present in large numbers. The situation is further complicated by the fact that more than a few countries have similar proportions of representatives from both sides, and a similar degree of division on globalization itself. And although acceptance is slowly improving as time goes on and the population becomes more informed, how much urgency can be given to bringing together people and ethnic groups who often have very different views and values?

Thus, we cannot ignore the fact that beyond the societies and communities along their routes, migrants or refugees from further afar can also pose a serious problem for destination or host countries if they arrive in too large numbers, especially when they do within a short period of time. And just one part of the problem – though far from negligible – is that migrants in the area sometimes damage crops, property or cause fear among the population simply because of their darker skin color or their large numbers. The infiltration of international terrorism, as we have seen in a number of cases of those carrying out attacks

in the name of the Islamic State in Western Europe, may pose a significant security risk in itself, but it is far from being the most serious threat.

In 2015, at the peak of the European refugee crisis so far, Sweden alone received 163,000 migrants from the Middle East and Africa, more than one and a half per cent of the country's population of around 10 million. A 2017 survey showed that, despite their proportion of the total population being around 25%, immigrants committed around 58% of all crimes, rising to 70% for robberies and 73% for murders and attempted murders. It is also clear from the data that violence is mainly committed by young men, which is generally true for most societies. However, when you combine the hormones and vitality of youth with the fact that people from other cultures do not always respect the rules, or women in particular, in the same way as the majority of men in more advanced, emancipated societies, it is perhaps not surprising that between 2012 and 2017, 58% of criminals who committed or attempted rape in the Nordic country were of foreign origins. (A figure that jumped to around 80% in cases where the perpetrator and victim did not know each other.) In addition, the proportion of crimes committed by unregistered immigrants and asylum seekers in Sweden increased from 3% in 1989 to 13% in 2017, which are not even officially counted as crimes committed by registered immigrants. In addition, the proportion of crimes committed by unregistered immigrants and asylum seekers in Sweden increased from 3% in 1989 to 13% in 2017, which are not officially counted as crimes committed by registered immigrants.

There is therefore a clear parallel between the change in crime rates and the intensifying of migration, even though we know that other factors may have been at work in the past, such as the rise in unemployment and poverty caused by economic crises, or the isolation of certain immigrant communities from the rest of society. At the same time, it is also important to see that criminals make up only a few percent of the population, while the vast majority of citizens, regardless of their origin, respect the law. This is typically true in Europe and in other countries around the world that receive large numbers of migrants, so it would be a grave exaggeration to say in general that immigrants are criminals. Furthermore, it should not be overlooked that the proportion of migrants is generally higher not only among the perpetrators, but also among the victims.

Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the fact that what some have called 'parallel societies' are not an isolated phenomenon, as they are becoming more and more apparent in several countries and cities across Europe. In France, where the proportion of the population of Islamic origin, mainly from North Africa, was around 9% in 2016, Muslim communities are often segregated, partly in terms of their place of residence, and partly in terms of their position in society. In addition to violent crime attributed to Muslims and poor public safety in ghetto-like neighborhoods such as those on the outskirts of Paris, terrorist attacks by Islamist extremists over the past decade have only exacerbated ethnic tensions. (But besides France, significant military forces have been deployed to maintain order in Brussels, the Belgian capital, among other places.)

Although the radicalization of the Muslim population itself is limited to a small segment, its dangers should not be underestimated, as the terrorist attacks in Toulouse in 2012, Paris in 2015, Nice in 2016 and Trebes in 2018 have shown. The vast majority of such attacks have not been carried out by extremists from abroad, but by immigrants radicalized in France, which strongly raises the contribution of certain factors. Namely, that the separation of state and religion legislation, and its specific interpretation, has opened a loophole for extremists, as the government does not believe it is 'politically correct' to interfere in the affairs of a free faith community. Moreover, it is precisely this objection that can be used as a reason for keeping certain information about atrocities and crimes out of the press, lest it further increases the anti-Islamic and divisive nature of society.

But no matter how much events are kept behind the scenes, hidden from most of the public eye – with the exception of the naturally much publicized terrorist attacks –, such problems do surface from time to time in the form of mass disturbances. Of these, the three-week riots of 2005, involving the arson of cars, shops and public property and clashes with the police, were the worst – so much so that President Jacques Chirac was forced to declare a state of emergency for all of France. But there was also a strong reaction to the 2011 law banning Muslim women from wearing veils, scarves and other clothing that completely cover their faces in public, which is a tradition in their religion. This was not at all well received by Muslims, as most of them saw it as a violation of their freedoms, and conflicts related to the issue have been recurring.

So French society, however much they try to hide it, is today visibly divided and has great difficulty in dealing with the problems posed by multiculturalism – while trying to ensure universal freedoms for all, they expect citizens to adapt without exception to the customary norms that have developed in its past, defined by Catholic Christianity. Meanwhile, many immigrant families and communities, especially young people, struggle with unemployment, poverty and poor living conditions, or the lack of adequate and quality education. Members of the newer generation often 'float' between their parents and the culture of their country of establishment, while feeling that they do not really belong to either.

Data shows, however, that in general, the offspring of migrants born in Europe are more likely to break the law than newcomers – so it seems far from unique that the children or even grandchildren of immigrants are less able or willing to integrate into mainstream society. That's why, according to many, there is no basis for them to claim equality or equal treatment – but think about it, Dear Reader, wouldn't You protest against neglect, discrimination or police brutality (even if the latter is not always without any reason)? And in my opinion, we should not be at all surprised that aimless young people without a real future or home are easily radicalized, especially in the world of the internet, which provides a virtually unlimited flow of information. If we look at them as providing the occasional demand, then on the other side there is always the supply, meaning those who hold

extremist views – whether it is about Islam or any other religion or worldview –, and are prepared to pass them on and enforce them at any cost.

Although not for this reason alone, the fears of the indigenous population are also understandable, at least in part. The increasing number of immigrants, their foreign culture and often strange habits, and poor public safety are as much a source of concern regarding migrants who have been there for generations as for newcomers. And just as those who seek asylum or resettlement deserve to be treated with fairness, the indigenous population must also be guaranteed the right to protect their homes, values and cultures from the flood of people who arrive in their countries, lands, villages and cities, even when other countries are at war or in crisis. In a state that considers itself civilized, one simply cannot fail to respect the will of the local inhabitants, peoples and nations to defend what they have built up over generations – or even hundreds of years –, and not for a moment should such intentions or interests on their part be condemned or brushed aside in favor of the interests of a mass of people who are essentially strangers to them.

While cultural tensions and security concerns are understandable to a certain extent, there is much more controversy about the economic aspects. In more developed countries, indigenous people typically complain that immigrants are taking jobs away from them, but these nations almost expect cheap labor from immigration as a given – and many are promoting migration for this very reason, beside the intent to rejuvenate a gradually ageing society. In these societies, there are more and more fields of work or jobs that are facing labor shortages, as few of the indigenous population are willing to fill them. These are usually activities or jobs that require little or no specific education, and they are often dirty, dangerous, physically and mentally demanding, and often looked down upon by many. While the so called 'brain drain' to fill jobs requiring specific knowledge or skills affects only a small percentage of migrants, the phenomenon described above is common among their rather marginalized or exploited masses.

Whether they are refugees who have lost their homes because of war, natural disaster or some other emergency, or people who have left their homeland for economic reasons, the general view is that they should be content with what they are 'left with' – including, among others, a much lower salary –, and should be happy if they now have a job and can live in better conditions than the total hopelessness they have managed to escape. This may well meet the hopes and expectations of a first-generation, i.e. newly arrived migrant in a truly desperate or very poor situation, but what about the settled, second, third or multiple generations of immigrants? To understand the essence of the problem, it is necessary to take into account and weigh their point of view, as well.

You don't think, Dear Reader, that when someone intends to settle in another country, the long-term goal is to do the job that the people there no longer want? That if they don't like the low pay, they should try to make a career or build a business in an economy that recognizes real equality of opportunity only on paper (at most)? To be a marginalized

member of society or a mere tool, while being expected to adapt to the majority, or to the customs of a completely different culture? It does not seem very likely – especially when they are no longer in an absolute minority, and thus have the opportunity to make their voice heard and express their dissatisfaction. And if we take into account the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we can say nothing but that immigrants have every reason to claim a right to the standard of living achieved by the indigenous population.

Having considered the above, you may have already realized, Dear Reader, that cultural tensions within a society are usually as much about existential issues as they are about the problem of otherness. As long as people struggle with basic livelihoods, insecurity, lack of equal opportunities and discrimination, peaceful coexistence seems nothing but vain hope. If the economic situation is far from satisfactory and the society is burdened with class divisions and constant stigmatization, cultural differences are indeed much more pronounced.

And this is the case not only in Europe, but all over the world, including in the United States, which is defined by immigration. Inequalities culminated even more during the 2020 pandemic, when 34% of African-American women and only 25% of men surveyed said it was a good thing to be black in the US. (In contrast, in 2006, before the credit crisis, 60% of black men agreed with this statement, while 73% of black women agreed in 2011.) The change is partly explained by the income disparities experienced by minorities: in 2020, 73% of blacks surveyed attributed them to individual racism and discrimination and 79% to structural or systemic racism, while 67% and 57% of Hispanic Americans agreed with them, respectively. A significant proportion of people of color also felt that they were regularly treated unfairly or discriminated against when shopping, at work, in health care and in their dealings with the police. Regarding the latter, there have been recurring incidents of African-American deaths as a result of police action – a similar public outcry over the killing of George Floyd on 25 May sparked the most widespread riots in recent times in the United States, which spread overseas to a lesser extent.

However, despite the fact that the US also has very serious problems with persistent racism and increasing migratory pressures (mainly from Latin America), the proportion of Muslim immigrants in the total population is nowhere near as high as in some European countries. These, in turn, are increasingly characterized by the fact that the Islamic population is slowly beginning to become comparable to that of the indigenous population – if only because while the latter shows a declining trend, in the case of the former, the opposite is true. In fact, the proportion of Muslim immigrants in Europe is increasing not only because of new arrivals, but also partly because immigrant communities tend to have higher fertility rates, i.e. their numbers are steadily multiplying, while the birth rate and size of the indigenous population tend to be steadily decreasing. If the number of Muslim immigrants continues to rise at the current rate in the coming decades, their proportion on the continent could almost triple to 14% by 2050. (This figure does not include Muslim immigrants who settle in Europe in the meantime.)

Although this may not seem like much in relation to the total population, as the number of people of the Islamic faith grows, it is easy to imagine that their need to assert their own beliefs and culture will also increase. This has the potential to further heighten cultural tensions in the countries concerned – especially if the socio-economic situation does not improve or if other problems (global warming, epidemics, economic crises, etc.) make it difficult for people to cope, worsening their insecurities and existential issues. And, as we have seen earlier, there is a very real chance of that happening...

Why is this particularly worrying? Well, on the one hand, there is the Western civilization, which is currently extremely materialistic and self-centered. This means that a large part of its citizens are living under a huge but unsustainable illusion (unlimited consumption and waste, distorted notions of personal freedom and highly questionable values), and efforts to remedy that are in vain if the system itself still operates according to these principles. And although they have already been affected and transformed by the globalization influences coming from the West, most Eastern cultures are still more conservative, authoritarian, and tend to rely more on spirituality, which in extreme cases can lead to radicalization and religious fanaticism. The two are already a dangerous mixture in themselves if not managed properly, but can virtually act as a gunpowder barrel in an exacerbated crisis. But whether we avoid catastrophe or not, the fact is that, in their current state, it is impossible to build a stable, long-term sustainable society, a truly modern civilization, on either approach.

If we do not succeed in slowing down the seemingly endless migration of people, we will not only have to reckon with a clash of world views and cultural tensions, but also with political and social antagonisms, since the fact of mass immigration is extremely divisive for the indigenous population itself. More frequent and populous protests and demonstrations of support, and manifestations of extremism could lead to a spread of violence and cause serious social and political disruption in the countries concerned and in the already fragmented European Union as a whole. The confrontation and finger-pointing between political forces and governments can lead to deteriorating relations and a toxic diplomatic environment, which can create a growing divide, both mentally and physically, between countries and social groups. In the context of increasingly negative public sentiment and growing chaos, nationalism, racism and other forms of extremism may become even more prevalent, and ultimately democratic state systems themselves could be seriously threatened.

Which side is right then, those in favor of (mass) immigration or those against it? To this I must say that the messages of both have a certain truth to them, but ultimately neither can be absolved of responsibility for the development of current trends. Support for (far) right-wing parties and movements is growing because of the public's antipathy towards migrants, serving as a boon for the growing populism, which is fond of creating images of the enemy and even exaggerating the public's existing fears through aggressive propaganda.

In other words, right-wing politics in the present situation is exploiting differences between people to increase its own influence and power.

Meanwhile, the extreme liberal left, with its reckless indulgence and cheerleading optimism, often gets irresponsible in their statements and behavior. In addition, despite the fact that they generally present themselves as champions of justice and are fond of invoking human rights, they are not always at the forefront of guaranteeing them, and there are many among them who see migrants primarily as cheap labor and a substitute for youth in society. At the same time, even wealthier European states with a more liberal in outlook that consider themselves humane, have tolerated the suffering and death of masses of people in their far-off homelands for decades, which has not changed much to this day.

The latter, of course, is similarly true for the right, so there is no substantial difference here, just as the left is not blameless in terms of communication with society, either. As we have seen, in the name of political correctness, even liberals who advocate freedom of expression sometimes try to gloss over certain problems, leaving them unresolved, and threatening the stability of society in the long term. Thus, if their interests so desire, both sides tend to influence the media and public opinion to obscure or distort the truth – either to make themselves look good or to make things look different from reality. However, whether we are talking about a specific phenomenon or not, it still exists and needs to be solved.

Nevertheless, the question of how to deal with this whole, extremely difficult and complex set of problems is absolutely legitimate. The peaceful cooperation, or even direct coexistence of different cultures is a really hard nut to crack, because what is completely normal or natural in one is sometimes just looked down upon or condemned in the other. (See the judgment of the Muhammad cartoons published in the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo in 2012: while Muslims were unanimous in their condemnation of this kind of mockery of the Islamic religion, which they considered immoral, the indigenous French mostly perceived the criticism of journalists and the 2015 terrorist attack on the editorial as a violation of free speech.) What is quite certain, Dear Reader, is that only and exclusively the existence of sufficient tolerance can ensure lasting peace between different cultures, which implies certain compromises on the part of both (or, where appropriate, several) parties. In addition to guaranteeing freedom of religion, thought and opinion, people must therefore be made aware of the need to respect the different views and sensitivities of their fellow human beings brought up in other cultures, and avoid even potentially extremist or controversial expressions, at least in public (including on the internet).

It is also part and parcel of human nature to fear and reserve, and sometimes even to act aggressively or defensively against otherness, so such ideas should not be allowed to become too rampant and paranoid in society. However, far from being the best way to do this is through silence, but through open and honest information, education and training, with detailed explanations wherever necessary. In order to promote 'getting along' and to reduce prejudices against each other, which are often the main source of the problem,

many people – not coincidentally – stress the importance of integration. At the core, this means that, as opposed to segregating people and children on the basis of culture, language and ability, we promote learning, working, living and playing together, wherever it is possible.

This is fine as long as integration is not about imposing our own culture on others at any cost. As opposed to this kind of uniformity, we need to focus on building a common identity that both helps different cultures to come together and coexist, and also articulates and emphasizes shared values – which are fundamentally given, since we are all human and inherently operate according to the same rules, natural laws, ideas and feelings. The development of a common identity should preferably start in childhood, when we tend to be much less prejudiced, but more open and easier to shape.

In the case of integration, however, it is not enough for people and children of different abilities and cultures to live, work or study together or alongside each other. There is also a need for everyone to have a truly equal chance and a proper education, and if someone is disadvantaged for some reason, they need to be dealt with individually, as well. This is not always easy, of course, but over time it is possible to develop a system with the necessary procedures and capacities (institutions, offices, teachers, social workers, psychologists, lawyers, counselors, etc.). For the sake of social sustainability, we simply have to create this capacity…

Ideally, it would be useful to create a standard school system, or at least a network of schools around the world, which teaches young people to think along the same lines, focusing on common values, regardless of the political interests of individual governments. While respecting cultural diversity, these institutions would be based primarily not on the memorization of dry facts, lots of tasks and a stressful, inflexible evaluation system, but on an open and cooperative method of teaching and learning that develops a variety of skills and abilities, logic and empathy. Such schools, modeled on the current Finnish system, should aim to develop a collective spirit and level the playing field, in addition to preparing students for life and showing them how the world works, while also providing free meals, health and psychological counseling and, if and when necessary, individual attention to students.

As for less familiar or foreign cultures and their representatives in general, the best advice I can give is to be open and tolerant, but also to be attentive and cautious (especially about radicalism). As in all forms of social coexistence, reciprocity is usually a basic requirement – it is not enough for one party to be willing to give in or accommodate. Nevertheless, in the longer term, I believe that any society and community vying to be fully civilized must accept the independence of the state, i.e. the government and leadership from religion, respect for other religions, equality for women and minorities, and the human freedoms that are the birthright of all, and to which citizens themselves must adhere. The point is to encourage a judiciously progressive, forward-looking way of thinking and way

of life, rather than clinging to dogmas or obsolete practices of the past, including those typical of the Middle Ages.

Problems usually begin with perpetuating behindhand, outdated views, which are often extremely difficult to weed out. Simple examples such as right- and left-hand traffic or the use of different units of measurement illustrate the transmission of widespread ways of thinking, customs and practices across cultures, ethnic groups and communities, and the difficulties of breaking them. While international transportation and the automotive industry, or indeed the way the world works, would be much simpler if cars and other road vehicles in every country drove on the same side of the road, or if everyone used only kilometers or miles to express distances, both systems are firmly entrenched in the minds of billions of people. We all have a tendency that once we have mastered and become accustomed to something, we no longer want or find it easy to switch to another, and we pass on to our offspring and young people the method or knowledge we prefer.

It is important to see that it is not a problem if people and their communities pass on their traditions and culture, but it can be a much bigger problem if they also pass on their misconceptions and ignorance to their descendants. But as it is not possible or worthwhile to forcibly prevent anyone from doing so, other opportunities must be created and made available to all, regardless of origin and culture. In other words, if you want to change someone's behavior and habits, offer them alternatives that are hopefully better and try to show them the benefits. It is usually only worthwhile if the person makes the decision themselves, because if they are forced, the change will hardly ever be lasting, but the more resistance there will be. Of course, it is also very important to start presenting these alternatives as early as possible, preferably in childhood, in the early years of rearing and education.

As far as cultural tensions and the economic aspects of migration are concerned, there are only a few thoughts I would like to add here, firstly on the much debated issue of labor. According to a 2019 study by the European Commission, an increase in the number of immigrants would increase the size of the labor force, but would not change the ratio of employed to non-employed people, meaning that the number of unemployed would also rise. Our aim in turn should be to increase labor participation and to get more people involved in the common tasks needed to run the economy. As the study has shown, wider participation actually relieves societies of the burden of ageing better than growth in fertility (i.e. birth rates) or migration.

So, in essence, while migration has some benefits, it is far from being the cure for all economic and other problems. If we take into account that large numbers of immigrants can be a heavy burden on host countries and federations in many ways (economic, health, epidemiological, security, socio-cultural), this tips the balance towards trying to prevent, rather than support or facilitate, large-scale migration. Furthermore, if we do nothing

about the uncontrolled and illegal influx of people, it is very difficult to track them and deport undesirable immigrants...

And in order to deal with even larger numbers of migrants and refugees in a relatively seamless way, the (more) developed Western countries would also need a radical change of attitude and even lifestyle. This should as much include a distribution system that is much fairer and closer to real needs, as effectively ensuring universal rights and equal opportunities for all. But again, this surmises a review and reform of the currently prevalent Western-style economic and political systems.

Global change seems inevitable, if only because we must expect that in the long run, it may be necessary to accommodate masses of up to millions worldwide – especially if we do not ignore the absolutely real threat of climate change, the increasing number and intensity of natural disasters, epidemics and so on, some of which are already being experienced by many of us. If current trends continue and refugee numbers continue to rise, any affected society that is not sufficiently stable – economically, socially and otherwise – could soon be in big trouble. Especially for host countries with smaller capacities, it would be important to be able to count on effective assistance from the international community, but participation in mutual assistance, with the necessary redeployment of resources, should be expected from virtually everyone – especially at federal level.

With regards to the right to asylum for all, we must not overlook the fact that, while the case of one or a few people in need or in a humanitarian crisis is quite clear, the more mixed and numerous the groups of refugees, the more difficult it is to guarantee their rights – especially when many of them are undocumented. But if one gets registered on the basis of self-announcement, it's pretty much like when some unknown person comes up to you asking for money... How do you know that he is telling the truth and that he is not going to spend it on something else instead of food or bus tickets? Therefore, major migratory flows must be constantly monitored and early action must be taken to screen out legitimate asylum seekers before they are 'taken into care' by smugglers or end up in often inhumane camps. In addition, every effort should be made to facilitate the submission of asylum applications and to ensure that they are processed as quickly as possible, within a few days at most.

Wherever you come from, you have the right to at least a minimum standard of living worthy of human dignity – nevertheless, you cannot go wherever they want, whenever you want, without any restrictions. Realistically, we are not at a point today where borders and other restrictions on free movement can simply be abolished or ignored without any negative consequences. Standardized international rules on migration and refugees are essential to make the phenomenon manageable, but this alone is not enough. In international relations and politics, too, a fundamental change of approach is inevitable, so that the dominant factor is not the tendency of individual nations and their leaders to turn things to their own advantage, often by exploiting others or ignoring the interests and suffering of many.

International Power Games

Helping and supporting those in need in other countries, however necessary it may be today, is far from commonplace, or being considered natural by those in power and the world's leading politicians. At least it's not really typical of them in a selfless way... While these people, in their own way, most likely sympathize with those fleeing war and poverty, given the rules of politics and the way power works, there can be no doubt that most of them will always ultimately put their own individual and political goals before the suffering, safety and needs of the public – especially when it is not even their own people or constituents.

Power games are among the most important determinants of our lives, whether we are aware of them or not, both at domestic and global level. One of the biggest lessons to be learned from the refugee crisis is the realization that such games are constantly being played between the world's most powerful and emerging states, military and economic alliances, which have no regard for local or affected populations outside their borders, except as long as it serves their own interests.

The masses of Syrians can also be considered victims of power struggles, some 6 million of whom have sought refuge abroad because of the civil war that has raged in the country since 2011. Many of them have headed to Europe in the hope of a better life, while others spend their days in camps in neighboring countries, often in desperate conditions, with no chance of making a decent living or having brighter prospects for the future. And those who choose to stay at home despite the ongoing fighting, or who simply have no way of escaping, are exposed to increased stress, suffering and constant threat to their lives, not to mention hunger and disease.

The case of Syria is also instructive because it is located in a hub of different interests in the Middle East, where several parties are trying to impose their will simultaneously. The civil war erupted for seemingly obvious reasons – including ones some attribute to global warming –, as a spill-over from the clash between protesters against unemployment, poverty, corruption and the lack of political freedom, and the government forces that were violently confronting them. Over time, however, more and more insurgent groups began fighting against President Bashar al-Assad and his army, and both sides had a fair number of supporters from different nations. At the same time, taking advantage of the upheaval, the Islamic State militants, who were beginning to build their own caliphate, also went on the offensive, seizing large swathes of territory in Syria and neighboring Iraq. Meanwhile, many people were imprisoned and forced to cooperate, and those of other religions (e.g. Christians, Yazidis) were constantly tortured and tormented, and in some cases executed as a deterrent.

In order to contain the Islamic State, an international coalition of several actors, led by the United States, was formed, which regularly bombed the caliphate's troops and positions. And although the US has not in principle taken up arms against Syrian government

forces, it has helped several rebel groups by providing weapons and military training, and has called on Assad to resign on behalf of the democratic forces. Turkey and Saudi Arabia also sided with the rebels, but the Syrian army, which fought both the rebels and the Islamic State, was not without support. Russia, led by Vladimir Putin, has been a long-standing strategic ally of Assad, and, in addition to diplomatic patronage, contributed both arms and air power to the successes of Syrian government forces. Iran, which has similarly good relations (and mutual interests) with Syria, provided military training, weapons and intelligence, but also sent its own elite forces to the region, both against the rebels and the Islamic State.

I am not surprised if You are scratching your head after all this information, Dear Reader, but it's understanding the why that really highlights the complexity of the situation in Syria and the international relations. So I suggest we look at who is motivated by what in this whole conflict in the first place!

President Assad's main goal is obviously to stay in power in Syria, which he seems to be insisting on at all costs – according to some reports, which are still not fully clarified, he did not even hesitate to use chemical weapons against his own country's citizens in 2017, which are prohibited by international law. Whether or not this is the case, what we can say with certainty is that a leader who does not resign when a significant proportion of the population demands it, but instead resorts to military force and allows his people to suffer, is not a legitimate leader, but an authoritarian dictator. The plight of the Syrian people, I believe, speaks for itself, so I think it's perfectly understandable that they are either fighting for their country or fleeing their homes if they can.

The objectives of the other parties involved may be less clear or direct, but they faithfully reflect the power games in the region and the world. The Islamic State, which is fundamentally based on terror and repression, sought to make the most of the opportunity to strengthen its position by seizing territory until, in a slow and bitter struggle that did not spare civilians, the overwhelming force had eliminated most of its positions. Since their expansion was damaging to the interests and security of most neighboring and allied countries, it is no wonder that most of them took a strong stand against the threat and the religious-cultural warfare they represented. But the differences of a cultural nature do not end here, as they also played a part in the participation of others.

Turkey's motivation, for example, beyond the containment of Islamist extremists, is not to oppose Assad's autocratic rule, but to ensure that the Kurds in northern Syria – against whom, incidentally, they regularly launch attacks – do not gain independence in the diplomatic settlement following the civil war. Indeed, in the eyes of the Turkish leadership, virtually all Kurds are terrorists, thanks to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a guerrilla organization that has been fighting them for more than three decades, claiming Kurdish rights and not shying away from assassinations. As for Iran, the main reason they support Assad against the rebels is that, while Assad and his government represent a branch of Islam with which they have no problem, they have been at odds with the Sunnis, who are

in the majority in much of Syria, for centuries. They have hostile relations with Saudi Arabia for similar reasons, but they need Syrian help to supply arms to the Lebanese Shiite paramilitary organization Hezbollah, who are as intolerant of Jewish-inhabited Israel as the Iranians.

So, in a nutshell, this sums up the prevailing conditions in the region, with the addition of the high-power games that are taking place at global level. The Soviet Union, which is basically the legal predecessor of today's Russia, had already gained influence in Syria during the Cold War expansion, but it was only after Putin's hegemony-building began that they really forged closer ties. After the fall of the Gaddafi regime in Libya in 2011, a multi-billion dollar arms shipment was left in the hands of the Russians, who looked for other allies in the region. Over the years, they built a military airbase and also a naval base in Syria, the strength of which they have periodically demonstrated to the world. As long as its local interests are not disturbed, the Russian leadership does not seem to mind if a few opposition groups with limited autonomy remain in certain areas of the country, as long as they do not threaten the power of Assad, who supports their activities.

And while the United States first acted as a quasi-savior against the Islamic State and Assad, after the former had been successfully repressed, it is no longer so keen to fight the latter. Indeed, more recent statements by President Donald Trump suggest that the leadership of a country known for its commitment to democracy may not mind Assad staying in charge of Syria if peace is restored – which could come very soon after the almost complete elimination of rebel positions. At the same time, it insists on blocking the presence of Iran and Hezbollah in Syria, as they are enemies of Israel, which the US has always supported.

In some ways, Syria can therefore be seen as a typical case of 'omnishambles', where essentially all kinds of interests and motivations can be identified, from the freedom struggle to terrorism and cultural hostilities to high-power games. But if we consider what millions of Syrians have had to go through, all of these reasons for maintaining the conditions in the country and the region seem essentially secondary. And while it is possible that the hundreds of thousands of people who have migrated from elsewhere in search of asylum left behind similar circumstances, it would be very difficult to explain why, while large numbers of those arriving in the EU, for example, have been accepted, those in even worse situations, who are virtually unable to move, do not deserve a chance.

In the world, especially in Asia and Africa, there are more and more people – hundreds of millions of them – who are hungry, deprived and in need of help, often in even more desperate situations than those heading for Europe, so it seems legitimate to ask: why do we favor them over those who are treading on our doorsteps? The former do not deserve to be helped, but the latter do? The response of today's liberal approach seems to be to provide aid that is at most symptomatic, while hypocritically focusing only on the problem in the

spotlight, and its humanitarian efforts are primarily aimed at reassuring its own conscience.

However, like most of the power struggles, inter-governmental aid is also primarily about political survival, and because much of it is misdirected, it is mostly ineffective in alleviating poverty and suffering. Governments that receive aid in this way usually have almost complete discretion over how the money is spent. Thereby aid is an excellent way of helping dictators to retain power and to deprive citizens of the human rights and freedoms to which they are entitled. By receiving aid, the governments of such countries do not even have to impose high taxes, but only need to please the donor to stay in power. And as long as the aided government rewards its military and policing system generously enough, it has little to fear from the dissatisfied population's opinions or protests.

Some estimates suggest that at least 70% of government revenue in Africa comes from foreign aid, meaning that a significant proportion of the continent's political leaders operate in a way that is influenced by aid, with the result that they are very unlikely to be acting in the interests of their own citizens. Nevertheless, corruption is a serious problem elsewhere, too: for example, according to a Pakistani opposition politician, aid from the UK (although the same can likely be said of the US and others) never reaches the needy in his country, as Pakistani leaders gradually siphon off millions of pounds from the Department for International Development (replaced by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office in the meantime). But a study by the NGO Taxpayers Alliance also found that UK aid has done nothing to improve the economies or political freedom of the people in the countries receiving it – in fact, the data shows that in twice as many countries, the situation has actually got worse as it has improved.

Nevertheless, it is a popular view among politicians in more developed countries that donating money to poorer parts of the world increases their popularity and the number of voters. At the same time, there is typically no effective, transparent control system in place in donor countries over the spending of billions of dollars of taxpayers' money over the years. Thus, such spending essentially reduces the accountability of governments, while increasing their power and the vulnerability of those in need. This anti-democratic system therefore perpetuates and even exacerbates social inequalities, as political abuses further strengthen the position of the minority elite against the increasingly marginalized masses. While the autocrats, with all the fat on their bones, are tightening their grip and beating back any democratic aspirations, the West is watching in a duplicitous way, exploiting the services of its vassals and reaping the rewards – at least until the unpleasant side-effects and consequences (see mass migration, terrorism, etc.) are forced down its throat.

However, supporting and tolerating this kind of attitude and corruption can sometimes have counterproductive results. This was the case, for example, in Afghanistan, which the US forces invaded after the attacks of 11 September 2001 to take down terrorists and Islamist extremists who were being raised, supported and harbored by the underdeveloped Central Asian country. But instead of doing everything possible to support the population

living in poverty, the US was for years funneling billions of dollars into the pockets of local warlords and politicians. As a result of what is now openly known as kleptocracy – literally the rule of thieves – the fight against the radical Taliban, formerly collaborators with the Al-Qaeda terrorist organization, also proved difficult, with the Afghan army, undermined by corrupt commanders, remaining too weak and political leaders who put their own well-being first, not encouraging the loyalty of the people. Ultimately, it was the corruption that consumed Afghanistan, and the social inequalities and injustices that (also) resulted from it, that brought many to the Taliban's side, facilitating the fall of the American-backed government and the return to the barbaric conditions that had prevailed after the withdrawal of Western forces.

Corruption is not limited to the level of top leaders, but often affects the entire state apparatus of aided countries, which settles in an elephant-like manner on funds transferred for even the noblest possible purpose. In many cases, public companies operating in such systems embark on unrealistic or excessive projects that are not only uneconomical, but also over-expensive in a way that leaves a large part of the objectives unfulfilled. In addition, state-owned enterprises in developing countries often take on large foreign loans, leading to increasing indebtedness and vulnerability as losses accumulate. In this context, it is not surprising that in many countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, USAID (the United States Agency for International Development) has left behind dozens of 'white elephants' such as idle cement factories, empty exhibition centers or abandoned roads, all of which have fallen into disrepair and are only damaging the environment. One of the most egregious is the case of the $3.5 billion Lesotho Highlands Water Project, which has ruined the lives of tens of thousands of local residents and led to corruption lawsuits against three of the world's largest construction companies.

Apart from the fact that money can easily end up in the wrong pockets, aid is also proving to be more harmful than helpful to those whose interests it is supposed to serve. The institution of aid contributes to the perpetuation of problems and poverty rather than to development, as it essentially preserves the status quo, and in many cases leads to the long-term dependency of the nations receiving aid. Indeed, governments and populations in less developed countries tend to rely too much on money from abroad, rather than actively and consciously promoting their own development. The phenomenon is essentially similar to the trend in more developed countries, where in consumer societies that make almost everything readily available the declining collaboration and community spirit between people prevents us from taking control of our own lives.

Aid alone, therefore, does not help people to improve their quality of life, to become useful members of society, or to possibly join the world economy. It requires what some non-profit organizations specialize in – investing in the future by creating and running schools and health facilities, building wells, sewers, infrastructure and various technological systems, while also transferring the knowledge to do so. In other words, developing countries and underdeveloped communities must be actively supported in learning to sus-

tain themselves in an effectively functioning socio-economic system, which is based on mutual cooperation and partnership rather than permanent dependence.

Of course, this will be difficult to ensure as long as only a few foundations and NGOs provide selfless assistance, while the governments playing power games are mainly concerned with their own immediate interests, even at the cost of people's lives. Journalist Linda Polman, in her book War Games: The Story of Aid and War in Modern Times, for example, points out that humanitarianism has become a major industry, allied with the global media and pro-war forces – and doing so in such a way that operations in war zones benefit the powerful who exploit others rather than those most in need. In these places, the military and special-purpose militias typically sustain themselves through taxes on aid and the movement of goods and charitable personnel, as well as by diverting or stealing funds. Moreover, these elite groups have also learned how to present an image to the outside world that attracts support.

Polman provocatively asserts that the humanitarian era basically operates according to the logic of 'sow horror to reap aid, and reap aid to sow horror'. To illustrate this, she cites among others, the example of Christian aid organizations in Sudan who promoted a 'liberation' program to buy the freedom of slaves, but in turn succeeded in increasing demand by increasing the number of people captured and sold on the market by slave traders as a result of rising prices in the slave market. And in Ethiopia and Somalia, in the 1980s and 90s, politically-initiated food aid sent to alleviate local famines allowed repressive governments to feed their own armies, while continuing to displace and destroy persecuted groups.

And for the great powers, the primary function of aid is to build and maintain a Western-style imperialism – even though expansion is no longer territorial but rather political and economic. In the majority of cases, the aid publicly disbursed by Western governments and their agencies actually servers the growth and enrichment of their own companies and banks. The leaders of recipient nations are expected to pursue policies that are in the donor's interests, especially in the case of less developed countries, where they do not have to dig deep into their economies. Instead, they prefer to push privatization so that they can get their hands on the property of state-owned enterprises in the target countries for a cheap price (often with a significant devaluation of the local currency as a result of debt default), while the recipients give up control over imports and capital exports. And the trade in raw materials and passive energy carriers is a huge business, which is also true of weapons that can be used to directly destroy masses of people, or to make them misfortunate, poor and homeless.

As a result, aid agencies are promoting pro-Western and often repressive regimes, which come to power in part thanks to foreign-backed military coups. At the same time, independent and patriotic political factions that are interested in the welfare of the people and therefore seek to protect and develop the national economy, are falling victim of the Western media's campaign of hostility, and the actions, uprisings and invasions financed

by the financial elite. On the one hand, governments coming to power are already committed to the Western imperialists, and on the other, the aid they receive from them, often coupled with loans with considerable interest rates, make them economically dependent and subordinate, perpetuating the underdevelopment and poverty of these underdeveloped countries, as described before.

Meanwhile, the great powers themselves rarely go to war these days, and when they might, there is usually little alternative and victory seems certain. As Bruce de Mesquita and Alastair Smith write in The Dictator's Handbook – Why Bad Behavior is Almost Always Good Politics, democrats buy political concessions by giving aid, and force them by going to war.

In his autobiography, Confessions of an Economic Hitman, John Perkins, a former chief economist at Chas T. Main, an American energy and consulting firm, essentially describes his former job as follows: developing and implementing procedures to ensure that the interests of a coalition of the US government, banks and big business are served while working publicly to alleviate poverty. The man, who graduated from Boston University in 1968, claims to have achieved this by persuading strategic countries to accept huge loans to develop infrastructure, projects which had to be given to US companies (along with the money disbursed). After the failure to repay the loans, the US government, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the various aid agencies had direct access to the country's resources (especially oil) and strategic land (where military bases could later be established).

In an interview, Perkins also explained that the US central aid system, like most other countries' aid systems, represents the interests of multinational corporations in the donor country. While a small proportion of aid does indeed reach the right people and is used to improve the situation of those in need, especially after major disasters, it is only a small slice of the overall pie and usually lasts for a very short time. After that, however, the aid is mostly used to boost the coffers or turnover of the banks and companies involved...

The extent to which the method outlined by Perkins can be considered a common practice is obscure, but it doesn't take much imagination to think that such deals tend to benefit the profit-oriented organizations that are most heavily lobbied – it can never hurt to be on good terms with politicians and other decision-makers, right? Perhaps the only thing better for You is if they have a direct interest in Your company. And if one is not particularly distressed – or simply ignores the fact – that while he is accumulating huge sums as profit, many people are far worse off, or even die or suffer, then it can be seen as a kind of contemporary recipe for success.

So the sad fact is that in our globalizing civilization, power and profit are still more important than people's lives, as momentary interests often take precedence over long-term solutions – just think of the pursuit of continued economic growth rather than sustainable management. Looking at these circumstances, it is ironic that humanity is most talked

about by those whose countries are dominated by an opportunistic approach to life, a materialistic system determined by the hard laws of the supply and demand market, in which people of the right quality for companies are seen as human resources, while the lives and security of the masses are given minimal real value.

In contrast, the hypocritical neoliberal conception in general is farcically characterized by an over-emphasis on rights vis-à-vis each other, while obligations towards each other are usually relegated to the background. However, this is a great way to ensure that common interests are forgotten, united action fails, and divided societies persist, serving an unbridled consumer culture that is passive toward power games. So it is only one side of the problem that politicians and business moguls are primarily interested in their own status and wealth, since it is civil society as a whole that allows them to run amok, without regard for the lives of the majority, and the suffering and the fallen.

In the context of the credit crunch, the epidemic or the migrant crisis, or even the war in Ukraine, we have now seen and experienced first-hand that on our finite planet, what happens to one people or one region's population affects others – especially in the ever more frequent crises that affect, devastate, destitute or displace millions. So it is time to learn the lesson that the attitude that we are dealing with only what is happening in our own countries or on our immediate doorsteps no longer works, because problems, whether economic, political or social, can very quickly become wider and more comprehensive. In a globalized world, increasingly plagued by social inequality and tension, we can no longer afford this luxury, and we must behave accordingly towards others – whether we are ordinary citizens or leaders in positions of power.

Therefore, in the spirit of equal treatment and opportunities, power wars or authoritarian regimes cannot be seen as the internal or private affair of stagnating or refugee-flooding countries, nor can they long serve as the private playground of great powers pursuing their momentary self-interest. It is clear that, instead of corrupt and irresponsible leaders and military organizations fighting for questionable goals, we should be supporting the civilian population in crisis and war-torn areas, not primarily through aid, but through active assistance. For this to become common practice, however, we must inevitably confront the neoliberal tendency that currently dominates almost all world processes.

Neoliberalism, which has permeated politics and the economy as a whole for forty years now, is essentially a doctrine from the economic side, extending the principle of the market without limits to both the public and the personal aspects of our lives. In essence, this is made possible by the fact that the classical role of the state, responsible for ensuring the well-being of the people, has now increasingly shifted towards being the agent and advocate of the freedom and maintenance of markets and competition at all costs. Neoliberal economic policies usually work to reduce tariffs and other barriers to trade, so that capital can expand locally and internationally as easily as possible, while limiting the influence of trade unions that protect workers. Following in its wake, we see everywhere that state-owned enterprises have been closed down, common property assets have been sold off,

and our lives have been opened up to the dominance of market thinking in every other way.

Despite its evocative name, the political affiliation of neoliberalism is in fact far from clear: while many consider it a form of liberalism, in the United States, for example, it is often referred to as neoconservatism. According to some conservative politicians, they are closer to classical liberalism because they allow some state intervention in the economy, while libertarians who advocate total freedom reject any restrictions. But they need state involvement if only because neoliberalism is generally characterized by the principle of 'privatizing profits and socializing losses'. This means that the profit generated in the economy tends to go to the owners of capital, while the concomitant damage or negative risks are borne by the state and taxpayers.

In many cases, the modern private sector creates large economic or environmental risks that cannot be covered by private insurance. Companies and industries (such as financial sector companies and commercial banks) that have grown huge but are in trouble due to their own mistakes or external causes are often subject to the rationality of the 'too big to fail' principle. This basically says that because of the interdependencies already established, the economic and social damage caused by the failure of a loss-making firm or industry would be greater than the cost of rescuing it. (We have seen the principle applied repeatedly over the past few decades, especially during the credit crisis of 2008, which threatened to bring about a domino-like collapse of banks.) The representatives of prosperous companies and industries, on the other hand, lobby for as little state intervention as possible (including market regulation and income redistribution), because they claim that the free market is the most efficient social organizing force that can ensure the general welfare, and any intervention is inefficient. However, all this can easily lead to socially irresponsible corporate governance, as the examples in the last section of the book will reflect.

We must see, then, that neoliberalism is not closely linked to any one political side or party, but rather as a kind of general economic philosophical doctrine that imposes itself on politics and society at all levels, determining the way most of us live and think. And through globalization, it reaches almost everywhere it wants to, apparently overriding previous norms and rules in any society or community that cannot defend itself against the pressures of its ideas and capital. However, the kind of individualism that promotes the sole importance of the individual, and the dependency on consumption and profit maximization with minimum investment drastically reduce social security and undermine the stability of our societies by increasing inequalities. At the same time, the constant pressure to grow and expand is completely at odds with environmental sustainability, no matter how many green solutions or environmentally friendly processes are introduced in the meantime.

In terms of international relations, this is extremely damaging because it is only through international cooperation and perhaps unprecedented cooperation that we have a chance of achieving sustainability both socially and environmentally as desired, or even essential for our future. We should therefore have a vested interest in seeing these problems as our common cause and working together to find solutions, rather than pointing fingers at each other and passing the buck. This requires a thorough reflection and a concrete redefinition of common values, which is especially true for a European Union that has been in crisis for many years.

The alliance, which until now has been held together – apart from security concerns – by the free movement of capital, labor, goods and services (i.e. the sheer material motivation of the need to expand the financial 'playing field'), must be put on a new footing. Instead of the all-dominant rule of money, the intellectual-cultural side, cooperation and sustainability must prevail, while reciprocity and real solidarity must replace exploitation and hypocrisy. Greater cooperation is needed both in the EU and in global international relations, but it must be built in a sustainable way, along progressive aspects, while also respecting more traditional, conservative values.

No matter how naive the idea may seem, the only solution in the long run is to put an end to the power games that are often tied to material goods and individual interests, and to focus on bringing peace to people in countries and regions affected by conflict. The contrary, selfish and short-sighted behavior and politicking that is unacceptable in civilized societies must end once and for all. Even now, the widespread practice in the Western world of relocating our factories and production facilities to other regions of the world because of cheap labor and tax breaks, and then making a profit by exploiting them, is no longer viable. And instead of the obsessively growth-based views on economy, we need to focus on environmental and social sustainability to preserve and restore the balance between nature and civilization. But to make change happen, it is essential that people in both developed and developing countries become increasingly aware of not only local but also global issues, and put the necessary pressure on their country's and the world's leaders.

Due to its function as the widest international platform, the United Nations would be the primary arena for global cooperation, but in practice its hands are tied. While the UN has, from time to time, formulated ideas and policies that are fundamental or even groundbreaking to social progress, justice and sustainability, it has unfortunately failed to effectively advocate them. Instead, it also tends to reflect the interests of the great powers, and serves as a venue for their conflict. Effective action is often hampered by the very rigid structure of the organization, which means that the opposition or passivity of one or two participating countries is enough to prevent progress being made in solving problems. In order not to undermine the ability of the majority to assert its interests, the UN would also need some reassessment, not least reforms that enable it to function more effectively. Consideration could be given, for example, to drastically expanding the number of Security

Council members to make voting as democratic as possible, as well as to reviewing the individual veto so that a majority vote can decide on issues.

While some may already be dreaming of a world state without nations, this seems as unrealistic as allowing people to move freely by abolishing borders globally. Although in many respects it would indeed be justified to empower a legislative body above all national governments to regulate and act in a unified way on the most important common issues, the problem is far from simple. On the one hand, in the present circumstances, under the dominance of neoliberalism, it is not at all certain that the leaders in power would take the world in a direction that truly represents the long-term interests of sustainability and the majority of people... On the other hand, there are so many different worldviews today, and so little unity amidst the various power struggles and rivalries, that it is almost impossible to have a kind of cooperation based on a common understanding to which everyone would be willing to submit. To do that, we will first need to find common ground on a number of fundamental issues – and at the moment it doesn't look like we are on the way to doing so.

If you think about it, Dear Reader, You can see that what is going on today is ultimately the same at the level of individual countries and their associations as between companies and people trying to get along in the free market, including quasi-monopolies and the distortions that result from dominance in power. This is due in large part to the fact that there are currently no superpowers that are far above the majority in terms of technical and economic power to contain the ambitions of the smaller ones. And although the strongest and largest countries possess weapons of mass destruction, smaller powers, such as Iran and North Korea, are increasingly capable of developing similar, if not practically used, but undoubtedly significant deterrent capabilities.

While the post-World War II reconstruction and rapid development was dominated by the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union (while trying to get everyone else on their side), the latter's break-up left the US alone as the world's leading power for a couple of decades or so. But as it lost more and more of its prestige and influence on world politics, China, with its vast resources, is increasingly taking the lead as the confrontation between the two countries begins to intensify. Global politics, however, does not revolve around them alone, thanks to emerging powers with growing economies and populations, such as India and Brazil, and countries with often unpredictable policies, such as the mentioned Iran and North Korea.

Nevertheless, as the offensive against Ukraine in 2022 has shown, we should never forget about Russia, led by the ambitious Putin, even by chance. A significant part of the Russian people, regardless of the particular historical and political views of their current president, still have a very strong national and great power consciousness, which places strong expectations on the country's leaders, on whose part the huge size and diverse population of Russia also imply a certain hard-nosed attitude. At the same time, other former superpowers have not completely forgotten their former status and their dominant role in world politics – and here we should not only think of the US or China, but also of the United

Kingdom, which still cherishes its former empire to some extent, or even France, which is still proud of its national consciousness and language. (Although the latter's room for maneuver is considerably reduced by the fact that it is a member of the very populous European Union.)

Following the collapse of the former world empires, we can no longer speak of rival ideologies and socio-economic structures as we did in the case of communism and capitalism, either. Even though some countries (North Korea, Cuba, Vietnam) are still experimenting with some sort of the former, China is the only one that is significant, and it can be considered more of a hybrid, as its economy is now strongly based on a global market economy. While some of the former military alliances are still in place, and NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) is engaged in hostility and rivalry with Russia without direct combat that is eerily reminiscent of the Cold War, today's world order is more multipolar and fragmented, characterized by multi-player rivalries. At the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that liberal democracies and authoritarian states are essentially two radically contradictory worldviews that are increasingly confronting each other in the arena of world politics.

The extent to which this holds the potential for a global cold war between the East and the West, or even open conflict, remains to be seen. But we must to see that even if the world does not become bipolar again because of the rivalry and constant positioning of the various actors, conflicts such as the Russian-Ukrainian warfare always carry the potential for escalation, which could even significantly increase the chances of a third world war, previously thought to be so unlikely. From this perspective, we may soon find out how much we have learned from twentieth century history...

In any case, it can be seen as a bad omen that the demand for armaments is on the rise again, as many countries are feeling less and less secure. And let's face it, their fears are not completely unfounded: after the war against Ukraine, there is a danger that aggression at the expense of other nations and peoples will become some sort of an etalon, a kind of practice that will once again be taken up by less liberal or democratic leaders. To counterbalance this, we must of course continue to take account of existing and even future military alliances, which in turn also represent a kind of obligation and motivation to maintain and increase the combat capability of the armed forces. Nevertheless, it seems that geopolitics are no longer so much about the feuding of great powers who ally with the smaller ones, but rather about the individual ambitions and maneuvering of countries and their alliances.

In the resulting power vacuum (or even chaos), different nations may try their best to take their prize – with the larger developing countries leading the way in terms of power – , whether it is political influence, cultural tensions, territorial disputes or purely economic interests. And then there are the newer deposits of raw materials, which are still a major driving force – for example, the behind-the-scenes battle for resources dormant under the melting Arctic ice has already begun. However, some even target (or have already target-

ed) the extraction of ores and other materials found on other planets or celestial bodies, and not just for scientific purposes, but to further their own economy. As money is nowadays the greatest master, the rivalry between countries and great powers is also primarily determined by it, essentially on a 'finders keepers' basis, with the exception of a few occasional international agreements.

The phenomenon of neoliberal globalization has aroused resentment among many, however, and if we add mass migration and the clash of different cultures to the harmful effects of a consumer society, we should not be surprised if they try to defend themselves against it in one way or the other. Of the more aloof tendencies defending uniqueness against uniformity and other cultures, nationalism is the most common, in which the loyalty and commitment of the individual to the nation-state is superior to that of community with all other groups. Although most countries in the world today can be described as essentially nation-states, in that they are mostly based on a common geographical area, language, culture and history, the degree of openness to others may vary widely depending on the distribution of views among their populations and the prevailing political outlook.

But as external influences multiply today, many of us instinctively react by closing ourselves off from them, and nationalism is on the rise in many places at the social level. This is the reason why more and more right-wing parties of a nationalist or even extreme right-wing nature are gaining popularity almost all over the world, occasionally putting them in government. Generally speaking, in times of crisis, nationalism tends to grow, which in turn is often exploited by leaders to strengthen their own position. Through their considerable propaganda apparatus, these politicians send out messages to society that fill the population with constant anxiety about external influences and threats, which tend to get exaggerated in the various media. This kind of populism is in stark contrast to national liberalism, which is now a worn-out ideology representing another strand in nationalism, which, while preserving national culture, historical identity and traditions, adheres to the ideals of European or international liberalism.

At the same time, there are several levels and varieties of nationalism, ranging essentially from patriotism and national liberalism, through conservatism and national radicalism, to chauvinism and the National Socialism that has become notorious as Nazism. The problem is that while the latter system, marked by Adolf Hitler's authoritarianism, which killed millions of people on racial-ethnic grounds, is now condemned by almost everyone in the world (although there are still some spiritual heirs), milder but in its own way harmful manifestations of nationalism are still very popular and common today. And behind these manifestations, unfortunately, there is far more chauvinist emotion and reasoning than we might think.

In this respect, chauvinism implies an exaggerated, even blindfold patriotism, and an unjustified degree of partiality towards the culture, language, land or group of people to which or whom we claim to belong. Consequently, on the other side of the equation, there

is often a sense of exclusion, rejection and superiority towards other people and cultures, which, depending on the country and its traditions, may even be reflected in a belief in the use of military force. But apart from extreme patriotism, chauvinism in other forms is not a rare phenomenon, either – think of male chauvinism, which proclaims the superiority of men, or racial chauvinism, which places man in a position of dominance over all other living beings. In this context, it is perhaps not so surprising why we still encounter racism so often today, whether at an individual or systemic level...

Such manifestations of nationalism can therefore be seen as a form of discrimination, which in turn does not necessarily indicate the highest degree of civilization in a society. Namely the mere fact that another people or group of people has a different language, culture or skin color from ours does not mean that we deserve more or better than them, and even if we happen to be more advanced socially, economically or technologically, it does not give us the right to excel at their expense. This goes beyond mere patriotism and the defence of one's own culture, which in itself is not a problem, as opposed to the accompanying discrimination within and across borders, for which patriotism and national identity are often used as a pretext. Radical nationalism, however, is generally not helpful for international cooperation and joint problem-solving, and in a crisis situation it can further intensify the antagonism between nations and ethnic groups.

Nationalist parties and politicians, of course, prefer to claim that they are protecting the members of the nation and their interests, but what their long-term interests really are is a complex question – sustainability, for example, is often the last thing mentioned, if it is mentioned at all. But, as we are increasingly discovering, belonging to the whole of humanity is even more ancient and more important than belonging to a nation, and nationalism and chauvinism are by no means an appropriate response to neoliberal globalization. The struggle between nations for various resources, money and power, or for whatever reason, is as absurd and primitive to the civilized eye as two packs of wolves fighting each other for prey or territory.

Speaking of territorial struggles: as far as such debates and demands are concerned, everyone can have more or less the same rights to a territory as anyone who has ever seen the light of day on planet Earth. After all, essentially all forests, fields, mountains, lakes, rivers, seas and oceans are part of it, and we are only temporary users of everything that it makes available to us for the duration of our lives. The question of the law of certain territories is not so simple, if only because in many cases they have been occupied by one people over long centuries and millennia, and then by another (often virtually exterminating the people who lived there before), but because of their mortality, no one can really form a perpetual right to any territory.

Nevertheless, one must obviously take into account the land cultivated over a long period by the same people or community, the settlements they have built, the scientific, cultural and other heritage they have created, which in most cases has only enriched the history of that area. Therefore, a socially agreed right of enjoyment and use should prevail, at least

as far as individuals and communities are concerned – but for-profit organizations such as energy and other companies should be granted at most a limited right of use, also by social consent. In order to live together peacefully, there must also be a willingness to compromise on territory, respecting, among other things, cultural heritage monuments – even if they happen to belong to other cultures.

We must never forget, however, that while we can artificially draw lines at will – especially if we have the strength and power to do so –, they will not remain forever where we have left them. On the one hand, this is true because nature rearranges the image of every landscape over time, and on the other, because globalization is as inevitable in the long run as the migration and redrawing of continents on top of the Earth's fragmented rock plates.

Perhaps You dislike globalization? Or at least some aspects of it? Well, as You can probably guess by now, Dear Reader, I do, too. Unfortunately, we cannot deal with some of its components, whether we like it or not, because they are simply the result of the laws of nature and the nature of intelligent beings. As our numbers grow on the planet, as we move around more easily and quickly, and as we learn more about our whole world through the flow of information and become more open, we are more eager to visit places for recreation, experience, culture and even settlement that are different from our birthplace and home environment. And for refugees and immigrants, the most common reason is obviously to protect their lives and the lives of their loved ones, and to hope for a better life with more opportunities.

For some time, it may be possible to impede the flow of people and their migration through some kind of political, legal, physical, military or other restriction or barrier. But in the long term, there is no force that can stop the masses if they really want to move. However, this is perfectly understandable and not at all unnatural in the sense that, as I have already mentioned, all country and state borders, as well as territorial divisions are temporary and artificial, created by groups of people over time. But the combination of intensifying migration and population growth is completely changing everything that used to define our world of countless societies and communities of more or less isolated groups. As Kofi Annan, former Secretary General of the United Nations, once wittily observed: "It has been said that arguing against globalization is like arguing against the law of gravity."

But even though globalization is inevitable in the long run, it does matter a lot how it takes place. If we want to create a world with more solidarity, cooperation and sustainability, it seems clear that something quite different is needed instead of a colonialist, imperialist and then neoliberal globalization that sees the globe as a playground for power, finance and raw materials, exploiting it as it wills. However, a fundamental shift in political attitudes seems essential to promote change, and this can only be achieved through the conscious action of a significant proportion of the world's citizens.

If we are to avoid facing a future fraught with constant hostilities, show of force, military and other forms of warfare because irresponsible leaders are concerned with unilateral gain and retaliation for real or perceived grievances rather than with what is really

important, we must not support them. If we are not careful, even as citizens of a Western world that has long been free of major warfare, we may well be forced to experience the horrors of war, because lasting peace is by no means guaranteed – indeed, the more serious the crisis, the more and bigger the wars we may face. We must therefore make our protests heard and even get involved in public affairs as much as possible. We need to elect and keep in office leaders who believe that cooperation and the pooling of our knowledge, skills and other resources is more important than rivalry between nations, gaining political and economic advantage at all costs.

As a citizen of a (seemingly) strong country which is or aspires to be in a position of a great power, You may of course ask, Dear Reader, why You should do anything against leaders, politicians or industry magnates who are promoting the interests of Your own nation against those of others. Well, in that case, you may want to consider the following:

- Is it really good for everyone, or at least for the majority, in Your country, the way leaders are governing (including poverty and inequality in particular)?
- Is it the interests of the majority of the people or only of a narrow elite, banks and big corporations that are decisive?
- How well are human and civil liberties guaranteed?
- How do leaders treat their rivals? Do they treat them democratically and respectfully, or do they try to topple them and push them aside?
- To what extent does Your country's policy contribute to ensuring and maintaining peace?
- To what extent do Your leaders seek to maintain good relations with other nations and alliances?
- How inclined are they to compromises, international cooperation and solidarity?
- Are they concerned enough with the global problems of social and environmental sustainability – or are they after their (or even their nation's) own short-term benefits while the general, increasingly urgent crisis remains unresolved or unmitigated?

I hope You too, Dear Reader, will see why we should not support leaders who are hostile to others because of cultural or ethnic differences, or because of their own ambitions, nor those who ally themselves with such leaders for their own self-interest. The powerful who act in the interests of a narrow group of people directly threaten world peace and social sustainability, and indirectly or directly threaten environmental sustainability. And support for radical nationalism and power games, whether active or passive, is also not an attitude that is consistent with the ideals of long-term sustainability.

In the absence of close international cooperation, our ability to solve the global problems and mitigate crises, as outlined above, will be minimal. If such an attitude does become the dominant one in the future, then for us, the ordinary people who make up the majority of the world's population, it will mean that the (existential) uncertainty we experience will not only decrease, but increase dramatically.

Looking at things realistically, on the basis of past experience, it is of course not easy to imagine a lasting, essentially worldwide coalition. What kind of and how big an existential crisis must occur before necessity overrides hostility and rivalry, making people more tolerant and cooperative? Experience has shown that it is quite big – it is no coincidence that in various stories and films this usually happens only when one party or character saves the life of another, or in some other way demonstrates a kind of selflessness that can break down the walls between the two 'worlds'.

The question is simply: do we really want to wait for such a crisis to happen before we realize the need for profound change and concerted action?

Technology Strikes Back?

The use of nuclear weapons is one of the greatest threats created by the wars of nations. Although this sense of danger is much less acute today than it was during the Cold War, when many in US-led NATO and the Warsaw Pact countries were seriously preparing for a nuclear apocalypse (some even built their own underground bunkers), the memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki has not yet completely disappeared from the public consciousness. The US Air Force dropped newly developed atomic bombs on the two Japanese cities in August 1945, killing more than 120,000 people in total – but the radiation released by the explosion later killed tens of thousands more and, in the longer term, caused hundreds of thousands more to suffer from its harmful effects.

In the seventy-five years since then, nuclear weapons have only become more sophisticated and destructive, and when used in the dozens, we may not even be able to imagine the devastation they can cause, whether to people and wildlife, to our settlements and the infrastructure we have built. But the experimental evidence suggests that, if deployed en masse, they would be capable of devastating large areas of our planet and rendering them completely uninhabitable, with residual radiation that would make human life impossible in all the zones concerned for at least decades. And that's not even mentioning the so-called nuclear winter: the widespread fires that would follow the explosions would release a lot of smoke into the atmosphere, which in extreme cases would block out the sun's rays and thus reduce the Earth's surface temperature to such an extent that our agriculture would be unable to produce almost anything for months or even years.

While we would all like to believe that such a thing cannot happen – after all, it was avoided all the way through the Cold War, including the highly escalated Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 – there is no guarantee of that. (As Vladimir Putin reminded us when he put Russia's nuclear deterrent forces on high alert in 2022.) According to the UN, there are currently around 14,000 nuclear weapons in the world, the smallest of which could kill tens of thousands of people in a crowded city. Of these, those equipped with long-range intercontinental ballistic missiles have a good chance of reaching their target from thousands of kilometers away, once fired, as interceptor systems still have a questionable efficiency of stopping them.

To the best of our knowledge today – which obviously includes information gathered by the intelligence services of the most advanced states – nine countries possess such means of destruction: the US, the UK, Russia, France, China, India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea. This pretty much covers the list of the world's current great powers, although there are one or two dark horses, of which probably the totally authoritarian North Korea, which almost completely closed in on itself and is paranoid about the outside world (especially the United States), is probably the most insecure. At the same time, Iran, located in the Middle East's trouble spot, is also a questionable case: although it does not officially have a nuclear arsenal, while it agreed to curb its nuclear program in 2015, some say it has not

lived up to the agreement. Moreover, the US withdrew from it in 2018, and Iran openly refused to cooperate as tensions and hostility between the two countries grew.

Although there are bilateral and multilateral international agreements, these change from time to time (or are abrogated), and there is no single regulation or plan to deal with the situation. While the US, the UK and Russia have reduced their arsenals somewhat, the likes of China and North Korea are increasing theirs, as well as Pakistan and India, who's been long in conflict with each other – but even the former are not willing to disarm completely, modernizing their existing arsenals to make them more precise and more destructive instead. In addition, so-called tactical nuclear weapons, which are less destructive but more plentiful, are subject to far fewer regulations than their larger counterparts. Thus, if tensions between nations tend to grow, nuclear weapons could pose an increasing threat, simply by their very existence.

It is true that nuclear weapons can usually be launched and armed by means of a special and highly sophisticated multi-stage security system. In some cases, however, it may be enough for something to go wrong just once, and there are always radicals, fanatics and wayward leaders, just as there can be infiltrators. On the other hand, not all nuclear powers necessarily have the same strict protocols, which may make it easier for some to use nuclear weapons prematurely, especially under an aggressive, dictatorial leader. (Even though the subject is thoroughly caricatured in Stanley Kubrick's 1964 film satire Dr. Strangelove, the piece is nevertheless thought-provoking and reflects certain aspects of human nature. Fail Safe, on the other hand, deals with the problem in a much more serious tone and from a slightly different, albeit equally important angle.)

To avoid a possible disaster, it would therefore be important to withdraw and dispose of nuclear weapons completely as soon as possible, or at least to radically minimize their number, while distributing parts of their launch codes internationally, so that they can be used for peaceful purposes, such as preventing an asteroid impact. Accordingly, the UN's 2018 document titled Securing Our Common Future: An Agenda for Disarmament addresses the problem in the context of "disarmament to save humanity". In it, the Secretary-General of the organization calls for the resumption of negotiations on nuclear arms control and disarmament. It also supports the extension of standards on nuclear weapons, and in this context reminds states with such devices that since a nuclear war cannot be won, it should not be started in the first place. Finally, it proposes to pave the way for a world without nuclear weapons through various risk reduction measures, including transparency in nuclear weapons programs, further reductions in all types of nuclear weapons, as well as the avoidance of the introduction of new and destabilizing nuclear weapons.

While all this sounds really nice, success may well require the populations of all countries concerned, and indeed the entire world, to take a stand to promote disarmament in earnest. And not just for nuclear weapons, because mankind now has many different technical means of mass destruction. In most cases, including chemical weapons that can cause so

much death and suffering, this is clear – the problem is that some of our instruments of warfare are so insidious that we, ordinary people, know virtually nothing about their existence. These include, for example, pathogens artificially cultivated in secret laboratories, which we are unable to defend ourselves against because of their unknown structure, and which, in extreme cases, could actually be capable of wiping out the entire human race.

A similarly insidious, but now commonplace, form of warfare is called 'cyber warfare', which operates with virtual rather than real pathogens, used in hacking into computer systems. Although at most indirectly endangering human lives, it can still cause huge damage to various manufacturing and energy production systems, power grids, utilities, transportation and even health care. Just think about it, Dear Reader, what would happen in a congested city if there were a long-lasting power cut, or if someone changed the data and medical records of patients in a hospital database...

This is possible because nowadays almost all processes are controlled and monitored via computers, most of which are connected to the internet, but this also makes systems in remote locations accessible to hackers. Thus, if they are not adequately protected against such attacks, they can be seriously damaged. Moreover, cyber warfare threatens us as individuals as much as it does companies or various government and non-governmental organizations – through our computers and the mobile devices we all have in our pockets, and because the Internet of Things is increasingly connecting the various electronic and smart devices in our homes, they can also be a target. Our world is increasingly interconnected, as is the World Wide Web, which carries vast amounts of information and has remote control capabilities.

Cyber warfare can be used for political and economic purposes, or purely out of hatred – in other words, it can be a means of terrorism, just as much as it can be a tool of a person or organization seeking to make a profit, or a totalitarian state power that constantly controls and intimidates its citizens. Today, it is possible to attack or observe someone without even being present, aided by flying drones, 'all-seeing' satellites, or even webcams that are common on computing devices. Supplemented by modern technology and the ever-evolving artificial intelligence, cyberspace is now a major arena of international rivalry. It is in this arena that the cyber arms race takes place, which is in fact something like the Cold War, where there was no direct confrontation between the parties, but rather they watched and hurt each other through a network of spies and their agencies.

This type of long-distance warfare is also possible because there is no uniform regulation for the operation or restriction of the cross-border World Wide Web. Even though there are some general directives, there can be significant differences between countries' laws: while in some places they cover a wide range of details and have specific restrictions, in others they are much more permissive. In the West and in developed countries in general, the latter is the predominant case, although the need for stricter regulation is raised from time to time. But it seems that with the freedom of the internet comes the inevitable

threat of cyber warfare, which means that even our most private or personal data is not always safe.

So we have to protect ourselves in some way – it's no coincidence that we hear so much these days about effective encryption, reliable firewalls and software updates. Hackers and security system developers are always trying to stay one step ahead of the other, and the situation may not be too bad as long as the latter can follow the former's newer and newer methods and programs. However, intelligent software, endowed with the ever-evolving capabilities of machine learning, risks not only making it easier to defend in the longer term, but also giving attackers a better chance of success. What's more, the number of security professionals is starting to lag behind the growing pool of cybercriminals... It is therefore not too unrealistic to estimate that online attacks, which caused more than USD 3 thousand billion (!) in damage worldwide in 2015 alone, could amount to USD 10.5 thousand billion – three and a half times as much – by 2025.

Therefore, if the cyber warfare gets really tough, it may even be a possible scenario that the era of the free World Wide Web will soon come to an end. Nevertheless, the radical restriction, possible disintegration or termination of the internet would be a huge loss to all of humanity. Beyond the many conveniences it offers, both in telecommunication and in the way we access information and shop, the web can be essentially the best and most effective tool for leveling social inequalities and preserving our freedom. It allows us to explore far-flung landscapes, languages and cultures at little or no cost, constantly improve our knowledge, learn about what's happening and how the world works, compare lifestyles, products and prices, and exchange opinions and experiences. We can even come together in an organized way to stand up against injustice, to protect the environment, to ensure transparency in politics and the economy, and to take action on other important issues.

It's a fact that there is a dark side to the internet – and I'm not just thinking about the Dark Web, which is invisible to traditional browsers and full of illegal content. Nowadays, it is often difficult to distinguish real facts from fake information on the traditional web, which has led to the internet becoming a repository and the main disseminator of conspiracy theories, most of which are completely untrue, but which are still extremely popular. But as well as sharing all sorts of fake news, false- or misinformation, it is equally damaging to our societies when people insult and provoke other people or groups they don't like, anonymously, under a pseudonym or even under their own name.

So there must be some kind of control and moderation, Dear Reader, because think about it: if our behavior is constrained by various rules in the real world, doesn't it seem natural and logical that our interactions in the digital world should be subject to similar rules? However, it would be a big mistake to radically restrict the freedom of online communication and exchange of ideas – of which there are unfortunately several examples, the first of which coming to mind is probably China that defends communist state power tooth and nail. In the more democratic countries (mainly in the West), which are more commit-

ted to freedom of expression, it is unlikely that there will be similar strictures or more serious restrictions on citizens' access to the internet. However, it is an open question whether this would remain the case even if the risks and losses due to disinformation and cyber warfare outweighed the benefits of the web's economic stimulus, and the current world order became jeopardized…

However, if we really want to minimize effective or potential damage, the most important thing is probably to live as peacefully as possible, and to do everything possible to reduce social inequalities, exclusion and marginalization, cybercrime and rivalry between different interest groups. As is usually the case, the best and most effective defence is prevention, which could render similar actions and attacks largely unnecessary in the future. Therefore, it would certainly be inadvisable to focus solely on outperforming our rivals in terms of cyber technology and skills, as it is just as important to have as few rivals as possible – just as the great power that produces the most nuclear bombs to outperform everyone else will not necessarily win the nuclear arms race, either. So, in essence, with all our technological achievements, we need to know not only how to produce and operate them, but also how, when and what to use them for.

In the light of the above, the fact that there is a lack of harmony between humanity and the means it invents and creates its technological tools is now clearly visible, in so far as our socio-intellectual-moral development is not quite able to keep pace with the explosive development of technology. And this is not only true for weapons of mass destruction or environmentally damaging and climate-changing technologies – our dependence on many of our cutting-edge inventions is evidence of our mental backwardness, which has been particularly prevalent over the last century, and is only increasing. These include our various machines, appliances and vehicles, as well as many of the achievements of the so-called information society, from computers to the internet and social networks. Today, many of us cannot imagine our lives without a washing machine, refrigerator, microwave, car, television, internet and mobile phone, while we are slowly becoming unwilling to walk or write with a pen, or even think.

But getting too comfortable as technology advances, however natural a reaction it may be, is not good for our physical or mental well-being in the long run. The number of obese people worldwide has almost tripled since 1975: in 2016, around a quarter of the total global population, 1.9 billion adults, were overweight, of which at least 650 million were considered obese. Unfortunately, more and more children fall into the latter category, which is a big problem because being significantly overweight is associated with serious health problems like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, musculoskeletal disorders and certain types of tumors.

Somewhat strangely, however, the richer a country, the higher the proportion of obese people in its population is far from always being the case. This is mainly due to the fact that low and middle income nations and groups tend to eat cheaper and unhealthier food,

and often lack the time and energy to counteract the negative effects of this through regular exercise or sport. In fact, due to financial and lifestyle issues, it is not uncommon for obesity and malnutrition to co-exist in a society, community or even household. This is yet another injustice of social inequality that we may no longer be surprised by...

On the other hand, the correlation between technological innovation and our intellectual impoverishment seems somewhat clearer. Our increasingly sophisticated machines and devices are making our lives easier by freeing up more time – but what we do with that time is another matter. Our dependence on computers, game consoles, mobile phones, the web and social media is increasingly leading us – especially the younger generations – to spend a significant part of our lives 'escaping' into a virtual world that is becoming more and more difficult to get rid of. While video game addiction can be as serious as alcohol or drug addiction, it is by no means our biggest problem. I don't know about You, Dear Reader, but I personally find that many people today can't go a moment without their phone and the social network or other application run by it, often unaffected even by the company of flesh and blood people around them.

The biggest problem with this kind of virtual existence is that, even without the spreaders of fake news, the followers with dubious intentions or the violent and provocative 'trolls', it is highly doubtful how real these relationships are. Superficial, mostly context-free and fast-paced interactions become monotonous and empty over time, and the sharing, ostentation and constant competition of the status symbols we have bought eventually lead to a lack of credibility. In the virtual space, most of us try to present ourselves in an even better light than in reality, showing a kind of idealized image, which can also be harmful. Complemented by following and imitating others, it can easily create a distorted frame of reference, which in turn can lead to a kind of false self-image over time.

Of course, social media in general is not designed with the intent for people to be themselves, as shown by the fact that the constant presence online and the compulsion to capture all (or at least the best) moments takes away the real joy and pleasure of experiencing real experiences, pushing us further towards addiction. To avoid this, we need to learn in time to put things in perspective, with the help of those close to us, including friends, educators and teachers. Failure to do so – which is particularly a threat for young people and adolescents with little experience – can lead to emotional burnout, identity crisis and even loneliness, and can be associated with anxiety and, in worse cases, depression. And at the societal level, we can speak of a phenomenon of alienation from one another in terms of online relationships, despite the fact that the purpose of our telecommunication tools is supposed to be to bring us closer together.

This is why it is crucial to use our technological and digital tools in the right way and with the right culture, while always being aware of the reality of the world around us. So we also need to know that social networks are no substitute for real relationships and direct contact between people, and that a real friend is someone you can always count on when you're in trouble. Another lesson is that an excessive online presence is by no means

an ideal way of self-actualization. Technology cannot help us in this way, only if we use it to develop our true selves. The COVID-19 pandemic has hopefully proved to be an opportunity for many to reassess things, so that if we have fewer opportunities to meet in person, we can at least try to deepen and add value to our online relationships.

While the mentioned aspects of the information society can at most be partly made responsible for the dehumanization of human beings, in the not too distant future, the number of technological applications that can deprive us of the essence of our humanity may increase dramatically. These can include artificial modifications and implants that alter and enhance our bodies, and with them our various abilities. For the time being, the general use of biotechnological devices is concentrated on medical purposes, to eliminate disabilities caused by various injuries and diseases, such as impaired or lost vision and hearing, to replace amputated limbs, to regulate heart rhythms or to treat various neurological disorders, such as epileptic seizures, with the help of a tiny electronic device implanted in the brain.

Nevertheless, similar technologies will likely have the potential, over time, to radically increase the physical strength, speed or resilience of otherwise healthy people, or even enhance or modify their mental abilities (mental capacity, speed of decision-making), by removing emotional and moral inhibitions, for example. Although these may be more typical for military use at the moment, we shall have no doubts that such experiments do exist, or that there is civilian demand for such solutions on some individuals part. Even though such interventions raise serious ethical questions, which in many of us also arouse strong resentment, rivalry on different fronts can, in the long run, lead some people to do almost anything to gain an advantage over others. So what is considered science fiction today may soon become an integral part of reality...

Even though if one undergoes several 'technical upgrades', it could be difficult to tell after a while where the machine begins and the human ends, it is generally true that the more artificial parts we have, and the more mechanized we become in our thinking, the less human we are. On the mental front, the routine of everyday life, the high threshold of stimuli and emotionlessness, the loss of inhibitions, the lack of capacity for compassion and kindness can all be warning signs that we are heading in the wrong direction, either on an individual or a social level. And in terms of the point, it doesn't really matter whether our technological devices affect us inside or outside our bodies, if the result is basically the same.

Genetic engineering and modifications, which are also part of biotechnology, are distinct in that they are typically less dehumanizing, but also involve interference with natural processes and raise very serious ethical questions. In the last decade or so, scientists have been able to delete, alter, and rearrange the genetic material containing the genetic code in almost any living thing, including man himself. Experiments worldwide have succeeded in correcting the most serious genetic defects, including mutations responsible for

muscular dystrophy, cystic fibrosis and a form of hepatitis that causes inflammation of the liver. At the same time, though, the method can also be used to modify human embryos not only to correct various genetic abnormalities to avoid the development of disease, but also to enhance and improve certain traits selected at will. Moreover, unlike implants and other treatments, these are passed on from the treated person to their offspring, which can give them a number of advantages over their peers.

The mapping of the human genome has certainly opened up a world of possibilities, which in the future may even allow doctors to 'adjust' certain characteristics of unborn children, such as eye and hair color, height, etc., as determined by the parents. The dangers of this are highlighted, among other, by the 1997 film Gattaca, in which society is made up of genetically enhanced and biologically superior people, as well as those born in the traditional way. However, instead of a better and sustainable future, this could easily lead to a caste system, potentially resulting in more discrimination, inequality and conflict.

Human DNA modification should not be overdone, if only because of the risks of unwanted effects – however, I believe that we must not overlook the positive, life-saving and life-enhancing effects of genetic engineering and manipulation. If we have the ability to heal and save people, or even to protect a new life from disease and suffering, how ethical is it not to intervene? A common criticism against meddling with our genes is that it is unnatural – but just because something is natural, it does not necessarily mean it is good or bad. For example, sunlight, no matter how much we need it to live, can cause sunburn or even skin cancer under certain conditions. The various pathogens also come from nature, and yet we are working to combat and eliminate the diseases they cause.

So I think that if it is necessary, we cannot reject the use of genetic engineering indefinitely – the important thing is that it should be as safe as possible. For practical application, however, even though there are no clearly defined boundaries, we need to know how far we can go, how long we can truly remain human. To do this, we need to reach some kind of consensus among the wider society, rather than having a few individuals take decisions arbitrarily on such a sensitive and crucial issue.

In my opinion, it should always be kept in mind that genetic interventions can be considered justified when they are beneficial not only for a single person or a minority, but for society as a whole, improving people's overall quality of life. This can, for instance, include immune enhancement – we must not forget that our civilized lifestyles in our societies often mean that people who would not have the opportunity to do so in a natural lifestyle survive and pass on their less advantageous genes that predispose their offspring to disease and other problems. As a result, it is feared that the genetic pool of humanity – and hence the health, physical and mental abilities of our descendants – will be increasingly degraded by artificial counterselection. To compensate for this problem, various gene modification technologies could certainly be considered, provided they are used in a sufficiently regulated and ethical manner. The most precise and stringent regulation possible would also be important to ensure that the necessary technologies can be properly applied

in medicine and even in the prevention of disease, while modifications that seek to guarantee certain advantages against others or to standardize people can be banned and filtered out.

Confronting such dilemmas, however difficult and complex they may be, is an intrinsic part of the existence of an intelligent species, in a context of constant change and evolution, which in turn always presents us with new situations. In any case, we could consider it a general directive that, if we do not want to relinquish control of our own destiny, technology must serve man, not the other way around. It is therefore critical for the preservation of our humanity and diversity that the development and application of our technologies should not be an end, but only a means – as we have already discussed in relation to the other material 'relative' of technology, money. Along this line, biotechnology should only go as far as it serves to preserve our health, improve our quality of life and our life prospects, and helps to maintain a balance with nature. The latter, on the other hand, is an aspect that we must ultimately always bear in mind if we want to do good for ourselves and for human civilization.

Like everything else in general, science and technology can be used for good and bad. But as intelligent, curious and creative creatures, it is our lifeblood to explore, to learn more and more about how our world works, and to use the knowledge our species has accumulated. What's more, it seems unrealistic to expect anyone to abstain completely if they are able to do something that they can do good to others or even save lives, just so that everything can continue in its natural course. Which, by the way, we will never be able to put into practice, because we have been constantly interfering with the processes of nature for thousands of years, from the domestication of animals and plants to the building of villages, cities, industry and infrastructure, and the creation of new forms of life.

And far from thinking only of living beings that we have modified, domesticated, cloned or otherwise genetically manipulated in one way or another, I also refer to entirely artificial creatures. I am not surprised, Dear Reader, if You have never thought of robots, computers and machines that mimic or learn human activity or thinking in such a way, but this could change radically in the not too distant future. We may be only decades away from being unable to distinguish between a life form we have created and a naturally born creature. In fact, even today, there are computer programs that, when you start a conversation with them, you may not be able to tell that it is not another person at the other end of the 'line '. (This is what scientists call passing the Turing test.)

While there is undoubtedly still a lot of room for improvement, artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly becoming an integral part of our lives. Self-driving cars, personal assistants on smartphones, video games with virtual opponents, smart homes with centralized control of devices, or personalized online advertising are some of the most prominent examples, but applications in customer services, finance, healthcare, security, industry, agriculture, and even education and the arts are also becoming common. Virtually all scientific

disciplines can benefit from the application of increasingly advanced machine learning and AI: physicists use it to study the fundamental laws of nature, engineers to automate monotonous, repetitive tasks and design more advanced technologies, biologists to discover new drugs to cure diseases, and doctors to provide better diagnoses and therapies. And this will become even more so in the future, as more sophisticated software and scientific breakthroughs are made – meaning that the further development of machine intelligence for cultural, economic and scientific reasons has huge potential for human civilization as a whole.

But despite the many different ways that AI can make our lives easier, more colorful and more fun, we must not forget that it also has some downsides. Targeted, personalized advertising, for example, while stimulating the economy, can increase our dependence on consumption, and can even be annoying if we regularly spend more than we want or can afford. In addition, the operation of some AI-based systems is far from perfect, and any failures can lead to very unpleasant situations and costs, and in extreme cases, even human injury or death.

The first fatal accident involving self-driving cars occurred in March 2018 in the US state of Arizona, which also raised the question of liability, as neither human error nor mechanical failure was entirely to blame. But if there is already an issue regarding self-driving cars, we need to see there is a general dilemma about when and after what trials and tests we should allow potentially harmful applications and systems to be used. For example, if an AI-guided drone destroys a civilian building instead of the intended military target, who should or can be held responsible? In order to decide, in addition to investigating cases after the event, it is also essential to clarify – in advance, as far as possible – any legal and regulatory issues, but this would require a uniform and transparent system, preferably internationally agreed.

Errors are expected to become rarer over time, as AI evolves and we gradually become more accustomed to its presence and use - but the ethical and social implications that emerge may determine the future of the technology and our relationship to it in the long term. After all, computers can learn, solve problems, plan, recognize human speech or even human behavior in vain if, unlike us, they do not have the empathy and wisdom to make appropriate decisions in every situation. To what extent, and in what form, can we unleash the various applications of AI in society, which can be seen as limited in this way?

The situation regarding the acceptance of AI is made more difficult by the fact that we consider practically only perfection to be sufficient for such technologies, and we tend to be caught by possible flaws even if people make many times as many mistakes in the same areas. One of the things we expect from machines is that they should not be biased – after all, that's partly why we use them –, but if the data they are fed (sex, skin color, etc.) happens to be biased, it can show up in the results and in their decisions as well. In addition, many of us have a strong sense of uncertainty, aversion, even fear, about the possible rise

of AI and its future applications, because we do not know what to expect from an increasingly intelligent but morally indifferent or confused structure.

It is no coincidence that there is more and more talk about scenarios that have so far only been seen in Terminator, The Matrix or other similar science-fiction productions, or read on the pages of books where machines confront their creators. From the point of view of our future, there is a very legitimate question: if AI-driven computers and robots become more intelligent than humans, might they become self-aware, consider us 'obsolete' and take over, or wipe us all out? Although this is a problem that does not pose a direct threat to us in the present, it is of crucial importance in terms of the principles and framework within which we proceed with the related developments. Just as it makes a lot of difference whether, once the technology is more sophisticated, we should create artificial life forms, and if so, how and under what conditions we can ethically put them together with flesh and blood humans.

However things turn out, it may be wise not to leave life-and-death decisions to chance as much as possible, and therefore not to trust them to an AI system, however advanced it may be, but not perfectly known in its decision-making mechanism. For example, it's hardly a good idea to let a supercomputer work on a vaccine against a virus all by itself – for who's to stop it if it decides to work on making the pathogen even more deadly instead of developing an antidote, after all?

But, as we know, automatic weapons, drones, autonomous flying, ground and underwater killing devices already exist in increasing numbers, even if their use often results in unintended destruction and civilian casualties, which raises serious questions about the ethics of their deployment. Given that a machine cannot necessarily distinguish between a child and an adult, a person clutching a rifle or a broom, an enemy combatant or a soldier signaling surrender, it is not surprising that many are calling for a ban on war machines that operate without human intervention. These efforts, however, have so far met with brick walls, as the production of automatic weapons is as lucrative a business for the companies and interested parties as the centuries-old production and trade in conventional weapons.

There can be no doubt that there is a strong need for detailed and clear legislation on newer technologies (as well), preferably based on social debate and consensus. Regardless of current public opinion, however, we must keep in mind not to only consider our own short-term, selfish interests – including material benefits –, but also the possible consequences, when making our decisions and making the relevant laws. Therefore, in the development of artificial intelligence and robots, we need to make a clear distinction between the category of machines that are designed to be as similar as possible to humans, and those that are specifically made to perform different jobs and tasks. While in the case of the latter, we need to ensure that – beyond ensuring their safe operation – they are not too smart, advanced and human-like, only as far as is really necessary, the former should be the categorized in the subject of creating artificial life forms (such as androids).

But from the moment we give something consciousness or even emotions, and thus basically life (if that is possible at all), it is no longer our tool or our property, but essentially our child. So we need to be aware that in our quest to create machines that are as versatile and as human-like as possible – and thus much easier for many of us to tolerate –, we may eventually reach the point where we bring forth a new species that is not actually flesh and blood, but is otherwise similar to us humans. Not treating our own creatures accordingly is tantamount to slavery – but we know from history all too well that self-aware slaves will sooner or later rebel against their masters.

Another aspect of the fear of machines that also raises a fateful problem is human labor becoming redundant. The ever-evolving MI, the increasingly versatile robots, and the expanding automation mean the loss of more and more jobs, which we have already begun to experience in many areas, from factories to various office jobs. According to a study by the McKinsey Institute in 2017, the number of jobs lost to mechanization could reach 800 million worldwide by 2030, and Oxford University researchers in 2013 estimated that 47% of jobs in the US and around half of jobs in Europe could be at high risk from automation by the early 2030s. Expectations and experience so far suggest that those in well-paid jobs requiring creativity and complex thinking should be the least worried about losing their jobs, along with those who are not highly skilled but require more manual dexterity, complex movements or social sensitivity. But in between, human labor could become redundant in countless areas, including accounting, administration and customer services.

So the question arises: to what extent must we or should we promote job automation in the future, if it makes the livelihoods of masses of people precarious or impossible? The problem will first and foremost affect the economies of more developed countries, where it could further increase social inequalities. If machines are replacing live workers in an increasing number of jobs, company owners and shareholders essentially benefit, because robots and computers do not need to be paid, so the money invested in them will pay for itself many times over. Meanwhile, the increased number of unemployed leads to an increase in poverty, while on the other hand, the rich get even richer. However, as already discussed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this could sooner or later lead to a dysfunctional economy (due to a drastic fall in solvent demand), and eventually to a breakdown of social order, as social tensions escalate and spiral out of control.

For the time being, experts hope that the number of jobs lost due to automation will be outweighed by the number of new jobs created in other areas, and by the total number of positions required for the commissioning, supervision and maintenance of machinery. While there may be some rationale for this, in the longer term we can almost certainly expect machines to take over most of our production and service tasks, as a direct consequence of the evolution of technology and the human nature that drives it. In the evolution of an intelligent species, it is only natural that sooner or later, almost all the tasks of self-

preservation will be taken over by digital systems and AI-driven machines – and it will only be up to us to decide what to do with this epoch-making opportunity.

Indeed, the mechanization of jobs, if done in the right context, can help to even out social inequalities. This, of course, requires that the benefits generated should not be reaped by a narrow group of people, but should be shared by all, which obviously implies a fundamental reform of the redistribution system and the economy. At the same time, automation can compensate, or even solve, the problem of ageing in developed societies by the replacement of lost labor. While it is true that there will be a much larger number of people of retirement age, they will all receive a decent level of benefits, as long as they share in the profits generated by the machines and the benefits of a much more humane and equitable redistribution system. This new system, however, would not only provide pensions, but also a benefit or some kind of basic income for all members of society, which would solve the problem of the reduced number of jobs due to automation. (The introduction of unconditional basic income and its alternatives will be discussed in more detail later.)

As many of us start to feel the effects of this problem on our own skin, the question becomes more and more relevant, even unavoidable: what should we do if artificial intelligence and robotization increasingly replace humans and thus take jobs away from us? If this is done so that the goods and wealth produced by machines primarily serve their owners, further increasing social inequalities?

1) Shall we destroy machines like our ancestors did a couple of centuries ago, during the industrial revolution? Wrong answer. The spread of mechanization and automation is a natural process for any society of intelligent beings that considers itself (or at least aspires to be) civilized.

2) Shall we rise up in anger against the owners and try to take their place? Another wrong answer. This would not solve the problem at all, as it would replace it with an even bigger one. Especially when there is another, much better and more sustainable solution.

3) In fact, rationally speaking, our goal can only be to make the distribution of the goods and wealth produced by machines more even, so that everyone can benefit from them in a much more proportionate and equitable way. So the only good answer is to work together and do everything we can to make it happen.

Reflecting the growing prevalence of mechanization, the demand for such technologies in more developed countries has been boosted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, 41% of business leaders in 45 different countries decided to invest in automation because of the limited availability of human resources and the related challenges (e.g. another pandemic) that are key to the future. And although many people are concerned about the possible economic and social impact of this phenomenon, this is not a problem in itself, just as the development of technology and science in general shouldn't be seen as such.

The most vital condition for social sustainability is that the goods and services produced, and the income that comes from them, should benefit everyone, rather than being concentrated in the hands of a small minority, widening social gaps even further. In this way, it can be seen as an investment in the future of society – which, of course, must be done with maximum protection of our environment. (If You disagree, Dear Reader, perhaps because You Yourself are a company director, owner or shareholder, consider this: it is useless to make a large personal fortune in the near future if you do not achieve much in the long run, because the economy and society becomes dysfunctional and simply collapses around you.)

It is true that technological developments – along with scientific experiments and new discoveries – are often very resource-intensive and expensive, but they also serve progress and help us to better understand the world we live in, and ourselves in it. The overall state of development of a civilization is not only determined by its technical knowledge, but also by the way it relates to its members (and the members to each other), to its descendants and to all its creatures, and to nature, which is inherently life-giving for all. Moreover, in addition to allowing us to live in a more civilized way, in greater harmony with nature and with ourselves, technology and science open up a wide range of possibilities.

Another important aspect is that the order of things is constant change, which is also true of civilization – but that is why we have to constantly adapt to different circumstances. Therefore, the support of technology and science, the use of their achievements, their constant development and improvement are by no means negligible, in fact vital, but it can make a fundamental difference how we do all this. Above all, we must bear in mind that a truly modern and lasting civilization cannot be built on mere self-interest or material considerations. That's because in the long term, they lead to dehumanization, the moral bankruptcy and disintegration of our societies, and a permanent, potentially fatal, alienation from nature.

Our material and spiritual knowledge, our material and intellectual growth, our opportunities and our sense of responsibility must therefore evolve in parallel, ensuring a balance between the artificial and natural environment around us. If this is not the case, we cannot hope to create the harmony within our societies and with our environment that is essential to maintaining a species that fully populates and takes 'possession' of its planet. And since this balance can hardly be achieved by itself, since as self-conscious beings we are constantly manipulating our environment according to our own needs, according to our own ideas – one could say that by disturbing the natural order of things –, we ourselves must consciously take care of it, otherwise our civilization will not be viable for long.

Unsustainability and Civilizational Crisis

The problems and threats listed and detailed above were vital to account because they are very real, direct, and burning for all of humanity. Since they are scientifically sound, they do not even coincidentally fall into the same category as Y2K or 2012 doomsday predictions. (As for the former, fear of the allegedly catastrophic effects of the millennium date change on computer systems, and in case of the latter, the apocalypse according to a misinterpretation of the Mayan calendar caused the drastically exaggerated and also media-inflated mass hysteria.) However, they have all the more to do with the recently much talked-about sustainability – and not without reason – in that they can have a very serious impact on both human society and its living environment in the longer term.

The likelihood of each crisis actually happening, and if so, when, is anyone's guess, and even the most experienced scientists and the greatest minds can only guess based on the available data, theories, simulations and the like. But as humanity has never been in a situation like this before, unfortunately we have only limited experience to guide and facilitate protection. What we can do, however, is to do our utmost to prevent potential crises and mitigate the effects of different hazards, in line with the wisdom of the proverb 'Hope for the best and prepare for the worst'.

"But what could be the worst?" the legitimate question may arise in You, as well, Dear Reader. "Could it be that after just a few thousand years of civilization, our species is already on the brink of extinction?" Well, I dare say with almost certainty that humanity will not just suddenly go extinct – this would only happen in the extreme case that the planet becomes essentially uninhabitable (which would be unlikely even after a full-scale nuclear war), or if there is a targeted attack on the human race itself (for example by artificial intelligence, extraterrestrials or synthetic viruses)[*]. But Homo sapiens, or 'knowledgeable man', is an incredibly versatile, resourceful and adaptable creature, and one that is extremely widespread across the globe. So it is hard to imagine that after a catastrophe of even the severity of the great extinction events in the history of the Earth, there would not be at least 1-2% of survivors, which means millions with today's population.

Among others, an asteroid may impact that devastates an entire continent and then, through the dust, ash and other materials would flood the atmosphere, obscuring the sun for years, causing a global temperature drop, drastic crop failures and epidemics. Or a major volcanic eruption, or even several smaller ones, could cause similar damage to agriculture – in addition to the potential for air travel and freight to be completely paralyzed by hazardous flying conditions. The eruption of Iceland's Eyjafjallajökull volcano in April 2010 forced the grounding of most flights in Europe for 7 days, but the ash cloud continued to

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[*] According to current scientific knowledge, the most likely cause of the sudden extinction of the entire human race would be a cosmic calamity from outside our planet, such as a black hole that strayed into our solar system or a gamma-ray burst of nearby origin. But the chances of this or similar events happening are extremely small – so much so that they may not happen for billions of years.

cause partial disruptions for the following month. But there are much bigger and riskier volcanoes on our planet than Eyjafjallajökull: in the 19th century, for example, the eruption of Tambora in Indonesia, which killed around 100,000 people, caused winter in many regions of the world for years, with many people going hungry due to crop failure, and the ripple effects of the disaster were felt by millions around the globe. But the climate change that is now being talked about on a daily basis, if it gets out of hand, could lead to global warming on a scale that will make a significant part of the planet uninhabitable.

If similar events were to occur today, although they would not mean the total destruction of humanity, they would all have shocking consequences – not just locally, but on a global scale –, which illustrates our dependence on nature, no matter how much we try to deny it. Some we can do little or nothing to protect against: for example, we can predict the occurrence of volcanic eruptions, but we have little control over the consequences, the amount and distribution of volcanic ash and gases in the atmosphere. However, the monitoring of asteroids and other celestial bodies that could potentially threaten the Earth is now very extensive, and we have a better chance of avoiding potential impacts thanks to the solutions that scientists are developing and experimenting with. And some threats we clearly have the means to avert, or at least significantly mitigate, and are essentially only hindered by our current technologies and our dependence on them in doing so.

The latter are exemplified by geomagnetic storms, which are the result of a temporary increase in solar activity called coronal mass ejections, known colloquially as solar flares. During these, billions of charged particles from the Sun bombard the Earth's atmosphere (which is the source of the spectacular aurora borealis phenomenon), and if our planet's natural magnetic field is not able to contain the invaders, intense electromagnetic disturbances can occur on the surface. Such was the case with the Carrington incident of 1859, when the American telegraph network experienced such power surges that it was able to operate without any other source of electricity, and sparks from telegraph machines even set paper and furniture on fire in some places. What's more, the aurora, typically found only high up in the north, beyond the Arctic Circle, was so strong even much further south that it was enough to read a newspaper at night – and the spectacular light show was even observed in Cuba.

But whereas such a solar storm in the mid-19th century was mostly a minor inconvenience, a similar event today, in the age of the all-encompassing technological infrastructure, can have catastrophic consequences. The power stations, substations and networks of entire cities or regions could become completely inoperable, leaving homes, workplaces, shops, streets and more without electricity for days, weeks or even months. Potential disruptions to GPS (global positioning systems) would have a major impact on transportation, as would the loss of satellite communications, which many people cannot do without. It is one thing to have to endure darkness or cold in our homes, but if the blackout is prolonged, it could mean a disruption to utility services and, after a while, the continuity of food supplies. But if we were to go without electricity for just one day, that would cost a

metropolis the size of New York roughly $1 billion in lost economic activity and other damage.

In this light, however, the amounts needed for prevention may not seem so daunting. Although one study estimates that protecting the entire US power grid from atmospheric surges would cost between $20 billion and $30 billion – no small sum, of course –, when compared to how many times the electricity consumption of this huge country (with a population around 330 million) could be that of even one of its largest cities, it is clear that Americans would still be much better off building protection against the costs of a longer-term outage. And if you take into account the potential damage (which could be as much as $1-2 billion), including the economic and social impact of the shutdown and the months or years of economic and social disruption, there is no question that this is an investment that could not only pay for itself many times over, but could be a matter of life and death for many people.

Naturally, everyone is hoping that an event similar to the solar flare of 1859 will not happen again anytime soon. However, there is no guarantee that this will be the case, as the cyclical nature of solar activity means that similar phenomena tend to intensify every few years – in 1989, for example, a relatively small flare was enough to cause a half-day blackout across the entire province of Quebec in Canada, with millions of people suddenly finding themselves in dark offices or elevators, subway cars stuck in tunnels, closed airports or cold homes. In addition, scientists have found that the Earth's magnetic field is also going through a more volatile period today, and if it loses strength just as a solar flare hits us, we will be almost completely exposed to the effects of geomagnetic storms.

Apart from the costly installation of surge protection, which involves rebuilding transformer substations, there are cheaper protection options, but they are much less safe from a prevention point of view. Therefore, the most effective solution is to forecast space weather by monitoring solar activity, which provides an opportunity to de-energize regions at risk in time. However, the accuracy of forecasting is key for these systems, as shorter-than-necessary disconnections can be dangerous for the network, while too long a power outage will cause increasing damage to the population and the economy over time. Whichever method is chosen, it involves a considerable outlay, but the potential consequences can make all the difference in the world. (The issue is also quite crucial because one of the greatest weapons of future warfare – whether used by military organizations or terrorists – could be the EMP bomb, which can cripple electrical systems.)

Any of the environmental issues discussed above, whether it is preventing or mitigating disasters, curbing climate change, protecting nature or controlling epidemics, typically requires very significant resources and investment. The situation is further complicated by the fact that we cannot delay things too much longer, as the disasters threatening us are becoming more frequent and more severe, while some processes already seem almost irreversible in the early 2020s. The 2019 UN General Assembly said that by 2030, we had only

a decade to prevent a 'climate catastrophe' (the permanent damage to the ecosystem caused by climate change), which will otherwise be unavoidable. Although the European Geosciences Union has set 2035 as the point of no return, what is certain is that the time available to act – especially given current trends, with greenhouse gas emissions still rising – seems extremely limited...

However, in league with climate change, most of the threats we face are directly or indirectly caused by us, but at least to a significant extent by human activity and our attitudes towards each other and nature. So basically, all we have to do is 'just' change this attitude, and we can significantly increase our chances of solving our problems. For this to happen, it is essential that most of us reach a level, both existentially and in terms of awareness, where we can already take maximum account of environmental concerns. (After all, if your very livelihood is a problem, the needs of nature are usually very much pushed into the background.) On the other hand, it is just as important to ensure that the necessary changes can take place at the macro level, on the economic and political stage, as well.

Thus, in order to achieve environmental sustainability, it is crucial that we also deal much more with social sustainability in parallel, and do so in a meaningful way that delivers real and rapid progress. This is necessary both because excessive inequalities undermine social stability, and because the world today is still driven primarily by forces that favor not long-term equilibrium and sustainable development, but over-consumption, waste, rapid profiteering and unjustified growth. These forces often spare the time and resources (or, if You prefer, money) to develop adequate protection, prevention or eco-friendly systems, and focus instead on fossil fuels, cheap labor and cost minimization, financial speculation, and the sectors that generate the greatest profits for them in general. And, as this is now the dominant trend around the world, it is clear that we need to re-evaluate and change our own priorities almost everywhere on Earth in order to drive global change.

What can happen if we do not take the necessary (counter)steps has been partly discussed already. Our global systems are now interconnected to such an extent that it would require a very serious effort to separate them or even partially make them independent – think of the many different places where our goods come from, the supply chains that span several countries, our dependence on energy and resources, the financial interconnections that we have, our business contacts, or even our relatives, friends and acquaintances in distant parts of the world. But with such interdependence, an economic or resource crisis, an epidemic, mass migration, or escalating wars (be it traditional or cyber) can cause a general crisis, where one threat often leads to another.

While globalization has now had an impact in countless areas, we must also remember that we all live on the same planet, and therefore ultimately all belong to the same global ecosystem, whose parts, however far apart on the globe, are interdependent in similar ways as our societies on different continents. And while the artificially created links re-

sponsible for the constant flow of people, goods and information can theoretically be severed or limited, we do not have the same influence over the constant cycle of nature, the interactions of the atmosphere, the seas and the land. Just as a bottle thrown into the sea can float across the ocean to the other side of the world, what we once released into the rivers or the air can affect our environment (tens of) thousands of kilometers away.

Local natural disasters also have the potential to spill over through various effects, causing a major crisis in virtually every country in the world. As we have seen, this can take the form of refugee waves, natural resource and economic problems or an epidemic, but a significant drop in food production due to climate change, or a prolonged power cut which exposes our dependence on technology, can also trigger chain reactions. Whatever happens, though, if it is significant enough or affects many of us, it is almost always felt by the interconnected global economy, and typically the longer a crisis goes on, the greater its effect.

And as if that wasn't enough, the different effects can add up and hit us all over the world at the same time: if, for example, climate change means that we are able to produce less food while the world's population continues to grow, we could face a virtually insurmountable situation. But growing social inequalities and increasingly frequent epidemics, among other factors, can also be a critical combination if not everyone can get the vaccines that control pathogens. In the future, we may well become less and less fortunate in having the various global crises occurring at different times, in a sporadic manner, with small breaks in between them heating up, as has been the case so far. If we take stock of the dozens of different threats and their potential magnitude, we can see that the only way to avoid or mitigate their catastrophic consequences is to prepare for them.

But are we getting prepared, and if so, to what extent? Do You think, Dear Reader, that what we have done so far and what we are doing now to achieve social and environmental sustainability will be enough? And what might be the future consequences if we come up short?

In no way do I wish to overstate the case, but I believe – and I am not alone with this – that the restrictions we experienced during COVID-19, the adverse changes to our personal freedom that we had to endure as a result, and even the many businesses that have gone bust and jobs that have been lost, seem like a minor inconvenience in the face of what we may face. Perhaps the biggest problem is that such a crisis and its consequences can last for a very long time, years or even decades, and eventually put pressure on the economy and society that it can no longer withstand. And because of the interconnectedness of our lives, we may well find that in the chain reaction that follows the first really big crisis, all the systems that allow us to run our societies on the basis of centralized power will collapse one after the other.

Without social order, however, we can hardly speak of a civilized way of life, but rather of chaos and anarchy, in which everyone gets what they need as they can, while the world

is once again dominated by violence and tribal rivalry, completely devoid of the comforts of today's more developed countries. Because if utilities and all other services shut down, and all businesses, factories and large-scale food production cease, it is a frightening but not unlikely scenario that in the future we will be fighting for our very survival, clustered together, starving and cold, and plagued by disease. And no one would be able to completely isolate themselves or escape from its effects, no matter how much money they have today, or if they live in virtually any place far from civilization that is suitable for self-sustaining.

As sad and scary as it is, given current trends, it seems an absolutely realistic possibility that within two to three decades, a global crisis of such magnitude will develop that it will effectively end human civilization as we know it today. For those who are eagerly awaiting the 'cleansing fire' that is about to strike 'sinful humanity', this may be good news. But if the crash does happen, it could result in immense amounts of deaths and suffering on an unprecedented scale, affecting the vast majority of people on the planet, which is closing in on counting ten billion souls.

As You can see for Yourself, Dear Reader, what is at stake is not the final disappearance of the human race from the face of the Earth, but the survival of human civilization and the (relatively) civilized human way of life. So it is no exaggeration to talk of a general crisis of civilization – the only question is whether we are on the verge of one, or we are already in it. Well, if we're not in it fully yet, if I had to guess, I'd say we're certainly up to the waist. Since we have not yet had to face anything that is an insurmountable problem, and most of us are only chalking up the recent increase in difficulties as temporary crises or perhaps some ominous portents, we may seem to be just ankle-deep in a major mess. Nevertheless, the effects of human activity accumulate gradually in both environmental and societal systems, and usually with considerable delay, so it may even be more realistic to say that we have already sunken chest-deep into trouble.

The point is, however, that the emergence of a civilizational crisis does not necessarily require a sudden event with global implications independent of the actions of our species (see asteroid impact, increasing volcanism, etc.), which could cause the previous order of our interdependent social, economic and political systems and societies to become unstable in a short period of time, and in extreme cases, to fall apart. In addition to such disasters, which have drastic and immediate consequences, the gradual intensification of factors in the life of our civilization and the accumulation of impacts can also cause a general crisis, which can make the balance with the environment or within our societies increasingly difficult to maintain, and can lead to their disruption. Since civilization as an open system is interdependent with both the Earth's related systems and its own subsystems, a crisis in one or more of them can potentially cause the collapse of civilization.

Before our globalized world was threatened by global dangers, the history of humanity had witnessed the rise and fall of regional civilizations of considerable size, including empires that lasted for hundreds of years, such as the Persian, Roman, Arab, Mongol and Brit-

ish Empires. But no matter how much power and military might, vast territories and abundant resources they possessed, or if they had a defining ideology and cultural influence, intellectual capacity and organization, in the end, without exception, they all fell apart, or were thoroughly weakened and shrunk. Why so? Due to climate change, external influences and attacks, internal divisions and discord, leadership shortcomings and failures, overweening and unscrupulous ambitions, and moral-ethical crises.

As we have seen so far, these problems and deficiencies – or at least many of their characteristics – are also often present in our current societies, and it is probably no coincidence that the existence of dominant world powers that permanently rise above the rest is becoming less and less common today. Of course, there is also growing competition, which in turn can be seen globally, for human civilization as a whole, as internal divisions and discord that are preventing the united action we so desperately need to avoid failure. Sure, we can blame this solely on the mistakes and failures of leaders, on their exaggerated and unscrupulous ambitions, but we must not forget that we ourselves, ordinary people who make up the majority of the world's population, are not doing much to promote change.

Is it all down to the still high levels of poverty and the constant existential struggles of our daily lives? To a large extent, yes – but You must also see, Dear Reader, that we have fundamental problems with priorities, i.e. the ordering of what is really important in life and what is less important, and even if we have some idea of it in theory, we usually prefer to give in to the temptations of consumer society and the drift of the masses and everyday life. In the long run, this leads to a progressively deepening moral crisis, which may result in a general crisis of values as a direct consequence. One of the main features of this is that material goods, fleeting gains and momentary pleasures are given priority over spiritual, emotional, cultural and social values, which have a more secure foundation and offer a real perspective. This can manifest itself in a kind of attitudinal decline, a lowering to the level of basic needs and instincts – a social decay, if you like.

In the meantime, our technical knowledge and the tools and infrastructure it has created have evolved at a pace that our values seem to have been unable to keep up with, or have always been a step or two behind. Moreover, for a globalized world, we have not yet managed to find a single, globalized set of norms and frameworks that we can apply to achieve peaceful coexistence and sustainability on a planet that has been fatally overloaded by our irresponsible lifestyles and sheer numbers. In the light of all this, we should not be surprised if we fail to tackle effectively the challenges ahead, which can be described without exaggeration as epoch-making.

Could it be that the phenomenon of the rise and fall of civilizations is catching up with human civilization as a whole? Although we obviously have no experience of this kind, from a scientific point of view, a global civilization operates in a similar way, so it could theoretically 'meet its doom', just as any regional civilization or empire has in the past. Thus, internal problems and tensions alone can be enough to bring about failure, but external (i.e. natural) threats can also be fatal or even of a magnitude that our socio-political-

economic systems can no longer cope with. And collapse itself usually occurs when the combined effect of the various threats exceeds the tolerance of civilization.

However, it is also reasonable to assume that the cyclical nature of the life of individual civilizations may also apply to global human civilization as a whole. If regional empires rise and fade into almost nothing in history, only to be replaced by something else, or to rise again in time, as it were 'from their ashes', why should human civilization, which is also constantly evolving and changing, be an exception to the rule? Especially if we take into account that, in many cases, climate change has been the root or main cause of the downfall of societies – because previously abundant and predictable harvests were no longer sustainable, and so the food and natural resources could no longer be adequately provided for the population. Research suggests that it led to the end of the medieval hey-day of the Mayan Empire and Angkor in Cambodia, among others, but it may also have contributed to the decline of ancient Rome and the Egyptian Empire.

The comments of Harvard University archaeologist Dr. Jason Ur on this subject may be instructive for all of us: "When we excavate the remains of past civilizations, we very rare-ly find any evidence that they as a whole society made any attempts to change in the face of a drying climate, a warming atmosphere or other changes." In other words, no matter how technologically advanced a civilization may be, none of them has so far been able to eliminate its dependence on nature. We can see, then, that while evolution is a natural condition of an intelligent species, uninterrupted progress is by no means guaranteed. The reason is that a civilization needs to be constantly close to a state of equilibrium with both its environment and itself, and if this is not achieved on a sustained basis, or changes sud-denly, it may well mean the end of that civilization.

But even if we don't reach the final collapse (in the near future), the following conse-quences could be decisive for current and future generations:

- the continued, rapid destruction of our environment;
- more and more disasters and (unnecessary or previously avoidable) death and suf-fering around the world (which usually affects poorer and more vulnerable people the most);
- further increase in social inequalities;
- more and more refugees and growing (economic and political) chaos;
- more and more cultural and other hostilities, the spread of violence;
- the elite expropriate what they can, and use all means to protect themselves and their privileges;
- constant clashes between the elite and the much poorer majority (which may even-tually lead to permanent insecurity for even those who belong to the elite).

And a rampant environmental and social crisis means that even in the more developed countries, we will soon have to prepare for situations that are essentially unknown to the current generation, such as shortages of commodities, food and water, and the recurrence of epidemics that are difficult to control, especially when accompanied by medicine short-

ages. In general, we can therefore conclude that, over time, a(n even) large(er) part of the population will almost certainly face increasing insecurity.

If You find all this hard to believe, Dear Reader, think about it: it is already commonplace that we have to deal with several of the threats described in this section at once. Many have had a sour taste of that, when, along with the COVID-19 pandemic, flood, drought, wildfires, earthquakes or other disasters hit them – and, of course, on top of it all, another economic crisis hitting the whole world. The threat of climate change handed us an irrefutable reminder of the fact that it was constantly hanging over our heads when the Russian Arctic in Siberia experienced unprecedented warmth in May and June 2020 (maximum temperatures reached 38 degrees Celsius!), before the northern hemisphere had even begun its summer. As the Arctic is warming twice as fast as the rest of the planet due to melting ice caps, its extreme weather is a good illustration of what we can expect elsewhere in the future if we don't do enough to stop climate change.

While COVID-19 has given us a breathing space to reassess and make changes for sustainability, we seem to be picking most things up where we left them off before the crisis. Before the pandemic even started to ease, polluting industrialists were already preparing to restart production – even ramping up to compensate for the shortfall – with renewed vigor and political approval. The Chinese leadership, which seems to be particularly keen to restore and maximize the previous rate of economic growth, issued even more permits to build new coal-fired power plants, instead of curbing greenhouse gas emissions. And these are obviously not planned to run for just a year or two...

US politicians seem to think in a similar way, as they continue to actively support energy companies that also use fossil fuels such as oil and natural gas. After President Trump pandered to these industries by relaxing regulations and other favors (even denouncing the Paris Climate Agreement), his successor Joe Biden has pledged to radically reduce carbon emissions. Nevertheless, the White House leased 78 million acres of drilling space in the Gulf of Mexico during 2021, which is referred to as the largest offshore oil and gas auction in U.S. history, while commitments on the climate crisis far outweigh the actual fulfillments. America's historic approach to climate change is reflected in the actions of energy giant Exxon Mobil, which, despite having been aware of the negative impacts of climate change decades before the public, had spent millions of dollars to cover them up rather than mitigate them.

And if all this wasn't enough, Brazil is not only turning a blind eye to the commercialization of the Amazon basin, home to the world's largest rainforest, but is encouraging it. Thanks to President Jair Bolsonaro's government, illegal loggers, miners and farmers face very few obstacles from law enforcement when they occupy public land. Satellite data shows that illegal logging in the region in April 2020 was 64% higher than a year earlier, although 2019 was already the worst year for deforestation in the 2010s. It is still an open question to what extent the international agreement signed by Brazil in 2021 to halt defor-

estation by 2030 will make a difference, after the 2014 agreement – without Brazil's nominal participation at the time – failed completely...

However, despite the fact that the situation is extremely distressing and not exactly a popular topic, many of us seem to be aware of its seriousness, even if we don't always see the context. But as our local and global problems multiply and become more serious, we increasingly feel the noose is tightening, and most of us do not trust our leaders to find solutions. In 2016, the average level of trust in national governments among the population of OECD countries – which mostly count as highly developed – was around 42%, which is typically volatile, but has been declining over the decades. In the United States, for example, the rate was over 70% in the 1960s, but by the end of the 2010s it had fallen below 20%, which is not a good sign for one of the world's largest and most powerful countries.

But mistrust alone is not enough - things need to be done to change things in a positive direction. Surely we don't want the economy that saps almost everything and everyone, and usually controls or determines politics, to deepen the crisis of civilization even further, and perhaps plunge us all into the abyss in the end? For now we are destroying our environment and its diversity, but if we fail, and our numbers dwindle along with the technology we use, nature will not shed a single tear, but will instead gleefully take back from us what was once hers. In 2020, the almost completely deserted streets due to the pandemic were enough to allow many species of animals to enter our cities, but we have also seen in the past that our abandoned settlements, such as Pripyat, evacuated after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, have been overrun by flora and fauna after only a few decades. So as much as we fear for nature, firstly we must fear for ourselves.

And not only for ourselves, but for our children and their children, i.e. the generations now growing up, to whom we have a full responsibility. It can be argued, of course, that not many of those who came before us really cared what kind of world they were leaving us, but does that really relieves us from our responsibility? Wouldn't it have been better for us if our ancestors had taken more interest in their environmental and social heritage? Indeed, there have been instances – particularly during the world wars that affected most of humanity – when they faced a situation that seemed similarly insoluble. But the question now is not what our predecessors did or did not do, but what we and our successors have to go through. If You have children, Dear Reader, think about it: what would You say to them if they saw the world collapsing around them, and that You had no control over it whatsoever? That You are no longer able to protect them, and maybe You don't even know what You are giving them to eat tomorrow or the day after?

But even if we hope to avoid the worst, there's still the question: what is the vision for today's young people? What are the possibilities for You personally, Dear Reader, if You are now in your youth, looking forward with hope and doubt at the same time? Well, on the one hand, You can make a career in consumer society – although in most cases this

could be described as living as a puppet of consumer society –, paradoxically helping to sustain what is fundamentally unsustainable. If You are lucky or very determined, there are fields where You can find your vocation and purpose in life – but they are not always rewarding or really appreciated, and they are rarer than the typical jobs of today. If You don't like all this, or You just don't want to be on the grind and worry about paying the bills, You can choose to get off the grid, but in the long run, You are unlikely to escape global problems.

In fact, no one will be able to escape the effects of climate change, pollution and the gradual destruction of wildlife – extreme weather is already causing more and more natural disasters, food and drinking water shortages, pollution is degrading the air, soil and water, and the destruction of flora and fauna everywhere threatens to upset the natural balance and cause irreversible or hardly reversible damage to our environment. If we look only at groups of people that exist largely outside modern civilization, such as the Inuit in Alaska or the indigenous people of Australia, global trends are shaping even their destiny. While the former face increasing problems hunting, fishing and gathering food, the latter suffer from water scarcity due to the ever longer dry periods. All this while they have basically no contribution to the global warming process...

Since there is hardly a human being on Earth who will not be affected in some way by the changing of the world, stepping aside is not a sure solution. But even if You feel comfortable being part of a consumer society, there's the burning question of what happens later, if it becomes unsustainable? If You manage to build up a seemingly massive existence, in a major crisis it could become nothing just as much as the largest fortune on the planet. After all, the existence of an individual or a family can only be as stable and lasting as that of the community, society or civilization which it is a part of. And those who find themselves in the category of the completely marginalized have very little hope of rising in this world today.

It looks as though present and future generations are facing problems of unprecedented magnitude and (existential) uncertainty, simply because they have been born or will be born in perhaps the most critical period of humanity's history. Such insecurity, however, can be significantly reduced with the right awareness, attitude and adaptation – and, most importantly, proper cooperation. The number of scourges on our civilization will most certainly increase, and there is little we can do to change that. The important thing is to be prepared to face them, in order to minimize human and material loss and to keep life going (in a sustainable way). By being prepared and making our current systems much more resilient and adapting them appropriately, the impacts will be less devastating, and the size and duration of crises can be minimized.

But for this to be the case, investment in the future of human civilization must take precedence over investment that benefits just a minority. This includes improving people's overall well-being, education and participation in the so-called labor market, as well as

investing in environmental protection and eco-friendly technologies, more resilient economic infrastructure and more sustainable ecological farming. There is one thing we must not forget when we think about the financial cost of averting, or at least mitigating and controlling, the threats we face: if we don't do what we can do now, we will have to pay a much higher price for our inaction in the future – and we may not always be able to pay in monetary terms...

While it is crucial for economy to be efficient in any situation, minimizing costs in the short term should not always be the deciding factor. Ensuring balance and sustainability often requires much greater social investment, and if the state is already in debt, these are even harder to achieve. Sadly, however, it is not only many countries and companies, but also us ordinary people, who are often in debt, and then become dependent on others for the rest of our lives. If we face more and more severe crises, families and businesses will be less and less able to survive, except for the richest and the largest. So if we don't want to be dominated by this minority in an even more unilateral way than we are now, we need to act in due course to change the balance of power.

The fact that a significant part of the total wealth is concentrated in the hands of a very small group of people is not at all conducive to either social or environmental sustainability. The only way to tackle global problems is by working closely together - but to do this, we need to level the playing field as much as possible (social sustainability) and bring all of humanity much closer together to ensure the survival of our civilization in the face of the challenges of nature (environmental sustainability). But since the close intertwining of the economic elite and politics makes this impossible or extremely slow and difficult, the irresponsibility of the leaders must be corrected by the citizens of the world.

Of course, this will not be easy at all, as the solution may involve significant sacrifices for some. At the same time, it is in the interest of wealthier citizens, families and countries and their associations to do all they can to help poorer people catch up. Failure to do so, because of global interdependence, could backfire very badly in the long term, in the form of economic crises, mass migration, refugee flows, epidemics, wars, etc. The good news, however, is that a decent standard of living for all can be guaranteed as a minimum. And of course let's not forget the really important things that money can never buy – such as peace, love, respect, trust and generosity – and that only mutually beneficial good relations and social relationships with others can provide us.

In fact, history has proven the selfish and often animalistic nature of our species countless times, just as the cyclical repetition of the rise and fall of civilizations is a portentous omen. But we humans have all the capacity to evolve, adapt and show solidarity, as demonstrated during the pandemic in 2020. Apart from the occasional negative manifestations (distrust of each other, fighting over rapidly depleting stocks, etc.), the focus was on caring for each other and helping those in need. Around the world, there have been countless instances of younger people shopping for the elderly (even when unknown), donating food and other items to the destitute, and more often seeking out the lonely – but there

have also been many examples of empty hotels and guesthouses taking in the homeless. The degree of cooperation in the face of adversity is also remarkable, because ultimately, thanks to the various restrictive measures – and of course their high level of compliance – most countries managed to avoid a much bigger disaster.

Experience proves beyond doubt that, if the will is there, we can make human civilization more resilient, but to do so we need to bring out the best in ourselves and in each other. To do this, however, we must learn to be mindful of each other and our environment not only in times of raging crisis, when we feel directly threatened, but also when – at least on the surface – everything is fine. Indeed, the greatest danger we face with the crisis of civilization is that by the time it becomes clear that there is a serious problem, it is too late to do anything to prevent it.

At the same time, the growing insecurity in our world today is having an increasing impact, so hopefully more and more people – including You, Dear Reader – think that urgent change is needed. While avoiding a global meltdown is not the least of our concerns, there are clearly tangible improvements we can make in our daily lives compared to the current situation, namely:

- a more predictable future, peace and security;
- an economy that truly serves us, in which money is a means but never an end;
- a society in which the power of communities, rather than profit-driven organizations, is the dominant force;
- a less materialistic way of life, focusing instead on spiritual and mental factors, especially human relationships and self-actualization;
- a much more egalitarian and solidarity-based system, where no one is left behind and can always count on the help of others and society;
- living in the greatest possible harmony with the natural environment, with all its positive effects.

But harmony, greater security and thus true freedom can only be brought to us by a system that focuses on always looking after everyone in the best and fairest way possible. In my opinion, it is only worth striving for such a system and such a future, otherwise everything we build today could fall apart tomorrow. If You really want to avoid insecurity to the maximum for Yourself and your family and loved ones, the best and perhaps the only thing You can do, Dear Reader, is to work towards a world that cares about all of us.

In a world based not on the almighty rule of money, quick profit, excessive consumption and waste, the pursuit of momentary pleasures, status symbols, stigmatization and pigeonholing, and the subjugation and exploitation of others, but on the common values that really matter: mutuality and solidarity, selflessness and generosity, resourcefulness, honesty, respect and love. What can make such a world a reality is essentially our inherent rationality, humanity, empathy and collective consciousness. But to actually make this happen, we must once and for all put an end to the most aggravating factor in our lives, which is the very existential opportunism that is included in the book's title.

FROM EXISTENTIAL OPPORTUNISM
TO COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

Existential Opportunism

If I am not mistaken, Dear Reader, ever since You glimpsed the phrase 'existential opportunism' in the title of this book, you've wanted to know exactly what I mean by it – even if You more or less probably know the answer. Well, existential opportunism basically means that a creature (or, in theory, even an intelligent machine) behaves in an opportunistic way in order to survive and thrive in life, and to acquire and secure the energy, things and conditions necessary for that. Although it does occur at times, it is not so much a case of mutual cooperation as of fighting at the expense of other individuals and creatures (or intelligent machines).

Looking separately at the words that make up the term, existence obviously refers to life itself – be it natural or artificial in origin –, the provision of which practically involves activities for survival and livelihood. (Although in the case of an intelligent being such as Homo sapiens, it can also include thinking about our existence and the desire to succeed in life.) Opportunism, on the other hand, is a somewhat more complicated case, since there is a strong difference in tone and mood between its original meaning and the one it is usually used in. This is because in today's common language, the word is generally meant in a pejorative, negative sense, referring to a person who acts in an unprincipled and compromising way for the sake of momentary gain and selfish interests. However, the notion behind opportunism, if stripped of all the negative connotations and meanings that have since been attached to it, is inherently just a matter of trying to take advantage of situations that are proactively sought or even spontaneously arisen – no more, no less. The point is therefore to take advantage of an opportunity in general, regardless of the impact of the behavior on others.

It is generally true of creatures in the wild that they can survive by relying on opportunism. They literally have to fight every single day to survive – and in the longer term, to maintain their species –, so their lives mostly revolve around meeting their most basic needs. In the meantime, they are constantly on the lookout for threats and looking for opportunities to feed and reproduce. Accordingly, they always need consider what the expected gains and risks are in a given situation, and whether or not it is worth taking those risks. They do not so much consciously understand as instinctively feel that if they make the wrong decision, it could easily cost them their lives.

When zebras want to drink while lions are preying on them, they try to seize the moment and go to the water when the predators are less alert. And lions may do so because they have spotted a young or sick antelope nearby, which is easier to catch than its mates or other animals, so they begin chasing it instead. Some plants turn to the sun to make their metabolism more efficient, and nectar-hungry insects seek out the most colorful and fragrant flowers for a more rewarding feast, which in turn use the same insects to pollinate each other. And males in general will use all sorts of tricks to win the favor of females to mate with them, while females will try to choose the most suitable, viable mate.

If creatures that belong to a species living according to the rules of nature fail to take advantage of favorable opportunities to feed and reproduce, it can lead to their demise, but in almost all cases it proves to be a disadvantage for them in self- or species preservation. Therefore, they often take advantage of their opportunities even when it is clearly at the expense of their mates, including such extremes as male lions destroying the cubs of their rivals. In nature, it is considered a general rule that the stronger, more skillful, faster, more alert individual survives and ensures the survival of its species. The rest may die early or fail to reproduce, thus failing to pass on their characteristics to their offspring and future generations. And since all this is basically driven by existential opportunism, coded in the form of instincts, as the main guiding principle, it could also be called the law of the jungle.

The successful exercise of existential opportunism, therefore, does not even necessarily require any special thinking capacity, since the instincts that operate programmatically in all living beings may be sufficient in themselves to ensure their survival. A less intelligent animal like a bear, a snake or a shark can often easily outmatch a more intelligent creature let's say, a man –, by virtue of its sheer physical abilities, strength, speed, agility and years of 'field experience'. Nevertheless, this does not at all mean that complex thinking, advanced logic and combinatorial skills do not offer any advantages, and in the long run can even be crucial for the survival of a species.

Although there is not necessarily a clear correlation between intelligence and propensity to opportunism, animals that are better at seeking and exploiting opportunities may have an advantage over their more passive or conservative counterparts. The former is particularly characteristic for species (pigeons, crows, magpies, rats, raccoons, foxes, some monkey species, etc.) that have adapted to the spread of human civilization, and have been able to change their way of life and even live in cities, taking advantage of the opportunities for food or safe habitat that they have found there. Why do they benefit from such behavior? Because the ability to adapt successfully to rapidly or radically changing circumstances is probably the most important key to survival.

And this general statement is as true for human civilization as it is for the survival of any species. However, for intelligent beings, such as humans, it makes a whole lot of difference how our actions and attitudes affect others. While animals typically cannot be expected to take this into account, for a thinking and social being – especially in a so-called civilized society – it is practically a basic condition for social contact and relationships. (In fact, it is vital for social sustainability.) And, as we have seen, our opportunism not only towards our fellow human beings, but also towards our environment, is leading to a very serious problem. It is a major contributor to the crisis of our civilization, in that the destruction, pollution and overconsumption of the planet's resources, together with the climate change we are causing, could, within decades, upset the delicate balance between nature and civilization. So for civilization to survive, we humans also need to adapt.

The fundamental difference between the animal kingdom and us is that Homo sapiens is an intelligent species, and as such is capable of drastically altering its environment, and thus interfering with the processes of nature – even if it cannot (yet?) control them. But not only are we capable of it, we do it every day: we make tools, we build cities, factories, power plants and infrastructure, we drive millions of vehicles, and of course we use the resources we have at our disposal in the meantime. All of this is inevitable for development and to sustain a large population – but how and how much we interfere with nature is at least as important. It would be hypocritical and self-deceptive of us to claim that with the advent and spread of civilization things work or can work in the same way as in nature, where until the increase of human activity everything went its own way, so to speak, developing and evolving only in the way determined by the order of nature.

Once the members of an intelligent species (in our case, humanity) become part of a particular ecosystem – be it a small area, a forest, a village, a city or the whole planet –, things no longer happen in their natural way, as determined by Mother Nature alone. This is precisely because, intentionally or not, we are inevitably interfering with the processes of nature, and this will become more so as the scientific and technological capabilities of our civilization become more advanced, with a parallel increase (at least for a certain period) in population and in the demands on our environment. However, if existential opportunism is 'performed' by an organism that can radically transform its environment, this can have catastrophic consequences for the ecosystem, because natural selection is always about the survival of the given individual or species (from its own point of view), regardless of its environment. In other words, if we humans irresponsibly cut down trees, destroy flora and fauna, or pollute the soil, water and air for our own immediate benefit, it means that we are destroying our very own habitat.

Given the finite nature of the Earth's resources and wildlife, this cannot go on indefinitely, and must be managed with maximum care and planning, with much greater regard for the future than at present. To do this, however, we need to be aware of and control the processes of our world as much as possible, using the potential provided by our advanced intelligence – if we are going to interfere with the natural order of things in one way or another, let us at least do so in a way that is sustainable in the long term and that we get the best out of it. We must never forget that the fact that man is able to change his environment does not mean that he has become independent of it!

Whether we are looking at our attitudes to the natural world around us or to each other within our societies, existential opportunism is a luxury that we as rational beings can no longer afford because of its destructive effects. Nevertheless, when it is not existentially based, in a way that threatens the livelihood or survival of our fellow human beings or the living beings and living systems that make up our environment, opportunism itself is not necessarily to be rejected, and in fact is an integral part of our lives. This is true even if we

otherwise exist as a part of a community, family, village, organization or other group whose members are essentially working for the benefit of each other.

Thus, for example, the basis for mate selection is often as opportunistic in human society as it is in the animal world, albeit in a more civilized context. We are opportunistic when it comes to deciding when to go on a trip or which way to go, in order to avoid bad weather, traffic jams and rush hour. Or, for example, when we try to book our cinema tickets as early as possible in the hope of getting the best seats. When playing a game or a sport, we also tend to take every opportunity to gain an advantage. Opportunism is also an indispensable feature for promoting innovation and progress. But from a certain point of view, even I myself am quite opportunistic when I write these lines, hoping that my book will bring some kind of change to the world...

In areas and situations where one does essentially no harm to others, and the benefits to those concerned outweigh any potential disadvantages, I do not think you should be judged for behaving opportunistically. However, when it comes to basic livelihoods and other existential, fateful or life-or-death issues, one cannot, in principle, afford to behave in this way in a truly civilized society. While in nature, it is often down to pure luck who survives, it is, let's face it, unacceptable in a civilized environment. Nevertheless, there are different levels and degrees of opportunism, so it is not so easy to be clear about how to judge it in a particular situation.

Blatant economic abuses, for example, where someone exploits the disadvantaged or forced position of others for their own gain, are not just crude and reprehensible forms of existential opportunism, but are also generally illegal. This category includes, among others, ticket touts who offer tickets for several times the original price to an event that is no longer accessible in any other way – but human smugglers who sometimes charge small fortunes for a single, often very dangerous ride are even more immoral. In many cases, though, the nature of opportunistic behavior and who is responsible in a given situation is far from obvious.

For example, if you look at Black Friday, a promotional shopping day that is particularly fashionable in the United States, but has also been spread across the world for some time, often promising big discounts, you can see that crowds of people are ready to literally step on each other for a bigger discount. For some, this is an opportunity to buy an item that they would otherwise not be able to afford, or would have to make major sacrifices. But for many, the motivation is quite different: highly suggestive and often repeated advertisements persuade them to buy products that they don't really need (typically a new generation TV or laptop). Then, their addiction to consumption alone can force people to behave like animals in shops, as if they were fighting for their very survival.

But whose fault is it that such a situation could arise in the first place? Customers who react compulsively to major promotions? Merchants seeking to maximize their profits and their customer base? Or legislators who put freedom of trade above all else? Or are they all guilty of the way the world is? Or maybe none of them? Whatever the truth, it is a fact that

opportunism and manipulation often go hand in hand, and now practically interweave our entire lives. So much so that, for example, promising someone better terms, which you may not be able to keep, just to get a deal from a competitor, will probably not go down as unethical or reprehensible behavior.

Opportunism, from relatively innocent situations to competition at each other's expense, is therefore everywhere in our daily lives, whether we are aware of it or not. But think about it, Dear Reader, how often in your own life are You forced to seize an opportunity in such a way that you take it away from others, directly or indirectly harming others? And not just in essentially insignificant matters like the aforementioned sports or discount hunting, but in much more serious areas such as looking for a job or a home, business acquisition, stock market trading, gambling and, in general, any kind of potentially crucial transaction for your livelihood or advancement. Existential opportunism often leads us to harm other people and our environment without even realizing it.

While most of us generally behave opportunistically out of necessity, because the social context is very similar to the wild, some people see it as a kind of game or a sport. But for most of us, including perhaps Yourself, the stakes are very high: to have a job and an income, and more money to spend on improving your quality of life and that of your family; to have somewhere to live and to cover your basic needs and pay your bills. What is this, then, if not opportunism for survival, entirely based on existential grounds?

However, a system – be it biological-ecological, or socio-economic and political – in which existential opportunism is dominant, essentially implies that a living being – be it animal or human – must be constantly opportunistic for its own self-sustenance. If it is not, it may cost his live, or at least make it impossible to have the kind of existential security that is one of (civilized) man's basic needs. Frequent insecurity, living from one day to the next, hopelessness, vulnerability and humiliation, and the stress that comes with all of these are common features of such a system. This is why the phenomenon of existential opportunism is fundamentally opposed to human dignity, which is a basic right of everyone in a truly civilized society.

But if this is how we live, then we are not so much different from animals in essence, but mostly in appearance. A non-exclusive but clear sign of not being civilized may include behavior as a creature of instincts; an extremely egocentric, self-centered attitude; an economy based purely on supply and demand that is built on obsessive materialism; careless wastefulness, unlimited pollution, disregard for and one-sided exploitation of fauna and flora, and the perpetuation of poverty in order to benefit oneself or one's own sphere of interest.

It is no coincidence that the increase in the prevalence of opportunistic behavior in our societies today is due to the rise of individualistic culture, which makes people more self-centered. The constant push for consumption and the division of people is usually accompanied by the disintegration of real communities and the emergence of pseudo-

communities (see online lifestyle), which are unable to counterbalance the negative effects of the system. Alliances today are usually driven by money, which is a kind of collective manifestation of existential opportunism, and fundamentally defines almost every area of our lives, from show business to sport. The occasional exceptions to this are various non-profit, charitable or cultural associations, but in many cases they are not really independent of financial interests.

Existential opportunism at the collective level operates in much the same way as at the level of individuals, whether it be various tribal wars, corporate rivalries, or political and international power games. Its traces can be clearly detected from the smallest communities to rival countries and international alliances, and perhaps its most complex collective form is the nationalism discussed earlier. The latter differs from the individual version of existential opportunism only in that it puts the interests of a single people or nation before the interests of everyone else, rather than of a single person.

We have seen many examples in the history of the last few centuries of what nationalism can lead to – and we don't even need to think of its most extreme forms, such as Hitler's Nazi Germany and the Third Reich virtually being bent on world domination, with its utterly racist and exclusionary vision. In the early 19th century, for Napoleon and his followers, strong national feeling and ambition alone proved enough to drive the French army across half of Europe, before the unity of other nations ended the conquests that cost many lives. Nevertheless, the same European powers could not claim to be innocent, either, since by then they had forced many inhabitants of distant continents into slavery through colonialism, imposing their own will, language, culture, religion and beliefs on them, proclaiming their own superiority.

In the recent past, the nationalism that led to the break-up of Yugoslavia has brought hostilities and ethnic cleansing with bad memories in the Yugoslav Wars, but the intense nationalist sentiment and territorial disputes between Putin's Russian leadership and the Ukrainian people have also resulted in a lot of unnecessary suffering and death. Especially when the former decided to invade Ukraine in early 2022, resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands of soldiers and thousands of civilians, while millions fled the country in imminent danger. (And that's not even mentioning the cities, factories, infrastructure, homes and lives destroyed, the families torn apart, or the deepening global economic crisis.) But we could go on for pages with various examples from around the world...

The behind-the-scenes tussle for the resources of the Arctic already underway shows that if we do not change our current political and worldview, the future of humanity will be determined by existential opportunism at the collective level. As the increasingly melting ice sheets from global warming gradually recede from the Arctic Ocean and surrounding landmasses, deposits rich in oil, natural gas and other resources are more and more within reach. Regarding the issue, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in 2019: "This is America's moment to stand up as an Arctic nation and for the Arctic's future. Because far from the barren backcountry that many thought it to be (...), the Arctic is at the fore-

front of opportunity and abundance. It houses 13 percent of the world's undiscovered oil, 30 percent of its undiscovered gas, and an abundance of uranium, rare earth minerals, gold, diamonds, and millions of square miles of untapped resources."

But with Russia, China, Norway and other nations besides the United States thinking along similar lines, while others such as Canada and Denmark are concerned by their geographic location and their own territories, this is unlikely to go as an easy ride. And the fact that some countries have deployed significant military forces in the region could even lead to the outbreak and escalation of armed conflicts, literally turning the Arctic into a front line. Moreover, the above statement reflects the true colors of the world's largest industrial economies: in light of the potential extraction of new fossil fuel reserves, the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions that will sustain climate change appears to be a vain hope, and even more an empty promise from the nations that have signed climate agreements.

So nationalism, although it seems to be about much more than just making a living, is fundamentally about survival and superiority, about putting our own interests and our own assertion first, but on a collective level, in relation to different nations and countries. In other words, nationalism is essentially driven by existential opportunism in the same way as, say, job search or market competition. But this is rather unfortunate (and can even be fatal in a globalized world) when we are facing multiple global crises that require unprecedented cooperation and collaboration from all of humanity. Not to mention the fact that it is not really suitable for eliminating or alleviating social inequalities, either...

One of the biggest problems of societies based on existential opportunism is that there are always winners and losers. And, even worse, it is often very difficult or almost impossible for losers to become winners, while winners can easily become losers at any time if they are not careful. However, as long as they operate on any principle based on existential opportunism, extreme inequalities and class differences will always be present in our societies, with the stigmatization and discrimination that reinforce them.

While those with power and wealth, or enthusiastic followers of self-centered opportunism, will pounce on limited opportunities, others may have problems just surviving if they are unable to acquire the necessary goods and services: drinking water, food, shelter or housing with adequate protection and hygiene, or even a very expensive medicine or medical treatment that they cannot afford on their own. So equality and equal opportunities exist at best in nominal terms or on paper, but in reality the system is much more supportive of differences.

The prevailing neoliberal view, however, is that everyone has a chance to succeed, and if they fail, it suggests that they have done something wrong or are simply too lazy or incapable to achieve more. At its core, this is essentially social Darwinism, which holds that humans and their communities are subject to the same laws of natural selection as animals and plants, as Charles Darwin observed in the 19th century, when he proposed his seminal

theory of evolution. Proponents of social Darwinism say that the weak will eventually fall and their culture will disappear, while the strong will gain power and cultural influence over them. For them, it is perfectly natural that people's lives in society are a constant struggle for existence, the main goal and rule of which is the 'survival of the fittest'.

The early think-tanks of social Darwinism – notably Herbert Spencer and Walter Bagehot in England and William Graham Sumner in the US – argued that the process of natural selection acting on population change leads to the continued evolution of humans through the survival of those that are the most competitive, just as Darwin observed in plants and animals. Accordingly, they also looked at societies as if they were entire organisms, i.e. living creatures that evolve in a similar way. Thus, existential opportunism is the driving force behind social Darwinism, too, serving as a basic means of natural selection, but also as a specific conception and way of life.

If we look at the issue from a purely scientific, factual point of view, the notion that nature does nothing but regulate things in its own way – including the overpopulation of the human race –, by the use of various 'methods' seems to be reasonable. So in a way it can be argued that COVID-19, or any major epidemic, merely ensures that the older, sicker and weaker 'drop out', and that there is nothing wrong with that, so we should accept it without further ado. However, if we look at the issue through a more holistic, one might say more humane filter, it seems rather uncivilized to think like that about the lives lost. Anyone who has lost or has been close to losing a loved one to the outbreak will know exactly what I mean, and will have a very different view on the matter than social Darwinists in general.

Be that as it may, humans are incredibly complex, sentimental beings with a rich emotional world, and that is why humanity – the quality that essentially encompasses all the qualities that fundamentally distinguish us from most other animal species – is an integral and inalienable part of our lives: the capacity for kindness, understanding and compassion towards others. Nevertheless, the proponents of the 'natural' approach sweep away all ethics and morality ascribed to sentimentalism – at least as long as it suits them –, legitimizing and even sanctifying existential opportunism within our societies, just as it works in Mother Nature. But in doing so, they are also endorsing all the atrocities and injustices that we humans commit against each other, whether it is elitism, discrimination or social inequalities in general. Social Darwinism, however, is an even more dangerous concept, as it can lead to views such as racism and chauvinism – which we have already seen can be taken to the most radical extremes (see the shameful case of Hitler and Nazism).

So you must not for one moment believe or give credence to the proponents of social Darwinism, Dear Reader, because whatever anyone says, existential opportunism is not at all natural in a civilized society. On the other hand, in the semi-civilized, or rather civilization-initiating, societies that characterize our world today, the struggle for survival, livelihood and assertion is still commonplace. These are no different in motivation from the money and power-grabbing methods used by the mafias, or the power struggles and

showdowns between criminal organizations, in a similar way to the rivalries found in the animal kingdom, for example between two groups or families of various monkey or ape species. While there is no doubt that we are forced to participate by circumstances, by the system imposed on us, it is hardly surprising that if we behave like animals, we are also treated like animals...

What do I mean by this unflattering statement? Basically, the fact that we often follow others as a herd, almost without thinking, or the rules of a narrow minority that are mainly self-serving. It is another question how much we can do about it, since, living in the endless cycle of consumerism, many of us will sooner or later become indifferent, that is, we don't really care about others and the world, only about ourselves and our own interests. Constant impulses from the media, advertising, public institutions, friends, real and virtual acquaintances and employers to maximize ourselves and our performance, to prove our competitiveness and viability, and to take our fair slice of the cake – 'because we deserve it' – may motivate us in part, but in the long run, it can undermine our self-esteem and mental health.

In countries following the Western world order, the number of people with mental illnesses increased particularly after the 2008 financial crisis, due to rising unemployment and job and livelihood insecurities. But even before and since then, it has become clear that the mental health of our societies is on the decline – we only need to look at the increasing incidence of shootings and violence, ordinary people suddenly having a 'switch' in their brains and becoming murderers, the intolerance that has become commonplace in public life, or simply the growing intolerance that is palpably all around us. While there is a constant encouragement of individualism that promotes self-centeredness, the collective well-being is not or only a secondary aspect of the system, which sooner or later is also felt at the level of the individual – so much so that today we can even call it a general crisis of the individual.

In neoliberal societies, where people are easily pigeonholed as losers after a bad decision, free will is largely illusory, while anxiety, depression and narcissism (i.e. self-important conceit and egotism – see social media) are increasingly common. The problem is typically more widespread the greater the social inequalities, and the more we are exposed to the unbridled effects of free market competition and the influx of information that is constantly bombarding us. However, relentless privatization, the lack of basic state subsidies and benefits, and the increasing vulnerability of employees and consumers are all pointing in this direction, while quality human relationships and real communities are in decline, and the number of mental health care institutions is dwindling. Thus, in many countries which are considered developed today, not only is it often difficult to treat the chronically ill, but the treatment of people who become violent on the spur of the moment is often left to the police and the judiciary.

We can see, then, what happens when we try to imitate nature at all costs in our human societies. Upon the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, most of our leaders themselves recognized the need to intervene, fearing the damage caused could soon become irreparable. Thus, programs and measures to safeguard the economy and the financial situation of citizens have been repeatedly put in place – in some countries even promising that consumer prices will not rise fundamentally as a result of a sudden increase in demand (and, on the other hand, an apparent shortage of supply). This may have been the case for a time, but then, as is typical, the dominant nature of money has again made its way in the form of a proliferation of prices, as no real and lasting countermeasures were taken to prevent it, and to successfully meet demand.

But in other respects, too, it has been shown that our governments did little to curb the continuation of individual opportunism, which led people to suddenly start hoarding purchases because of uncertainty about the future availability of various goods. So those who still got enough of a particular product (e.g. flour, disinfectant or even just ordinary soap) were well off, while those who didn't could continue to 'hunt' for it, or at most pay the price of much more expensive substitutes. In most cases, all that happened is that everyone was asked nicely not to buy large quantities because shops would be constantly stocked – and, at the same time, most stores set limits, but these were too sporadic and arbitrary and, on the other hand, were generally too high to prevent hoarding.

But can an ordinary person anywhere honestly be blamed for not trusting either the politicians or the companies to ensure that supplies are not disrupted? Since experience shows that in Western-style societies the whole socio-economic-political system is too self-interested, too vulnerable to random and unusual situations and crises, it is not at all surprising in such an environment that the already atomized majority would rather rely on its own situational awareness, individual actions and solutions than on the strength and cohesion of the community. Yet after what has happened, it is now quite obvious that true freedom in a society or economy is not necessarily when you can choose from dozens of shops where you can either get what you want or not, but when you know for sure that you can get what you actually need (within certain and reasonable limits, of course).

And while the rage of COVID-19 undoubtedly provides many examples of solidarity and cooperation, on the other hand, the struggle for toilet paper and other essentials is a good reminder that existential opportunism can really show its teeth in a pandemic or other similar crisis. Many countries are also primarily concerned with saving themselves, stockpiling items thought necessary to contain the epidemic (e.g. face masks, respirators), while in some cases banning the export of medicines that they have in abundance. Leaders often blame each other for the spread of the virus or inadequate management of the situation, and the success of the race to achieve universal vaccination against common mutations of the pathogen and other measures is highly questionable.

Nevertheless, as we have already seen, nature is not only trying to 'kill us' through viruses or other pathogens invisible to the naked eye. Earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, floods and droughts, wildfires, tornadoes, traditional, snow-, sand- and geomagnetic storms, meteors, locusts, predators and more all make life difficult or even impossible, but these disasters usually hit us in otherwise habitable and therefore often densely populated areas. Outside these areas, in the realms of perpetual frost, heat or drought, we are practically unable to even survive unless we are given regular supplies and equipment for self-sufficiency (like the polar explorers working in Antarctica). So far from being a planet that is conducive to human life everywhere, conditions outside the Earth are much harsher and even more unlivable: in the vacuum of space clearly, but as far as we know, life on any other celestial body is essentially impossible, at most temporarily sustainable, and only under artificial, continuously controlled conditions.

So, despite the fact that nature is truly admirable – both in its appearance and in its functionality –, we all know from our own direct or indirect experience that for all its beauty, it can be extremely wild, dangerous, harsh and unforgiving. As easily as it gives, so easily it takes away anything, including life. (If You don't believe that nature is cruel, just watch a mother elephant being forced to leave her calf in the desert to die of exhaustion.) However, all of this does not fundamentally fit into the concept of what we usually refer to as civilized conditions. And if you don't count the ideal, almost paradise-like conditions in some places on Earth, nowhere is nature really conducive to life – let alone life with minimal existential insecurity.

But we, humans, who are capable of much greater destruction than locusts in our masses, are destroying by our opportunistic and reckless behavior this tiny oasis, an almost insignificant expanse of habitat compared to the size of the universe, which is currently the only place that can ensure our long-term survival. That is why we must do everything we can to protect our home planet (and all areas with habitable climates on Earth), because if we destroy it, we have nowhere else to go.

Just as we need to be aware that nature will not ensure that living conditions are always right for us. Because nature does not plan for the long term, existential opportunism, in its infinitely simple but highly efficient way, works perfectly well in the plant and animal world, where the goal is almost exclusively short-term survival. Natural selection always looks for the immediate benefit in any change and retains only the traits that provide an immediate advantage, because it does not know what might later serve the survival of an individual, or even a whole species. In other words, natural selection is merely the result of instantaneous and spontaneous distinction in terms of viability – but what may be advantageous today, in a particular place and circumstance, may not be so elsewhere or in the future.

Although some living beings with sufficient intelligence may behave proactively, the process of natural evolution is in itself absolutely passive, and thus completely devoid of anticipatory or calculating action. But we humans, who are building a global civilization,

need to look ahead and calculate if we want to do well for ourselves. If only because Homo sapiens has long interfered with natural selection, both in the case of the species it has captured, tamed, bred, sublimated, genetically or otherwise modified, and in its own evolution, manipulated by the artificial environment. (Not to mention our activities that have a major impact on natural ecosystems, such as deforestation and pollution.) So for an intelligent being capable of changing its environment, including itself, it is only natural that evolution takes places not only in a natural but also in an artificial way. And the more advanced a civilization is, the more so.

Although nature constantly plagues us by various disasters, the growing insecurity we are experiencing today is largely due to our own thinking and behavior, especially existential opportunism, both at individual and collective level. And since we have already seen its negative effects, we have every reason to believe that existential opportunism as a worldview and a way of life is not sustainable in the long term in a civilized (or aspiring) society, as it leads to unsustainable trends both for our environment and our societies. (Unlike many, I do not discuss economic sustainability separately because it must be part of both environmental and social sustainability.) So if we don't break with social Darwinism once and for all, we may well soon experience 'non-social' Darwinism, too, where survival is effectively determined the same way as it is in the animal kingdom.

"Isn't there a fundamental contradiction here?" you may rightly ask, Dear Reader. After all, if existential opportunism is what drives evolution, how will the human race be able to evolve without it, instead of regressing and disappearing from the face of the Earth over time? Now, while adaptation to current conditions is a necessity for all species and civilizations, we must not ignore the fact that conditions for humanity, which inhabits the entire planet, are now changing significantly on a global scale, and in a very short time in the history of the Earth. Therefore, in this context, adaptation is not so much relevant at the micro level as at the macro level, meaning that as members of a species that exercises global dominance, it is no longer enough to think small, only in terms of momentary benefits. And while nature is not fundamentally concerned with this, for those of us who are aware of it all, and whose fate of their own civilization depends on it, it is downright mandatory to look at the whole picture, including the possible future consequences.

The good news for us is that even in nature, an opportunistic lifestyle at the expense of each other is not always a long-term winner. For example, the random, temporary absence of interspecies competition can benefit biodiversity by allowing new species to emerge, spread and rise to dominance (as happened to mammals and thus primates, and then humans, after the sudden extinction of dinosaurs 66 million years ago.) And cooperation and solidarity can have benefits even in the animal kingdom, as the example of the ants or bees that build 'societies' of millions on sheer instinct shows. However, the more intelligent a species is, the more it tends to be characterized by companionship and division of labor, along with complex social relationships – just think of primates (chimpanzees, gorillas,

orangutans), dolphins or elephants. As for the overpopulation that comes with the development of civilization, it can be addressed by a conscious strategy of much more humane methods of birth control, rather than by the ruthlessness of natural selection, along with practically all other regulatory activities related to human civilization and its relationship with nature.

Consciousness and unity can not only replace social Darwinism and existential opportunism, which have accompanied the entire history of humanity, but simply *must* replace them. As long as existential opportunism is the dominant way of life in our societies, a minority that favors its own self-interest will forever dominate the majority, so that they will never be truly civilized. In fact, most of humanity's troubles – along with the crisis of civilization we are facing – can be attributed to existential opportunism. In the old days, when we had much less impact on the ecosystem, on the conditions that govern our planet's living world and on each other's lives, this was less the case, but nowadays, following the population explosion, with all the knowledge and technical skills we have, it is largely our attitude that makes it so much harder for us to get by.

In order to truly achieve environmental sustainability, a fundamental step is to get rid of existential opportunism as the dominant trend and way of life. Therefore, as I explained earlier, we need a global change of mindset, which also fundamentally affects social order. But if there is a fundamental reform of the social system, and the current focus on individual interests is finally replaced by the vision of long-term sustainability, then measures and technologies to prevent and mitigate climate change could gain much more ground. Thus, a systemic change to ensure social sustainability, to do away with social Darwinism and consumerism, and to redefine priorities, would open up the possibility of effectively achieving environmental sustainability, as well.

If this fails... Well, I don't know about You, Dear Reader, but I for one wouldn't really want to be part of such a world. I believe that if You wish to live in a truly civilized society, with all its benefits and freedoms, You must also work to eradicate existential opportunism, which is essentially the greatest threat to human civilization.

So, while we are sometimes opportunists, we can no longer allow much room in our societies for existential opportunism towards our fellow human beings or towards our environment, since it is our main common enemy, which we must seek and combat not outside but within ourselves and among ourselves. The crucial question, however, which has probably already occurred to You, as well, Dear Reader, is: how far does this contradict human nature itself?

Human Nature

Human nature includes a myriad of different traits – both good and bad, but none without a cause or a specific function. As intelligent beings, we actually have an extremely complex psyche, primarily due to our incredibly advanced brains, which are probably the most complex and sophisticated structures known to us in the entire universe. It helps us to make sense of things and events around us, to think logically, to recognize context, to learn and develop, and thus to get to know the world and ourselves. At the same time, our central organ controls our bodily processes and functions, and our behavior – the latter of which depends on the impulses we receive from the outside world and the choices we make based on our inner qualities.

Our inner qualities are fundamentally determined, on the one hand, by our learned thinking, and, on the other, our inherited tendencies and instincts. Instinct is essentially an innate drive to act, typically in response to external stimuli. Instincts today are generally described by science as patterns of behavior that are not learned but determined by genetics, and which do not seem to change in response to the external environment. The less intelligent – i.e. the less developed the brain of – a creature is, the more its behavior is determined by instinct, because its cognitive, or intellectual, abilities are less abundant.

Protecting territory, building nests, mating or caring for offspring are all instinctive actions in the animal kingdom, but some of them – especially the last two, among the examples listed – are not exclusive to its members. After all, we humans are often strongly influenced by our own instincts, too, most of which are as strong in us as in animals. Sexual urges and the desire for a partner and children are practically as important for us as caring for our young, although the need to create or protect a safe home can also be a strong internal driving force. The fear of death is also a characteristic of all living beings, and is probably the most ancient instinctive reaction, but it can manifest itself in completely different actions. This is because our behavior is largely determined not only by our innate qualities, but also by the set of memories and ideas that we have developed over time as a result of external influences and experiences.

While our thinking involves the constant processing and understanding of stimuli from the outside world, our emotions are the result of a combination of the two. In other words, an emotion is basically created as a specific combination of bodily sensation and consciousness, and its quality and intensity reflect the personal – real or perceived – significance of an event, situation, thing or person. This way become emotionally attached to people who play an important role in our lives, family members, friends, events such as a wedding or a funeral, or even to certain objects, such as a book or a car that we hold dear. At the same time, we should not ignore the fact that animals also have emotions – especially the more intelligent species and individuals –, which are not inferior in intensity to our own, even though their emotions are not as deep and complex as ours. (Precisely because their intelligence typically can't compete with ours.)

And because they have unique qualities just like us, the prominent representatives of Homo sapiens, animals also have personalities. If You only think of pets of the same species, Dear Reader, such as dogs or cats from the same litter, their behavior, habits and temperaments can become completely different over time, especially if they are separated soon after birth and sent to different homes and owners. Those that are bullied or hurt, for example, can become shy, withdrawn and wild, while those that are handled well and played with tend to be more lively and social. Just as in humans, their characteristics are shaped in no small part by the stimuli they are exposed to throughout their lives – but childhood experiences can be particularly influential, even in a lifelong way. This is true despite the fact that, just as instincts are not equally strong in us humans, animals can also be inherently wilder or friendlier, which we often take into account when breeding them, for instance.

Beyond seeing how much we and animals have in common – even if many people refuse to notice or acknowledge it –, it is crucial that we are all as much determined by our external circumstances and influences as we are by our inherited traits. Where you are born, what kind of family you have, and then what kind of school and company you go to, is not at all indifferent in your life, as the social culture around you can be very different from that of another country, or even from that of a particular ethnic group, religious community, etc. Scientific experiments and observations increasingly confirm that the fierce gesticulation of Italians, the public seriousness of Russians, or the easy-going and direct nature of the Dutch are typically learned traits, not something that is genetically hard-wired into us. Our parents usually try to pass on to us the norms dictated by their own culture, and as different qualities and characteristics are valued in different societies or communities, it is no coincidence that they tend to become emphasized in us, mixed with the traits we inherit from of our ancestors.

At the same time, the development of our personality is greatly influenced by which ways of thinking and behaving are more likely to succeed in a given environment. A well known experiment in psychology is when a child is put a candy in front of her, and if she can stop taking it long enough, she is rewarded with another one. Statistics show that children with more willpower and patience tend to do better in school, and even cope better with stress. It makes a lot of difference, however, who and exactly where is subjected to such an experiment.

In most cases, the subjects are typically representatives of Western, educated, industrialized, wealthy and democratic societies, who, due to their less precarious life situation, are more likely to gamble, risking the possible loss of a candy for the potential reward. On the other hand, the children of the Shuar Indians in the Ecuadorian part of Amazonia, who still basically live in the wild and depend on hunting and fishing, have proved much less adventurous, almost always choosing the safe, the only candy placed in front of them. The reason for this is clearly that they, like their parents, generally tend to avoid risk-taking, as

their very livelihood depends on their ability to seize an opportunity immediately. This is further supported by the results of a more recent experiment, in which the behavior of Shuar children living near urban areas was closer to that of children in developed industrialized countries, highlighting the crucial role of their lifestyle.

Local and cultural characteristics also have a major impact on whether we are more motivated by our own goals and interests, or whether we prioritize the well-being and prosperity of our communities. While in the more individualistic Western world there is usually a greater emphasis on personal recognition and material success, in much of Asia and Latin America, for example, where social values and belonging are traditionally prioritized over ego, there is generally a lower drive to stand out from the community. Nevertheless, it is a fact that people in most countries have become more individualistic over the last fifty years, as globalization has blurred the boundaries in this area too.

But since belonging to a community is at some level indispensable for fitting in regardless of where we live, our thinking and behavior in even the most self-centered societies is not independent of alignment with others – in fact, conformity tends to play a much bigger role in our decisions than we might think. The way others dress, the mobile phone they use or the car they drive can have a significant impact on our own shopping and consumption habits, often without us realizing it. One reason for this may be that there is a particular group of people we want to belong to, so we may even consciously try to be like them, so that we are more easily accepted. We may also be attracted to a much wider community, such as the world of trendy youngsters or successful business people, and subconsciously try to align our choices with them. This kind of thinking, heavily influenced by our desires and emotions, may have led, among other things, to the development of a culture of status symbols, which is one of the basic motivating factors of consumer society.

Nevertheless, conformity is not necessarily a bad or unnecessary quality to have. On the one hand, in a civilized society we must always adapt to each other on some level, otherwise it would be impossible to live with or alongside each other. On the other hand, it is a natural human need to belong, to place and define oneself in a largely unknown and uncertain world. But conformity can also make our lives easier in many cases, beyond our search for identity, by saving us a lot of time when making decisions, listening to or reading the opinions, advice, experiences and reviews of other people, for example when choosing a career, a holiday destination, a restaurant or the latest movie to go to. In addition, the influence of others does not only affect us through consumer habits or even mass hysteria, as we can also be motivated by positive examples and behaviors, such as protecting the environment or showing solidarity and helpfulness towards others.

The best advice to follow regarding conformity is essentially the same as for everything else: don't overdo it. It is rather unfortunate when alignment and adaptation to others comes at the expense of independent, critical thinking, and the drive to conform becomes so persistent that it turns into conformism, i.e. following or imitating without much thought. As a result, one is more likely to contribute to, and easily become an instrument

of, harmful trends and an unsustainable consumer society in the long term. Following bad examples can even lead to a degradation of ethics and social morale, while our uniqueness and individuality can also be seriously compromised.

In our societies, suffering from a crisis of values, open profanity is a typical example, which some people say is perfectly natural. In fact, many people like to incorporate a variety of swear words into their speech as a way of emphasizing their feelings about a situation. Accordingly, a film is only considered realistic or authentic by them if it is full of profanity, because if it were not, it would not cover or would present a false picture of reality. Moreover, since sexuality plays an important, one might say central, role in our lives, according to this kind of extreme liberal approach, its fictional representation can only be real if it is presented in an unvarnished way, almost without taboos.

However, the untenability of this perception is immediately highlighted, among other things, by the fact that during sex scenes, women often wear nothing (not even below waist), while the bra remains on at all times. But such hypocrisy is not necessarily the fault of the actresses defending their morals at all, but rather of the male-dominated film industry and the all-seeing public and critics who force them to shoot such scenes. In such a system, it is no wonder that they often don't know where the boundaries are, or what is still necessary or tasteful within a given genre – that is, for example, a romantic film will not become really good if everything is shown in it, just as a drama won't be realistic just by depicting the most extreme human reactions.

Under the proper circumstances, there is a time and a place for everything, including nudity and profanity, and if we were to reject them in all cases, we could rightly be called hypocritical or overly prudish. At the same time, it is a serious mistake to proclaim widely, or even to reward or put on a pedestal, the legitimacy of their everyday, ubiquitous presence. On the one hand, because it is by no means certain that everyone sees things in the same way, such an approach cannot be generalized, especially not across all cultures. But what makes it even more damaging and dangerous for our societies is that in their mass appearance, it is an excellent way to set a bad example, normalizing open profanity and sexuality, so that the majority of people, thanks to conformism, after a while actually believe that they are natural.

The fact that, as social beings, the behavior of our fellow human beings and our own behavior – real or perceived – can influence us far more than we think is at least as much used against us as it is for our benefit, and unfortunately we can experience the former as often as the latter. Nowadays, the almost ubiquitous media is virtually present as a constant stream of impulsive information, pushed on us by consumer society, which influences our emotions and instincts through images, sounds and written texts. In this context, the economy and society are essentially self-reproducing systems, in which people pass on among themselves, in a constant cycle, false, distorted and unsustainable values, thus constantly reinforcing them.

A striking example of this is the opportunism and competition in commercial television. As participants in the economy, the main objective of these for-profit media is to maximize viewership, which is usually directly proportional to the amount of revenue they generate from advertising. To do this, they tend to produce and screen programs which, based on their measurements and research, are more popular and therefore likely to attract a larger audience.

While this is basically how it works, there is one thing they consistently forget about: in addition to the fact that audience tastes and preferences determine which programs are more popular and successful, the nature and quality of programs can also actively shape public tastes, and people's attitudes and awareness. In other words, if more people choose less demanding, low-quality and useless programs, or even sensationalist and covertly manipulative content, this is not only due to external influences outside their control, but also partly due to the activities of the profit-interested media themselves. Furthermore, experience shows that the more we watch television, the more we believe that what we see reflects reality, thereby amplifying the effect. (But the same is true for other media, including the internet, and to some extent social networks.)

Media researcher George Gerbner's cultivation theory, published in 1969, also points out that people who watch a lot of television increasingly see the world as it is transmitted to them by it. Gerbner's initial focus was the mean world syndrome, which he observed in those whose worldviews permanently incorporated the idea of a fundamentally cruel, malevolent and desperate world, and the associated depression, pessimism, worry, anxiety and mistrust. Later, however, with the help of his colleagues, he extended his theory by introducing the concepts of mainstream and resonance, the idea being that as frequent consumers of television (or other media), people who otherwise have completely different world views begin to see things in a very similar, almost homogeneous way over time. The different viewers thus essentially take on the common perspective of the mainstream, conveyed to them by the same repetitive messages and patterns at many hours of the day. In addition, this includes different patterns of behavior, habits, norms, and nowadays community and social values, or even entire framework of values.

On the one hand, this is extremely important because it clearly highlights that a medium can indeed be used to manipulate the masses of people through the propaganda and 'brainwashing' that is constantly transmitted through it. But at the same time, it also seems clear that a commercial broadcaster has exactly the same responsibility for the content it publishes as a state or public service media. Why is this so? Simply because their programs have the same impact on people as their counterparts that do not seek to maximize material gain at all costs – i.e. they should optimally function as an integral part of society as a whole, not simply of the economy. Nevertheless, they have an extremely materialistic approach and motivational system, which means that they broadcast far less quality, community-building, educational and cultural content, as those are generally watched

by far fewer people, especially during prime time. In this way, however, real values are often relegated to a secondary role or are lost in the competition for viewers...

However, this is not only true of commercial television, but also of organizations, influential celebrities and influencers in virtually any field and on any platform, who often operate on the principle of existential opportunism. In fact, since in most cases we ordinary people do the same – as we are usually forced to do for a living – we pass the 'message' and reinforce the system among ourselves just as much as any profit-driven enterprise.

The reason, then, why the phenomenon outlined above could so easily become a generalized civilizational crisis, the effects of which are increasingly felt in our lives, is that there is a constant positive feedback loop between the main features of the current social system and the aspects of human nature that are coming to the fore today. Positive feedback in this case does not refer to the quality of the outcome produced by the process – it should be understood as the system exerting some influence on people (their thinking, instincts, emotions and decisions) and vice versa, i.e. individuals and their communities also influence the system (its structure, properties, functioning), so that both sides reinforce each other.

What this means in practice is that even if the characteristics of the system are fundamentally negative or based on questionable (or even unsustainable) norms, the majority of people who make up society will adopt them, adapt to them and try to find a way to find their way to prosperity or at least survival, often contributing to the acceptance and enhancement of these characteristics themselves. If a society is built on the conquest, exploitation and oppression of others, on the pursuit of individual gain, pleasure and sensation, and other equally selfish and unscrupulous views, then it is hardly surprising if the majority of its members live their lives according to these considerations, and in the meantime their activities, in pursuit of their own interests, do not improve but rather damage the chances of more positive values coming to the fore. But the opposite is also true: if there are positive examples, trends and processes in society, people are just as capable of amplifying them.

We can see, therefore, that the crisis of the individual is fundamentally a crisis of identity and values. While we are desperate to find something to identify with, we are, for lack of a better, driven by current trends and social pressures, breaking with our traditional human values to embrace different, but often transient or false values, and to change our preference for what is important. Thus, the crisis of the individual is closely related to the crisis of the given environment, community and society, which are also made up of individuals who normally interact with each other on a permanent basis. Therefore, the crisis of the individual and the crisis of civilization as a whole are inseparable, insofar as the crisis of identity and values of individuals spreads to other individuals, and ultimately to a large part of the population, through their direct human, business and other relationships, and vice versa.

Where could all this lead? Among other things, the selective use of language is replaced by everyone turning the air blue, and loose or non-existent sexual norms mean that couples fall for each other wherever they feel like it, rather than avoiding publicity and preserving the intimacy and specialness of the occasion. All this casts a dark shadow of atrophy, not only of language and sexual culture, but of civilized human values in general, without which we can hardly talk of any kind of sustainability, especially with regard to a civilized society.

But can You really wonder, Dear Reader, if ethics and morals are in decline, when at the heart of our way of life is not our physical, mental and spiritual well-being and growth, but an object, which is also an abstract concept of mere promise that (almost) everyone is chasing? While money above all else controls and determines our lives – and often our deaths –, the realm of economics is now as much a religion as a science. In essence, economics offers a comprehensive doctrine with a moral code that promises us salvation attached to it – an almost irresistible ideology that we can follow to transform our communities and societies to suit the system's needs. The economy has its scientists, priests and wizards, just like many other religions, who can conjure money out of thin air, using magic words like 'derivatives' or 'structured investment vehicle'. And, like the churches it has superseded, it has its prophets, reformists, moralists and inquisitors, who ensure that society's orthodoxy is maintained by correcting the doubters and heretics.

Over the ages, a succession of economists and financial gurus has filled the role gradually taken over from the churches, showing us the way to achieve the state of material abundance and endless contentment. For a long time, they seemed to deliver on this promise, which perhaps no religion had ever achieved before: our incomes multiplied, and we were 'gifted' with a cornucopia of new inventions, cures and delights. In return, we have richly rewarded the economic 'priesthood' with elevated status and wealth, and the power to shape our societies as they see fit. And while in the West the link between church and state tended to loosen, the link between politics and the economy became even closer than before, until the two became almost inseparable in the actual exercise of power.

In the economic explosion of the second half of the 20th century, after World War II, Western countries became richer than human civilization had ever seen before, and the doctrines of economics slowly conquered the world. Almost every country in the world has adopted the guidelines of free market practice, and universities have graduated masses of students with a degree in economics to ride the wave of success, while ensuring a steady supply of new graduates and the survival of the creed.

However, history has already shown that when economists are sure that they have found the holy grail of endless peace and prosperity, or the best and most perfect socio-economic arrangement in existence, something always grossly distorts the seemingly idyllic picture. On the eve of the 1929 crash of the US stock market, the economist Irving Fisher encouraged people to buy stocks, and in the 1960s, the followers of Keynesianism

(named after the British economist J.M. Keynes) claimed that we would never have to fear another downturn or crisis because the movement had successfully perfected the tools of demand management.

In that respect, the credit crunch of 2008 was no different: five years earlier, in January 2003, Nobel laureate Robert Lucas delivered a triumphant presidential address to the American Economic Association. While reminding his colleagues that macroeconomics was born during the Great Depression precisely to try to prevent another similar catastrophe, he said that economics had reached the end of history: "Macroeconomics in this original sense has succeeded," he declared. "Its central problem of depression prevention has been solved." Yet, following a crisis that once again shook the entire global economy, many of us saw our living standards fall again and social inequalities widen. But because the politicians 'saw no other way' in order to save economies virtually everywhere, they bailed out and allowed to continue operating essentially the same system that caused the crisis.

Beyond the phenomenon of 'every man kindles the fire below his own pot', this was also possible because the think tanks of economics do not simply observe the laws of nature and then transpose them into the everyday life of our societies, but control our lives through their own re-interpretation of them. If, for example, the policy that governs along their lines shapes the basic incentive structure of society to the assumption that people are selfish, then, lo and behold, people do behave selfishly. (Even more so because if they act according to this image, they are rewarded, and if not, they are punished.) And if they are taught and see around them at every turn that greed, pushiness and existential opportunism are good things, it's no wonder that they believe it – especially if they have little other way to succeed.

As we have seen, the goal of existential opportunism in our societies is typically to pursue one's own interests at the expense of others, which also involves the exercise of power over others. But as the winds of power hit economics, as well, as it became increasingly intertwined with the world of politics, it's grown more ambitious and corrupt. "And even if this was not always obvious, if we have come to realize that the system is not sustainable indefinitely, how is it possible that we continue to follow the teachings of the 'priests' of economics?" you have every right to ask, Dear Reader.

Well, for one thing, because most of us think they know a lot more about it than we do, so we don't dare question them. (If we do, we are usually scolded immediately.) Secondly, because as ordinary people we usually don't have the time or energy, as we are so busy with work, family and daily worries, and in our little free time we prefer to escape into things that can help us relax our overloaded minds. Thirdly, because they always have the virtual trump card in their hand: so far, every other system that has fundamentally contradicted (human) nature has ended in failure or even disaster, so no other concept can have any justification.

As we know, however, a society created by a civilized (or aspiring) species that is largely transforming its environment creates, in the long run, quite different conditions than

nature, which, by means of existential opportunism as a driving force, could get by perfectly well – at least in terms of functionality – for eternity. Disaster is therefore as much 'coded' into our current socio-economic-political set-up as it is into any of the previous systems, which economics has failed to recognize, or at least refuses to acknowledge. Its fundamental flaw and failure, in turn, beyond its ambition and greed, is not necessarily that its scientists, experts and enthusiastic supporters meant evil, but rather that they believed that economics is nothing more than a science in which people always operate according to the same rules. The problem is that such a narrow-minded description and pigeonholing of human nature unfortunately has the potential to focus on, define and seemingly conserve a few of our many qualities in ourselves and in our relationships and interactions within society.

It would be immensely difficult to even roughly list all of the many different human traits, so I won't even try. But, as we have already seen from previous examples, and would likely even know from our own life experience, our species if perfectly capable of cooperation and peaceful coexistence if we consciously strive for it. It is true that we do not always succeed, but we must not forget that difficulties, existential problems, social inequalities and even changes in environmental conditions are to a large extent due to our own attitudes and behavior and our relationship with each other, so it is up to us whether we change them or not.

Is it really that simple? Not at all. Many of us find it hard or impossible to let go of the things, lifestyles and patterns we are used to, even if we dream, perhaps only subconsciously, of a better, more meaningful and higher quality life than we have now. But clinging to the past instead of looking at a common future is a fundamental obstacle to cooperation, and even threatens to ignite conflicts time and again. In fact, the conservation and passing on of obscurant views, ancient dogmas and beliefs can be as much of a threat to the survival of human civilization as the imposition of the flawed and unsustainable systems and practices that are prevalent today.

Moreover, humanity is far from being at the same level of development and consciousness, even if globalization has leveled the playing field somewhat. While in most of the Western world there is (too much) emphasis on individual freedom, in some cultures, traditions that go back a long way almost shackle the individual. One example is the institution of forced marriage, which is a bad practice in many cultures even today, but which is very difficult to put behind us. In India and Pakistan, for instance, laws prohibit girls and women from marrying against their will, yet in 2016 there were around 50,000 such marriages in India, and in Pakistan almost 1,000 women were killed by their own family members just for marrying the man of their choice. In some cases, however, the women themselves commit murder, because they see no other way out of their predicament, only to be stigmatized for life.

Meanwhile, millions of people around the world, including in the poorest countries, still believe, thanks to local customs or ancestral teachings, that children, whenever they come, are a blessing, and so they strive to create as large a family as possible, without any idea of overpopulation and the problems it causes. People of different, opposing cultures and religions are often unwilling to cooperate with each other simply because they have long been at odds or hostile to each other over something, even if they share similar views on a myriad of other issues. Unaware that they are threatened by a crisis that overrides everything else, with the survival of all human civilization at stake, they are also unaware that ultimately it doesn't matter what culture you were raised in, what you believe in, the color of your skin or your wealth, if there is a common problem that needs to be solved somehow.

Yet it would be a mistake to claim that the selfish, petty and narrow-minded traits of human nature preclude any kind of broad or even global cooperation. Modern technical tools and the rapid spread of data via the internet can greatly facilitate the flow of knowledge, information and news, and human nature is not necessarily set in stone, either. It is a scientific fact, based on thousands of years of observations, that everything in the universe is constantly in motion, changing and transforming, with the fundamental laws of nature being constant at most. This is true even if, compared to our relatively short lives, it happens so slowly that we don't notice it: rivers and glaciers carve deep canyons and fjords into the rock over millennia, erosion wastes the highest mountain ranges over time, while winds can visibly move sand dunes away in as little as a few days.

Living organisms are no exception to the law of constant change, as evidenced by the extraordinary diversity of species and the changing characteristics of domestic animals through breeding. Why should human nature be the only exception? And while instincts are still an integral part of us, it is a natural process for an intelligent, civilization-building species to increasingly eclipse them in favor of rationality and humanity – especially if we do not do everything to ensure that the advertisements and other messages which bombard us from everywhere and tempt us to consume, constantly stir them up through our emotions and material desires. And if we are not pitted against each other all the time to secure our livelihood, advancement and success by outdoing others, as we would do in nature, along the lines of existential opportunism as a fundamental and overriding principle.

However, we can now see that unrestrained competition in a theoretically civilized society sets in motion damaging and self-perpetuating processes which, in the long term, threaten the stability of civilization as a whole, as it becomes both environmentally and socially unsustainable. My personal experience also shows that most of us are not in favor of existential opportunism – we have just been led to believe that only a socioeconomic system based on it can work, and it has been forced upon us for the lack of a better option. So despite our differing worldviews and ideals, perhaps most of us can agree that we are civilized in large part because our communities are not governed by the very same laws of

the jungle, cruel and selfish, above all aimed at survival – one might say barbaric – customs and relationships as nature.

Nevertheless, we must also realize that our situation is fundamentally different, for we have the opportunity to make informed choices, and shape our own and our communities' lifestyles so that we are less likely to be forced into similar behavior. Animals in the wild usually don't have much time to think in a situation, and their intelligence cannot match that of humans – even if they have much more experience in a particular setting than their civilized counterparts, who mostly live in artificial environments. On the other hand, in a civilized society, the goal for the individual cannot be mere survival – not least because, as intelligent beings, we have much more diverse needs. Yet, as long as materialistic and self-centered thinking and existential opportunism dominate our societies, the majority of us will remain 'slaves' of consumer society – but by no means can we enjoy the kind of freedom that only a truly civilized society, not only technically but also morally advanced, can offer its members.

While it is still very much part of our nature at the level of instinct, Home sapiens as a rational being has the ability and the potential to rise above existential opportunism – and in a time of a potentially fateful global crisis, that's the only logical choice, as well. However, given the significant differences in cultural and consciousness levels, the replacement of rivalry by cooperation is unlikely to succeed on its own, in the absence of adequate organization. (At least until a really big crisis or disaster strikes, which suddenly brings people together.) We must therefore strive to live our lives with rationality, thinking in terms of facts and consequences, and to keep the instincts that influence our decisions under control. Even though our emotions inevitably play a part, too, that in itself is not a bad thing, as long as we don't allow ourselves to be ruled by those emotions that make us selfish and irresponsible.

So humanity's main task at the moment is to bring out the good in ourselves and in each other, the positive qualities that are favorable for social coexistence and sustainability, while trying to keep the bad ones in the background (but definitely not ignoring them, because then they can cause serious problems). All this may sound a bit naive to You, Dear Reader, but I think it is worth taking very seriously, because the fate of our civilization may essentially depend on it, especially in the next few decades. Balance and harmony must be the primary focus of our actions, both for ourselves and our communities, and for our environment. To this end, we must first and foremost reward behavior and initiatives that are beneficial for the wider community, i.e. society and humanity as a whole, as well as the environment, as opposed to thinking, behavior and solutions that are not sustainable. We must make sure that resources are channeled where they are most needed, otherwise damaging trends will continue.

Let's not forget: recognizing the problem alone is not enough, if there is a lack of practical adaptation to the situation. (And, since the problem is global in scale, the adaptation must also take place on a global level.) And we can only do this through unprecedented

cooperation, based on our shared values, which requires a sense of common identity that we can all identify with. But to build a common identity, we must temporarily put aside everything we have believed, learned and experienced. We need to get down to the very foundations of our existence, so that we can then find its essence and the common ground in all of us, which will lead us to the collective consciousness that is key to solving the civilizational crisis.

However, in order to understand our place in this whole system as individuals and autonomous entities, we need to start from our individual perspectives, by reflecting – and, if necessary, reassessing – our own values, priorities and life goals, so that we can finally arrive at where we collectively want to be. All this seems inevitable to finally put an end to existential opportunism and create truly civilized societies.

The Meaning of Our Lives

The meaning of human life, or life in general, is a rather subjective and abstract concept, which has been one of the most fundamental questions of philosophy for thousands of years. Accordingly, it is not an easy topic to discuss – yet I believe that we must do so for our common future, for which we must find common ground.

There are countless different understandings of the meaning of life in various cultures, often linked to all kinds of stories. But since we are now looking for common ground, I will consider only what is common to all of us and based on a direct, as far as possible, objective perception of the world, and the rational or scientific explanations that can be given. As I said in the foreword, I can offer nothing more than reality, based on pure logic and all the facts that we know – or at least roughly suspect – about the world around us today.

Using a metaphor that has become a catchphrase thanks to the popular film The Matrix, I could aptly put it as: which would you rather have, the blue pill or the red one? The former means 'blissful' ignorance, in the sense that one prefers to cling to the seemingly secure status quo, and with it ignorance. The latter represents the inexorable truth of reality, which, although it carries a strong element of uncertainty, gives You the freedom to choose. And with it, potentially, the knowledge that will allow You to shape Your life for the better, rather than constantly floating and being at the mercy of others. You have a choice – but know this, Dear Reader: even if You decide to turn your head or bury it in the sand, the world will go on its way. Only without You...

Now for the cold shoulder: as science currently stands, life has no special, predetermined meaning of any kind. You can believe in anything else, of course – but regardless of how you look at it, everyone has to find it for themselves, and make sense of their own lives. In fact, in many cases, others – our parents, teachers, mentors, role models, leaders or someone else – try to steer us in a certain direction, and in this way give our lives a sense of purpose. This is obviously most common in childhood, when we have little idea of the world or what to do with ourselves, but it often happens later, as well. As adults, however, we are essentially responsible for our own actions and behavior, and for what we consider to be the purpose or the guiding principle of our lives, and, in general, for whatever we believe can give meaning to our existence.

Of course, it is obviously much harder to get by without a ready-made script or specific instructions, but only vague guidance, examples, ideas and suggestions on how to spend our time on Earth in the best or most useful way. As the saying goes, the world is not a wish-granting factory – nevertheless, far from everything depends on external factors outside of us or on other people. There are things in our lives that are given, but there are also plenty of things that are constantly changing, and thus subject to different influences and events – such as the random encounter and interaction of predetermined factors or properties.

How fast an apple falls from a tree branch three meters above the ground in still air takes (almost exactly) the same amount of time anywhere in the world, because the gravitational pull is basically the same at any point on the Earth's surface. In strong winds, on the other hand, this time interval can be noticeably longer – but wind is nothing more than random movement caused by air currents, which probably no one is able to predict accurately. Thus, the coefficient of gravity as a physical constant is everywhere determined, i.e. fixed, while changes in the weather generate stochastic, i.e. random, changes on the surface of our planet. The movement of the apple is influenced by these two factors simultaneously – so what we have to see is that if in a process even one of two or more factors changes randomly, in a way that cannot be exactly predicted (and at best can be calculated with some probability), then the process itself will also take place randomly.

And this is true not only in the case outlined above, but in every other event in nature and in our own lives, where we experience the involvement of similar forces. Just as we cannot predict stock market prices – because if you could, one would never have a financial problem again –, we cannot predict traffic jams, nor can we predict what traits we as parents will pass on to our children that are not directly inheritable. But it is just as much out of our control which numbers are drawn when we play the lottery – this and our own decisions (which numbers we mark on our ticket) both affect our winnings.

However, from infancy onwards, we humans tend to look for intentionality behind virtually every event, simply because that is how our brains try to make sense of our experiences. As a result, many people tend to attribute an accident, a major lottery win or any other significant change in their lives to some higher power, be it fate, God or whatever that they have no influence on. But this kind of intentionality bias is highly dependent on the external influences and the circumstances of the moment, as psychologist Dr Evelyn Rosset, among others, has demonstrated in her experiments on the subject. These experiments have shown that the more we are made to believe that an otherwise random event is intentional, or the sooner we have to judge its intentionality, the more we tend to attribute some sort of ulterior motive to it.

Accordingly, it may be a matter of perspective to judge whether the Sun provides warmth because without it life could not exist on Earth, or whether life can exist on our planet because the Sun, being a star, produces the necessary energy. Or, for example, whether hydrogen and oxygen molecules combine to make water so that we have something to drink, or vice versa.

Looking at the two questions from a scientific point of view, it is clear that the Sun and its heat, and the coupling of molecules under given environmental conditions, are the cause, and life on Earth and human life are the effect. In other words, in neither case was it necessary for life to determine its own conditions, but the circumstances of the moment made it possible for life and humanity itself to come into being on Earth.

Had the conditions in the Solar System been different, life would not have been possible in it, as was the case in countless other star systems – so there is no evidence that the appearance of life itself in the universe was anything other than the result of chance.

However, in our lives, too, we experience events and influences all the time that we cannot predict the outcome of. Thus, the meaning, purpose or driving force of our lives can change over time, whether it is caused by an unexpected encounter, a trauma, spiritual enlightenment or the aforementioned lottery win. But think about it, Dear Reader: if everything was predetermined, if every moment of our existence on earth was written in the stars, what would be the point of living? Because then we would be nothing but helpless instruments, puppets without our own will...

Or is that really what it is all about? We are born, we live, we die, and the circle is complete? From a strictly biological point of view, that's really all that matters. In the meantime, we need to do different activities (eating, drinking, sleeping, etc.) to stay alive – this is called self-preservation. We must also ensure that, if possible, humanity does not become extinct, which is driven by another instinctive impulse – the preservation of the species. These two things are the basis of the perpetual cycle of life, and nature is in fact the stage for the constant alternation of life and death, which, while it sustains living beings, also continually destroys them.

The most basic driving force of life is therefore self- and species-preservation, which is true for all species regardless of intelligence – that is, a living being does not need to be particularly intelligent to do either, in fact, the instinct is sufficient. While greater intelligence can certainly provide some survival advantages – for example in finding food or avoiding predators –, it is by no means essential, as it is generally adaptability, persistence and tenacity that can lead to success in the longer run. (Adaptation in this case must be understood in terms of external circumstances, not necessarily in terms of relations within a society or community. So it is not the same as conformism, which means enforced, even potentially self-dangerous conformity to others!) Those species that are better able to adapt to ever-changing environmental conditions will survive longer, those that are not will usually disappear quickly down the drain of the natural history of species.

Is that all our life would be, too? A constant struggle for survival and preservation of the species, so that there is very little or nothing left of us? That our existence is dominated by the laws of biology through our genes in the same way as those of animals, which are primarily regarded as creatures of instincts? Well, Dear Reader, the point is exactly that we do have a say in this. For a rational being, such as Homo sapiens, has much more intelligence than animals, and possesses something that they do not have (or mostly in a more rudimentary form) – and that is self-consciousness. We humans are aware of our own existence and mortality, are able to understand the more complex interconnections, and thus to learn about the world around us in detail, and to use and transform our environment in ways that serve our enrichment (or even cause our doom).

Thanks to our self-awareness and the knowledge we have acquired through complex thinking, motivated by our emotions and desires, we are able to formulate, set and achieve goals other than strictly speaking self- and species-preservation. Although it is true that some animal species, such as dolphins and primates, live a social life like us, play for pleasure or even use tools, there is no far-reaching and complex planning behind their actions, no creation of elaborate structures to achieve their goals, and certainly no conscious, even radical, alteration of their environment. Along with our rich emotionality and capacity for humanity, this is essentially what sets us apart from the animal world, and what distinguishes an intelligent being from an 'inferior' life form in general.

Our abilities, knowledge and goals thus orient us towards higher things, and while self- and species-preservation remain an essential part of our lives, we seek to place them in a context, complementing them with things that go beyond the mere survival of ourselves and humanity. And it is precisely this kind of endeavor that can really give meaning, something extra to our lives: learning about the world and how it works, acquiring and passing on knowledge, using our creativity to make things, playing for our own and each other's pleasure, and at the same time increasing, practicing and constantly refining our skills.

However, such a motivation, which can be realized in practice, can only be available to a being that is not only intelligent enough, but also has the possibility of free choice. Homo sapiens theoretically belongs in this group – indeed, because we have a well-developed sense of consciousness and self-awareness, we are able to assess the potential consequences of our decisions for others and ourselves, to set goals, and to specifically find and give meaning to our own lives. On the other hand, self- and species-preservation are inherently and fundamentally instinctual motivations that are passed from parents to children through the process of biological inheritance, and thus are in some ways predetermined factors that we cannot change in our lifetime. (Except for various artificial interventions, such as sterilization to render one infertile.)

Nevertheless, we know that our lives are essentially a constant series of millions of smaller and larger decisions, each of which is supposed to have some impact on the shape of our future. Or is it not the case, and a large part of our decisions are in fact insignificant, and any change is nothing more than an illusion? Unfortunately, I have no information on such polls, but I wouldn't be surprised to find out that the number of people in the world who feel this way by far exceeds the number of those who don't. Millions of people living in underdeveloped countries or regions, or on the margins of society, with almost nothing, hardly see their lives as a limitless pool of opportunities. As they try to survive from one day to the next, they have almost no chance of prominence on their own, without significant external help.

The masses of people working in the treadmills, even in more developed countries, are perhaps less desperate and more hopeful of seizing some opportunity that can make a real difference to their lives, but statistics show that few succeed. In many cases, people take on more work in order to get ahead, usually at the expense of their personal lives, and often

at the cost of breaking up families or other relationships. (This also shows that having money doesn't hurt, but it can never make you happy by itself.) And when You can no longer decide whether You eat, drink and sleep so that You can work, or You work in order to be able to eat, drink and sleep, that is when Your free will finally becomes questionable...

Wasn't it said earlier that the way an organized society works is not that you can do whatever you want? Yes, Dear Reader, but it is about balance – in our own lives as well as in our societies, and in the relationship between our civilization and the environment. Self- and species-preservation are obviously vital and indispensable activities, but they are hardly enough in themselves to make it worth living for. When our whole existence revolves primarily around them, how different are we in our way of life from the animals we consider to be mostly inferior? Aside from the gigantic scale of consumption and the resulting inorganic waste that living creatures in nature do not produce...

Whereas for instinct-driven animals it is only natural that pretty much everything is about the cycle of life outlined above, for an intelligent species like Homo sapiens, there must be some higher purpose in our lives for them to make real sense. Ideally, everyone in a society should strive to find that goal (or goals) – but to have a real chance of doing so, it is not enough to just want it, it is also essential to have a realistic opportunity. However, as we have seen, in an environment where material considerations are central and existential opportunism is the dominant principle, there is no hope of a kind of equilibrium in which the majority or even half of the people can share in such equality of opportunity. Moreover, through the continuous reproduction of inequalities, this state of circumstances is 'passed on' to future generations, leaving them to a large extent without the possibility of giving real meaning to their own existence.

Nevertheless, as rational beings, we have a heavy responsibility in bringing offspring into the world if we cannot provide them with decent living conditions. Should we do that purely because our instincts tell us to? Obviously the problem, Dear Reader, is not that we naturally desire to have children, but that we do not do everything possible to enable them to achieve all that their abilities and intelligence would allow them to achieve, and to live content, healthy, peaceful and happy lives. But far from being the responsibility of parents alone, it is the responsibility of our societies, and indeed of human civilization as a whole – because if the options of parents and other relatives are limited or severely restricted, society needs to interfere.

And for this to happen, the minimum requirement for a truly civilized society is to at least strive to ensure equal opportunities and to guarantee the basic needs of all its members, including the education and upbringing of children. Although it is up to everyone to discover the meaning of his life for himself, it is one of the most important tasks of a civilized society to provide effective and, if necessary, lifelong assistance with it to all its members. To achieve this, it should offer as many opportunities and alternatives as possi-

ble for all, and support and encourage people from an early age to learn about the world and themselves, and to realize their full potential.

Such a 'nurturing society' may be contrary to the laws of evolution and existential opportunism dictated by nature, yet it is absolutely necessary it if we are to exist in a truly civilized environment beyond mere self- and species preservation, both at the level of individuals and the entire human race. And caring for future generations is important, if only because as far as we know, no one comes into this world having begged to live in it... Each one of us is born into a specific place and time, with certain circumstances and people, into a world defined by factors outside ourselves – but which, as we come to know it, we can become part of, influence and even change to a lesser or greater extent. But it makes a whole lot of difference what awaits us, what 'baggage' we have to carry with us into existence on this rare (unique?) oasis of life that we call Earth.

If we look at life from the point of view of a creature of instincts in nature, it is essentially nothing more than a series of repetitive activities, which end as suddenly as they began. (But despite the fact that the life of an animal, even a beetle, may seem to be rather insignificant, we humans are largely judged by the way we treat it.) A sentient being of advanced intelligence, on the other hand, has a much more conscious and complex way of looking at its own existence, and – beside its repetitious aspects – sometimes sees life as a burden, sometimes as an opportunity. It is only naturally that it often feels like a burden, as from time to time we have to deal with different problems and difficulties, which is also necessary because without negative experiences and a reference point, we would not be able to appreciate positive events. With that in mind, an important measure of a society's development and civilization is the proportion of its members who are able to look at their lives as an opportunity.

If You, Dear Reader, are one of those who believe that the glass is always half full, You probably also believe that life is an opportunity to be seized and used the best way possible. Fine, but the best for whom? Just You and a few other people close to You? And at what cost? Or, if possible, for everyone – but, since it would be naive to think that this is possible, at least for You and Your country? Can such a country even exist?

Wherever You are born, life obviously offers some kind of opportunity, because in each situation You have at least two choices: to do something, or not to do it. But by the time You reach the point where You can make Your own decisions, others - Your parents, Your educators, the leaders of Your community and country, etc. – have already made countless decisions for You. And later, when making Your own decisions, You always need to take into account what the consequences might be. So, in some cases, it may be impossible to make a really good decision at all...

If, for example, Your parents are against You marrying the one You love, will You stick to your decision, even if it alienates them or turns them against you? Or would You rather give in to their will, sacrificing Your own happiness? Is it possible that they are right and

only want what is good for You? Or is it just their attitudinal and cultural limitations prevent them from supporting You?

When Your family could use more money, do You take on a side job and risk barely being there for them? Or would You rather try to convince them to save more or live a more economical lifestyle, even if it's a matter of constant debate? Which option gives You a better chance of keeping Your family together?

While there are always opportunities in life, the question of 'what' and 'how' usually make a fundamental difference. Can You really achieve what You want? Can You learn and develop in whatever direction You want, so that You can then fulfill Your potential and become a truly useful member of society? Can You build real relationships with others, free from conformism or self-interest, so that You can feel emotionally safe and loved? Are You right to be guided by Your desire to live in peace and harmony with others and with nature, striving to be the best You can be? Or should You seize every opportunity to move forward, to build an existence by pushing others out if necessary, to the detriment of Your fellow-creatures and the environment, and enjoy it while it lasts?

With the destructive effects of existential opportunism in mind, I think it makes a world of difference whether we hinder, ignore and exploit each other in the course of our lives, or whether we help each other in a mutual way – just as it matters a lot what circumstances and conditions we are born into, how much of a burden we carry. Because a newborn baby or a young child is essentially helpless and innocent, it deserves the best possible treatment and conditions from its immediate environment and society as a whole. Therefore it must be guaranteed a minimum quality of life, and the opportunity to live and develop with dignity. However, the responsibility of the current generation does not end here, as for the sake of social sustainability (and order) alone, it is necessary to continuously care for the well-being of every single member of society to the maximum.

On the other hand, it is vitally important what we do with the opportunity, if it is given to us. If one cannot say until retirement that there was at least one person or thing (a cause, a vocation, etc.) in his life for whom or for which he was prepared to sacrifice himself, and did nothing in particular for others, then he may rightly think that his life was essentially pointless or self-serving. It is a critical detail, however, that by self-sacrifice I mean some kind of selfless act for the benefit of others, but in no way the deliberate taking or destruction of the lives of others. For the latter is simply unforgivable, and he who does so may hope for salvation in the afterlife, but he will certainly be hated and cursed in this world. At the same time, if You do feel that Your life is aimless, the good news is that as long as You are alive and have some capacity for action, it is never too late to change things.

While creatures in the wild, living only according to nature's rules, have no choice and are forced to constantly fight for their survival according to the rules of existential opportunism, we, intelligent and civilized (or aspiring) beings, have the capability to take our own destiny into our own hands. Unfortunately, this is not always easy, and sometimes we

are forced to struggle to change the dysfunctional and unjust system that surrounds us – something we cannot realistically achieve alone, but only with the sufficient cooperation. Nevertheless, through a more efficient and equitable division of goods and labor, mechanization and proper organization, it is possible for virtually everyone in the world to live a meaningful and quality life – the only thing missing is the (social) will to realize it.

Having Faith

In the previous chapter, I based my discussion of the meaning of our lives on what we now know factually about the world and ourselves in it. I believe that it would be a mistake to ignore the many observations made over thousands of years and the knowledge based on them on such a central issue, as we owe virtually all of the achievements we have today to science. Nevertheless, as much as I try to remain objective, I am aware that the majority of people believe in some kind of higher power and creation story, and that life is far beyond what we normally experience in our physical reality.

As a thinking and curious being, even as a child I myself wondered about fundamental questions such as whether there is life after death, or where I was before I was born. Although there are countless different ideas, theories and legends about all this, it is highly unlikely that any one human being has the answers to these questions. So over time, I had to accept that there was a good chance I would never get to know them, either.

However, according to many religions and cultures, our souls do not perish along with our bodies, giving us the opportunity to live on in some other form. In this way, our existence is not limited to a few decades of material incarnation, which also means that we are much more than a single ephemeral, insignificant shell of dust.

Whether this is true or not, I cannot decide, but I have an idea that seems to be absolutely logical and realistic to me. We humans want to believe that there is life after death precisely because we try to give meaning to our own lives: it would be too cruel for us if we had no particular purpose or destiny. This kind of faith can provide a pretty firm handhold in our uncertain lives, especially in the most difficult moments. So we really need bolstering, and when we don't find them in ourselves or in other people (or even animals), we naturally start looking for them on a more abstract level.

But the really interesting question is: if we knew or believed for sure that there is no life after death, what effect would that have on our relationships and attitude toward each other? If we start from the premise that our existence is finite, does that encourage us to pursue pleasure, concentrating as much as possible on ourselves, to make the most of the little time we are given? Or should we pay more attention to how we treat others, and have more respect for each other's lives and souls than we do now? Or should we strive to somehow balance these two, seemingly contradictory aspects?

What is certain is that because we are spiritual beings, we all need some form of faith, but it has to be a personal matter for each of us. Our faith is something that is bound up with our inner, private world, and therefore it is only part of us, part of our self, even if it is sometimes a little vague or perhaps difficult to define, yet integral and essential to our personality. From a certain point of view, it is comparable to sexuality: both have their own place, their time and their way, and both are basically unique to us and to the group or community with whom we practice them. And while sexuality can also be said to be part of our personal sphere, it is no more a private matter in that respect than faith and

religion are. It is true, Dear Reader, that within certain limits, everyone should have the right to freely practice both sexuality and religion. However, according to civilized norms, the public exercise of sexuality, beyond the limits of the law or of decency and public taste, is not permissible, just as the harassment of others in the name of the propagation of faith or religion can be interpreted as an invasion of one's private, one might say intimate, sphere.

At the same time, the problem is not limited to overly violent and, in extreme cases, intolerant proselytizing – we should not forget that there are forms of religious practice which, even if they cannot be called a violation of intimacy, are capable of seriously disrupting the lives of others. This includes, for example, when members of a religious community occupy a road crossing while praying, thereby obstructing traffic, or when they worship their god or gods in a manner or at a volume that intrudes into the lives of others in a way that invades their personal freedom. Those who do so are not behaving in a civilized manner, and must either change their attitudes, or accept the rejection or expulsion of society. On the other hand, no one should be discriminated against or disadvantaged in any way because of their faith or religion, as long as they abide by the rules that are essential for social coexistence – one of the cornerstones of which is precisely how people of different cultures can tolerate each other.

In the exercise of our various rights, it is a fundamental guideline not to use one to offend the other, so we must be able to speak and express our views openly, including on certain religions – within the appropriate framework, of course. That means one can exchange views or even discuss them without any further ado, and even criticize them as appropriate, as long as it is not accompanied by any derogatory, derisive or disrespectful qualification or personal attacks. For just as it is inappropriate or impermissible in more advanced cultures to invade the aura, or immediate personal space, of others without being asked, so the violation of the psyche and inner world of others should be equally taboo to all civilized beings.

Personally, for instance, I believe that there may be some kind of 'higher' organizing principle in the universe other than natural selection. We could call it a kind of natural intelligence, or even the all-penetrating 'Force', which gives meaning to things in a kind of mysterious, inexplicable way, and by 'rewarding' right and intelligent behavior, points the way to a kind of ideal state for the whole universe and its inhabitants. It is possible that this is because I watched a lot of Star Wars as a kid – after all, we know that early experiences, the major influences on us in our childhood (and even later), don't usually go away without a trace. Thus, those who were exposed to some other influences as children – being intensively subjected to the teachings of one religion or another, for example – may well believe in different things as adults.

My faith, however, is nothing more than my own individual support, my attempt to explain the mechanisms of the world that I do not (yet?) understand. That's why I won't im-

pose, and I can't impose it on anyone, not even on my own child, nor on other people's children. As opposed to some views to the contrary, children are not the property of parents, relatives or anyone else, but parents do have a responsibility to society and to the child to protect her, and to bring her up in the best possible way. And just as responsible parents, genuinely concerned for their child's future and happiness, do not impose any occupation or career, it is a mistake to impose a belief system that fundamentally determines and limits her life on a developing consciousness that is not yet capable of making foresighted decisions on its own.

As has been said, this does not mean, of course, that one cannot share his beliefs with others as well as any other thoughts and ideas about the way of the world, as long as he does not offend others' feelings and human dignity. Nor there is a problem with the practice of faith, as long as one does not abuse, persecute or discriminate in the name of it against followers of other religions or non-believers – whoever does so voluntarily renounces being considered a civilized person. The point is that one should never influence others by forcing them, according to one's own interests. Rather, they should be allowed to form their own opinions and beliefs, preferably when they are mature enough to do so.

I know from my own experience that as a young child, it is extremely difficult to judge realistically what is true about different aspects of the world – especially when You are exposed to millions of pieces of information and stimuli at such a young age. Thus, it is also practically impossible to decide which of the many different stories about the origins of the world one should consider credible. If You accept one of them as true, does that mean that the others do not correspond to reality, but are just myths and legends? If You fully believe the followers of one religion, are You not calling the others liars at the same time? As a child, how could You possibly decide which of the many to accept as true, while rejecting others?

Don't get me wrong, Dear Reader, these otherwise innocuous, but perfectly legitimate questions are not intended to offend anyone's faith or to change it at any cost. All I want to point out is that had You been born in a different part of the world, or even into a different family, there is a good chance that You Yourself would believe in something completely different from what You believe in right now. Just as Your mother tongue could be any other language or dialect instead of Your current one. Therefore whatever religion You have adopted, You must see that our beliefs are often 'inherited' in the same way as our other views or our social and wealth status.

So, depending on the environment in which one lives and has been brought up, everyone has their own worldview – however advanced or rudimentary –, and tries to somehow fit the information that bombards them into it. In the light of this, it is perhaps not too surprising that people tend to believe, or believe more, what fits into their existing worldview, since it provides a kind of confirmation and self-justification. But this often leads us to believe what we want to believe, rather than what makes the most sense or is the most logi-

cal explanation. On the one hand, this makes us susceptible to all sorts of ideas that are divorced from reality, such as the conspiracy theories that are increasingly rampant on the internet, and on the other, it makes us easily manipulated by others.

In this context, however, we can also see that religion can be just as capable of dominating us as economics is at present. Dependence on the church and its close connection with politics was particularly characteristic of the Middle Ages, but in many parts of the world it is difficult to separate them even today. (Apparently, churches are not quite free from existential opportunism, either.) But such power can be abused, just as it has been done in the case of the economy – see the Inquisition, which did not shrink from torturing and burning at the stake those branded heretics –, therefore the intertwining of state and religion is not acceptable in any modern, civilized society. If this is the case in a country, it does not necessarily mean that it is completely devoid of civilization – but it cannot be called fully civilized as long as the injustices it practices and accepts (lack of equality for women, caste system, etc.) persist in society. (In fact, no culture can be considered civilized if it does not respect people's privacy and personal freedom, while cultural behavior that aggressively expands at the expense of other cultures can be called downright invasive.)

Since faith is an entirely personal matter, religion should not be imposed on anyone. This obviously does not mean that we cannot practice our faith together, only that it cannot be institutionalized and forced on anyone. It follows directly from this that the practice or teaching of any religion should not be made compulsory in a democratic society, as this would be a serious violation of religious freedom. At the same time, political decisions must not be based on the teachings of one religion or another, or on the highly subjective dogmas of the past that are now outdated, but on exact facts and up-to-date information, and on the principles of equality and reciprocity. A contradictory, hereditary or arbitrary hierarchical system, dominated by a minority over the majority, is again not really civilized, which can only be said about a truly democratic system of government.

The freedom of religion on the spiritual plane must go hand in hand with its full existential freedom, so that no one can be expected to support financially a religion or denomination with which he has no connection. This means, among other things, that it is highly unjust to upkeep any church from public funds or from the taxes and other contributions of adherents of other religions, and therefore everyone should have the right to prevent it. (After all, if You don't use something or it is of no benefit to You, how can You be expected to pay for it, right?) Another way of looking at it might be to ask: what if we had to choose between a church maintained or supported by the state, and the guarantee of the basic needs of every citizen as a basic right? Which one would You vote for, Dear Reader, if it were a question of your own livelihood?

Heretical as it may seem, our current circumstances can very well influence the development of our beliefs over the course of our lives – especially if we accept that they are a kind of response to our existential questions and fears, which can be seen as a major indi-

rect way of overcoming existential insecurity. The fact that we tend to turn to some form of it when the situation around us is at its worst, most confusing and unclear, strongly suggests that the main driving force of religious faith is the search for order in chaos, for certainty in uncertainty. Beliefs that we 'inherit' or are introduced to by our family and immediate community may be really strong and defining for us, and we may only be able to deny them in the face of a major disappointment or trauma – on the other hand, there have been many examples of someone becoming religious as a result of a similarly fateful event (say, the unlikely survival of an accident).

However, statistics have clearly shown that the more educated we are, the more our religiosity tends to decline. According to a WIN-Gallup International poll of 52,000 people in 57 countries, the proportion of people who consider themselves religious is 16% lower among people with a post-secondary education than among those without a secondary education. In the meantime, in addition to education and general awareness, our financial situation also has a big influence on our attitude towards religion – so the figures confirm that the fewer existential threats we face, the less we rely on the spiritual support offered by institutionalized religion or any other belief system. Data from social science surveys, for example, have shown that the number of believers fell by 33% in Sweden, 20% in Australia and 7% in Canada between 1947 and 2001, which undoubtedly shows some inverse correlation with the increase in wealth of each country.

While similar trends can be observed in the West and other (more) developed countries, religions in the developing world are typically still as popular today. Although similarly old data are not available in their case, according to WIN-Gallup's 2012 Religiosity and Atheism Index, 85% or more of respondents in the ten most religious countries on Earth, none of which had an annual per capita income of more than US$ 14,100, identified themselves as a 'religious person '. Gallup's 2009 survey polled around 1,000 people in 114 nations of varying levels of development and wealth. Where per capita income did not exceed $2,000, 95% of respondents (in the median) answered "Yes" to the question of whether religion was an important part of their daily life. At the same time, in countries with an annual income of more than $25,000, only 47% of respondents said "Yes" to the same question.

There is therefore clearly a strong correlation between financial situation and religiosity, even if it cannot be said in general terms that this is the most important factor influencing the issue. Vietnam and China, for example, which are still poor countries in terms of per capita income (although the latter is already catching up with richer nations), are officially atheist, and are classified as more secular nations. On the other hand, in the camp of the rich, there are Ireland and Italy, where the proportion of the religious population is still very high.

However, none of them are sticking out as much as the United States of America. In 2008, the International Social Survey Programme found that 81% of Americans have always believed in God, a high proportion compared to other wealthy countries. (In the United Kingdom, for example, the percentage of 'original believers' was 37%, while in

France it was only 29%.) This is obviously possible because other factors also play a significant role in their religiosity, at most their importance may be questionable.

According to Marcus Noland, senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics in Washington, D.C., one of the main arguments is that the US 'religious market' is much livelier and more open, and has many more players than, say, of the countries in Scandinavia, where there are long-established churches that are dominant. But Professor Phil Zuckerman and other sociologists attribute the phenomenon more to socio-economic inequalities in the US, saying: "We have 50 to 60 million people without health insurance; we have the highest child poverty rates of the industrialized democratic world; the greatest gap between rich and poor of the industrialized democratic world; we have increasing inequality and, voilà, we also have a strongly religious society... that can't be accidental."

But since we do not have sufficiently old and extensive data to examine the relationship between wealth and religiosity, and because it is in fact a very complex psychological and social phenomenon, material status can at best be considered a significant factor in the matter. On the one hand, for example, traditions play a similarly prominent role, while on the other, globalization and the culture of consumer society contribute significantly to the marginalization of religions. All in all, it is safe to say that we are thinking in increasingly materialistic ways globally, but to break with religion – or to completely ignore it – it is generally needed that we worry less about our daily security of existence.

But if you think about it, is it any wonder that in such a fast-paced world, bustling with different people and a constant stream of information, many cling to their faith for support? If they turn to their own gods and to pray to them, hoping it will help them to solve their problems, their poverty, their illnesses and their suffering due to ignorance and insecurity? If they try to explain their lives and the world by all sorts of old superstitions and beliefs, because their education and upbringing have not given them greater knowledge and understanding of how things work? Or, even if they are quite knowledgeable, is it possible that astrology, for example, which predicts the future on the basis of the current position of the stars, still provides more reliable support than society itself?

Since the ancient times, man has instinctively sought to understand what he has done to deserve the misfortunes that befall him – and as a result, different ideas and explanations have evolved, along with the corresponding practices. Examining the customs and traditions of various cultures and religions, we can see that many rituals survive even after they have lost their original meaning, i.e. the reason why they appeared and took root in the lives of our ancestors in the first place. Even though we don't usually know how they work, they reinforce our sense of community, while typically giving us a sense of security by attributing to them luck or other powers to keep 'evil spirits' away.

In all cases, the aim is to reduce the threat and the resulting fear and uncertainty, whether it is to avert the death, suffering and misfortune caused by natural disasters, wars

or other calamities. Many religious rituals related to hygiene, fertility and sexuality, or the way food is handled and prepared, were once used to minimize the risk of disease, while others, related to property or family, were aimed at preventing conflict. In the Indian state of Bihar, for example, where infant and maternal mortality rates at birth are still very high, researchers have documented 269 different rituals associated with pregnancy and childbirth.

Nonetheless, many of our similar customs have now lost their original meaning, and only their communal value remains, preserving a sense of belonging among the members of the community and the practitioners of the ritual. That way, consistently practiced traditions provide a safe point, a kind of support or lifeline in an otherwise unpredictable and often hostile world. Furthermore, in tense, life-and-death situations, cooperation can be key to averting trouble – the mental side of things works essentially the same as in the military, through joint training and identification. The greater the threat, the more the community closes ranks, trying to find a solution through the use of common rituals that are now almost automatic.

Where there is a higher incidence of natural disasters, disease or conflict, social rules tend to be much less permissive, meaning they are more rigidly adherent to common norms, and are less tolerant of deviant behavior. Religiousness and unconditional faith also tend to be strong in such cultures, but for this reason, questioning tradition or even authority is not a common phenomenon. At the same time, we must see that religious – or at least highly spiritual – rituals inherited from our ancestors do not in themselves protect anyone from the events they are trying to avoid, as they offer real, practical use in a very small percentage of cases.

The problem is, then, that a truly civilized society that is sustainable in the long run cannot be built on ancient customs and dogmas, myths and legends, beliefs and assumptions. Just as they can't on mere rumors and gossip, half-truths and fake news, or the conspiracy theories that have grown out of them, which we usually believe only because they are often more exciting and interesting than reality, and because they can explain (in their own distorted way at least) things that are incomprehensible or frightening to us. And, of course, because we *want to believe* in them – in this respect, they function in essentially the same way as the various religions that provide a support in a disturbingly random, often extremely hostile world. (From that perspective, both can be seen as a defensive response to insecurity, vulnerability and the unknown.)

It is no coincidence, Dear Reader, that in the age of the internet, certain theories are becoming increasingly popular – which we could call beliefs without further ado - such as the Earth being flat, the moon landing being a sham, climate change being a manipulative lie, vaccines having an intentional harmful effect, or Jews, the Illuminati, or even extraterrestrials running the entire world. Just as the X-Files, a TV-series about a similar conspiracy, becoming a cult hit before the web became ubiquitous was not too surprising, either.

While all this can be an integral part of our internal world and our common culture, the creation and maintenance of a civilized, let alone global, society is only possible through the use of proven facts, knowledge acquired through scientific methods, and the application of the principles of solidarity, equality and reciprocity. Therefore, in the case of our beliefs and convictions, they can be problematic if they bind us too much, preventing us from living our lives with sufficient awareness and, if necessary, taking the steps that are essential for change and, considering human civilization as a whole, for sustainability.

"God helps those who help themselves," the old wisdom goes, which also suggests that it is not enough to expect an external force to make our lives better or more sustainable, but that we must actively pursue those goals ourselves. As it has already been pointed out, far from God, fate or nature being to blame for all our ills – in fact, we humans are to blame for a significant proportion of them. It is no coincidence, either, that I noted at the beginning of the book that minimizing existential insecurity is a fundamental characteristic of a civilized society: nowadays, with the 2008 crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, the growing economic problems and the increasing number of natural disasters due to climate change, perhaps more and more people are beginning to realize that this is indeed the case.

But the insecurities and difficulties of everyday life can be significantly reduced by treating each other much better than we do now, and by functioning better as a community. It is important to see that it is not just our religion or faith that can bind us together, but that we can also form communities with others on countless other grounds – where we live, a common hobby, a similar life situation (e.g. pregnancy), a common interest (worker or consumer protection), a common cause (ending racism), and so on. And if communities in general are strong and cohesive, then over time it may become natural to rely less and less on the support of religions and churches that stem from ancient belief systems, or even more recent ones.

Of course, on the flip side, the less insecure we are, the more likely we are to get too comfortable, overly materialistic, aimless and stuck-up, like some spoiled brat. However, this is really just a matter of culture – if society supports us in finding purpose and meaning in our lives, if it encourages us to do our best and make the most of ourselves (through positive motivation and empowerment rather than coercion), and if we value each other's well-being as much as our own, then it is not at all inevitable that depravity should occur.

For this, of course, we would need a radically different set of priorities and values than we have now, which our various belief systems or churches do not seem to be able to provide us with, in the face of the still dominant role of existential opportunism. At the same time, we must also see that it is not only our faith that can be a source of morality, but also our common sense and empathy for others, which are only natural qualities for us intelligent beings, even if they need to be nurtured and developed.

But how well would we do if we broke with religion altogether? Would doing so mean that we no longer have faith in anything? Or perhaps in the wrong things, such as chasing

and hoarding money, or eating life with a big spoon? But why not find a middle ground, a healthy state of equilibrium?

For this to happen, religions can even be of benefit to us. While dogmas and outdated beliefs can be very damaging, especially for social equality and progress, it is very much possible to build on the wisdom and positive values of religions. Examples include Buddhism's middle way and call for moderation, or the Ten Commandments in the Bible, which serve as a code of ethics for many religions. More than one of its admonitions – especially "Thou shalt not kill", "Thou shalt not steal", and "Honor thy father and mother" – seem essential, even from a secular perspective, regardless of one's individual beliefs.

Basically, I myself believe in many of these teachings, even if I don't practice that particular religion. I also believe in humanity, in the greatness of reason and science, in the beauty and power of the soul (whatever it may be), in solidarity and cooperation, in a better and more just future. I don't know what you personally believe, Dear Reader, but it is absolutely clear to me that man is much more than the mere material that makes up his body. You could say: we are much more than the sum of our parts. The only question is whether we can find and maintain harmony between them, the already mentioned healthy state of equilibrium.

Body, Mind and Soul

As an intelligent, biological being, basically each human has three areas that require constant nourishment, so to speak, maintenance: these are the body, the mind, and the soul. In order to live a healthy and fulfilling life in all respects, we need to devote enough attention and time to all three of them.

Our bodies need not only air and food and water to function normally, but also protection from cold, heat and (mostly solar) radiation, which we can usually provide here on the surface of the Earth with adequate clothing and shelter. But we also need to look after the health and wellbeing of our internal organs, blood circulation, muscles, bones, joints and all other parts of our bodies, which requires sufficient and adequate exercise, alongside a good, varied diet – in addition, we need to compensate for the effects of civilization, sedentary work and the lack of physical activity on our bodies.

In our computer-rich world of modern devices, the centre of our mind, our brain is also subjected to less and less use, unless we are forced to use it intensively during our work. But even in this case, the workload is often rather monotonous, so it is not a bad idea to give it some kind of work in other areas, whether it is talking and exchanging ideas with others, reading, crosswords, board games, chess or any other hobby that can stimulate the brain. The bottom line is that we need to engage in a variety of mental activities with sufficient frequency to maintain both the speed and efficiency of our thinking and the integrity of our memory.

And our souls, wherever they are located in the human body, need to be nurtured in the same way, which means that we must also devote sufficient time and care to our emotional lives. If we want to do good, we cannot ignore that or overburden ourselves for too long, because sooner or later it will take its toll, and it can harm not only our own quality of life, but also indirectly that of our loved ones and those who live and work with us. On the other hand, it's no good if we can't keep ourselves busy or useful enough, either, as this can have a very damaging effect on our souls in the long run. So to maintain the right balance, we need to take enough time for ourselves and our social relationships.

It is obvious, then, that we all have 'basic' needs in all three areas. As biological beings, physiological needs such as air, drinking water, food, sleep, a basic sense of security and the need to satisfy sexual desire are inevitable consequences of the way our bodies function. Because our brains are part of our bodies, in some ways the maintenance of our minds is also part of this, even if it is not quite as critical to our short-term survival and health. In other respects, however, our intellectual activities are closely related to our spiritual-emotional well-being, in that they serve to develop and maintain a sense of love and belonging, as well as self-esteem and ultimately self-actualization.

The American psychologist Abraham Maslow summarized the hierarchy of our needs in a very visual way in the form of Maslow's pyramid, which is still commonly used today, and the theory of motivation that is associated with it. The pyramid (see next figure) is

usually made up of five successive levels, with the needs at the bottom always having to be met theoretically before we can move up a level. (In practice, it is not always that simple.) From the bottom up, the five basic levels are: physiological, safety, social, and self-esteem and self-actualization needs.
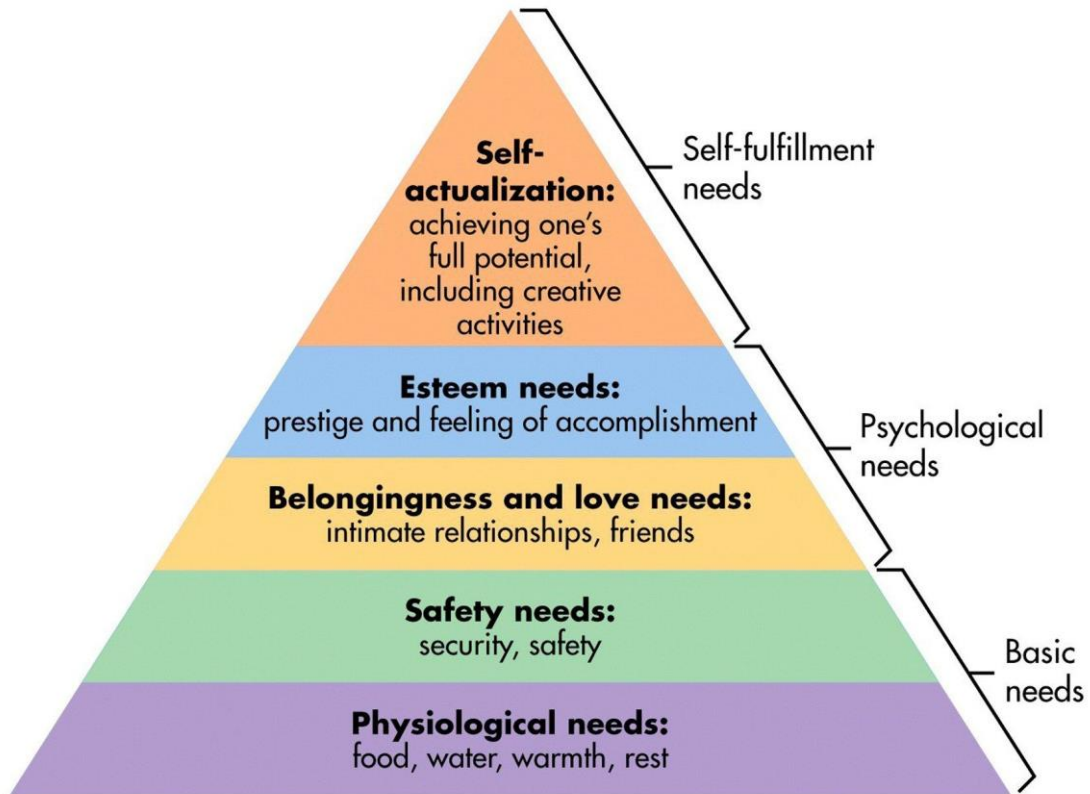
Figure 8 - Maslow's pyramid (based on Maslow, 1954)
Source: Simply Pscychology (https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html)

To simplify things a little, we can say that the lower two levels represent our most basic needs, which are essential for the proper functioning of our body, while the needs of our soul above them are collectively referred to as psychological needs. And self-actualization, or in other words spiritual fulfillment, is something like 'the icing on the cake', and can be seen as the crowning achievement of our lives, or the attainment of a state of (near-)perfect equilibrium.

Maslow's approach has been the subject of many criticisms over the years, one of the most significant of which is its practical usefulness, in that we can often satisfy a higher need even when we are deprived of one or more of the lower ones. Perhaps it has happened to You, as well, Dear Reader, that You were terribly thirsty during a hiking tour, but even though You ran out of water, You stopped somewhere for a longer time to take photos, because You were so captivated by the beauty, uniqueness and specialness of a landscape, village, monument or any other thing. And it is quite commonplace that in a poorer community or society, where many lack food, shelter, hygiene or any other basic need, people

are able to express love and togetherness for each other, or even to create significant works of art.

So despite the fact that the order of priorities would dictate otherwise, man, as an intelligent and unpredictable being, from time to time overrides the 'requirements' imposed by nature, and quite infrequently, aware of the dangers and risks involved, acts in a different way than, say, a raccoon would. Of course, given our higher intellectual capacities, our far more complex psyches and needs, this is hardly surprising. This also shows that body, mind and soul are all interconnected, and that we can only talk about wellbeing in earnest if we are not in permanent deficit in any one area.

Nevertheless, the pyramidal representation is a faithful reflection of the hierarchy of our needs in that it places them in the order of which we can survive the shortest time without satisfying them. Not having access to drinking water for even two or three days as one of our most basic needs can be fatal, but just think about it: extreme high or low temperatures can kill us in hours, minutes or even seconds, and we would not last more than two or three minutes without air of sufficient quality and purity (especially regarding oxygen). Alone, surrounded by a pack of hungry wolves, without safe shelter, our prospects would probably be similarly bad.

Our psychological needs, on the other hand, although also extremely important, usually allow us to exist in their absence for longer periods of time, even without suffering permanent damage. Without friends and family, or any contact with loved ones, if we really have to, we can endure at least a few months (even if it is very difficult), but we can also somehow tolerate the complete absence of the company of others for a few days or weeks. While we don't need a constant or daily sense of achievement as much as we need food and water, without it we can become very frustrated and depressed after just a few days. Because if we feel like we can't do anything well and everything we touch breaks and stops working, it's no wonder that our mood will suffer, making us feel discouraged and generally unconfident. In the longer term, this can seriously undermine our state of mind, which, in extreme cases, can cause irreversible damage to our mental health.

Our most complex spiritual, self-fulfilling needs, however, fall into the category of those that we cannot satisfy for many years or even a lifetime, yet we remain alive and, in many cases, in good general health. Unfortunately, there are no statistics available to show how many people in the world currently feel that they have reached a state of fulfillment and have basically achieved what they wanted in life, but I suspect that a large proportion of us do not consider themselves so fortunate. (If You do honestly put Yourself in this group, Dear Reader, I can only congratulate You.) And for someone to actually achieve all that they are capable of, fulfilling their full potential, is probably something very few people can say about themselves. And while it is certainly possible to exist without it, and even to give some form of meaning to our lives, the fact is that there is a very close connection between self-actualization and a sense of true contentment, happiness and wholeness.

The five-step pyramid is usually divided into two parts based on the nature of our motivation: while the first four levels are collectively called deficiency needs, the top one covers our growth-based needs. Deficiency needs typically arise when they are not being met, and instinctively prompt us to do something about it as soon as possible. (In other words, the longer we stay hungry, the stronger our urge becomes to eat something.) When our deficit needs have been met, then usually – though not always, as we have seen – we turn our attention to our higher, growth-based needs. These, however, as their collective name suggests, they do not disappear even after they have been satisfied, and often become even stronger. For example, if an athlete sets a world record, it can motivate her to try for more, just as a win can easily give her the 'appetite' to want more.
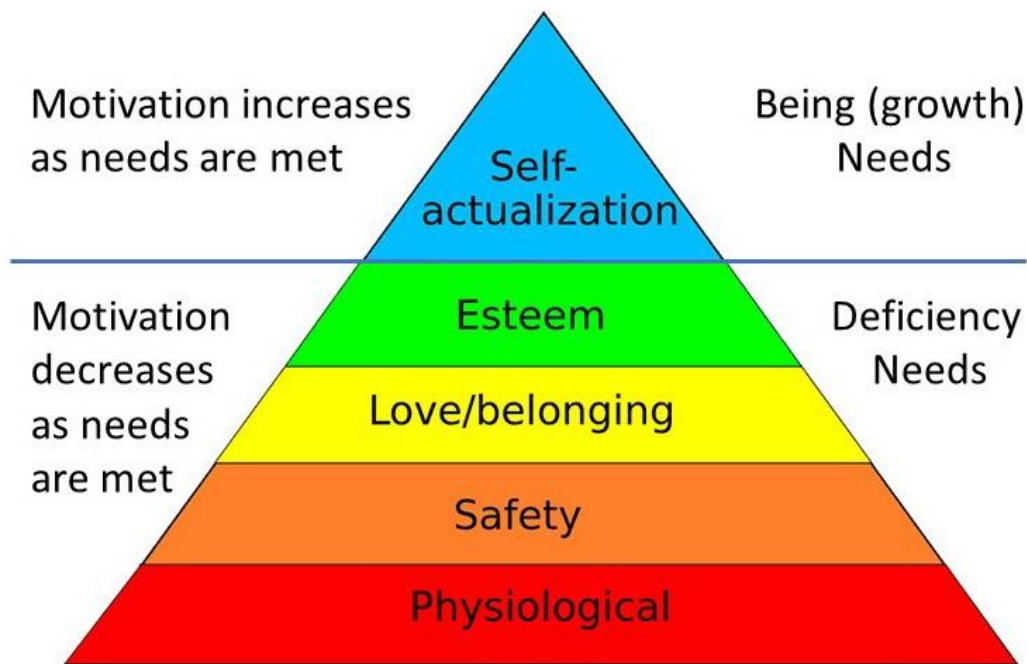
Figure 9 - Maslow's pyramid (based on Maslow, 1943)
Source: Simply Pscychology (https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html)

So our growth needs are not fundamentally stem from a lack of something, but a desire to become better at something, or more generally to develop and grow as individuals. Once these growth needs are broadly met, the highest level of self-actualization becomes available. Every mentally and spiritually healthy person has the ability and the desire to move up the hierarchy towards the top, but unfortunately this process is often disturbed and interrupted by the lack of satisfaction of one (or more) of our lower needs. For example, the athlete mentioned above would train herself to perfection in vain if an illness or injury prevents her from doing so, or if a change in her financial situation no longer allows her to eat or prepare according to the increased demands and requirements of the sport.

From a more ordinary point of view, events such as a divorce or the loss of a job, among other things, can have a significant effect on our fluctuations between levels, as far as the downside is concerned. At the same time, even if it feels less common, moving upwards

may also be possible, and you don't even have to win the lottery to do it – a job with a higher salary or, say, a new relationship with someone who opens doors you thought were closed could do the trick. (But our circumstances can also be improved by joining a community, for instance.) The bottom line is that our movement through the hierarchy of needs is heavily influenced by our financial situation, our health, our social relationships and countless other things that can depend on many more factors. Because of this, we may experience a 'bouncing' between levels from time to time, which can be seen as a natural fluctuation due to the influences we are exposed to, or our ever-changing lives.

On the other hand, it is a fact that most of us do not, or only with difficulty and in rare cases, have the opportunity to rise above the circumstances around us and the mechanisms of society that fundamentally determine, or even hog-tie our lives. This is where the (traditional) social roles, expectations and stereotypes come into play, which significantly hinders the satisfaction of our higher needs, usually without us even realizing that they may exist.

When we first meet someone, we usually classify them into some category based on their age, weight and build, gender, skin color, nationality, language (or accent), to which we later add characteristics that are not always obvious at first, such as social class (poor, rich or middle class), education, occupation, and so on. And after a while, we form an image of the person (funny fat guy, cranky old bastard, spoiled millionaire, etc.), which from then on becomes so fixed in our minds that we may not be able to move away from it even if we want to.

Labeling people and things in general is so characteristic of us because it is a very efficient way of categorizing and storing information in our brains, and thus of quickly distinguishing and recognizing people and things. (Schemas actually play a central role in creating our general picture of the world – that is, we compare everything to something else we already know in order to make it easier to understand and store in our memory.) In the process, we essentially do nothing but use the tool of simplification to categorize everything and everyone into different prototypes according to their actual or perceived characteristics and our own past experiences and impressions – which, let's face it, we need more than ever in our fast-paced, busy and information-overloaded world.

However, because our perceptions are quite subjective, and our values and experiences can also be fundamentally different from one individual to another, we may have a completely different picture of the same thing in our minds than someone else (whether it's our twin brother or sister). So, for example, if you think of a bird in general, one person might imagine a pigeon, another a seagull, depending on which of the schemas in your brain you associate with the concept. (An average city dweller on the mainland would obviously prefer the former, while a coastal villager would probably prefer the latter.) But when we mention a car, a doctor or a businessman, we don't all see the same image, even if there are obvious similarities (four wheels, white coat, suit and tie).

There is no particular problem with thinking along schemas per se – the problem is (as usual) when we overdo it. Nevertheless, we often do it unintentionally, especially when life is hard on us, we are overwhelmed and we don't know where our heads are at. Or if we simply, due to our own narrow-mindedness and the constantly repeated stimuli from the outside world (see media, economic and political propaganda), develop a so-called tunnel vision, where we are willing to see and judge everything and everyone only as we once put it down in our own minds. But even if the situation is not so bad, stereotypes can have a significant impact on our human relationships and our perceptions of the world, and can do a lot of harm to others and to ourselves.

The issue starts with the upbringing and education of children, where in many cases we put them into certain categories, thus predetermining – and limiting – their development. The phenomenon is well illustrated by an experiment in which teachers at a primary school were told that, according to a test, some of their pupils were in the 20% of students who were expected to show outstanding intellectual ability and academic achievement in the coming years. In reality, however, the students in question were selected at random, while their performance was average. Teachers nevertheless paid particular attention to the progress of the designated children in the following school year, who by the end of the year had already clearly outperformed their non-designated peers.

Labeling then takes hold in many areas of life, which unfortunately leads to discrimination on a regular basis. If You happen to be homeless or have a criminal record, You can easily become an undesirable person in the eyes of others, while if You are considered a person of public standing, doors will open almost automatically. If You have become aged as an employee, no matter how good Your health and mental condition, some companies will no longer trust Your abilities, while as a graduate, coming out of school, You may have been rejected for lack of practice, no matter how good Your results. As a young woman, You are probably less likely to get most jobs than men of a similar age and ability, simply because they are unlikely to take maternity leave. But labels and pigeonholing are even linked to racism, as research on the social stigma that has emerged has highlighted.

At the prestigious Stanford University in the US, a photograph was placed in front of white students of a young man, about whom one could not tell at a glance what race he was, i.e. he was as likely to be labeled white as black. Half of the students were told that the picture was made of a light-skinned man, while the other half were told that it was of a dark-skinned man. They were then each given the task of drawing a picture of the person based on the photo in front of them. Although all the students saw exactly the same face, those who tended to believe that race was a basic human trait drew a picture that matched the information they had received. In their case, racial labels formed a filter through which they saw the subject in a way that they could not dissociate themselves from - which means we are not talking about discrimination due to racism here, but a consequence of simple social stereotypes. But if as a young child you are surrounded by the kind of catego-

rization that people of this type or color are expected to be this way and others that way, as an adult you are likely to think and judge in a way that is influenced by these prejudices.

As there is a general tendency nowadays to categorize and make decisions (e.g. about a job, a bank loan or even a relationship) in a very short time, based on a few pieces of information, such 'nuances' add up to have a significant impact on our daily lives, and usually not in a positive way. On the one hand, we are pigeonholed and thus deprived of opportunities, and on the other we are encouraged to wear a kind of mask because of our conformism in order to fit in. This is because our perceptions of ourselves are based almost entirely on what others think of us – which in turn often leads to us limiting ourselves in the end.

If, for example, You are often called 'the muscle guy' because You regularly get into the gym and it shows, after a while You start to believe that You actually are. And while You may well be interested in countless other things besides bodybuilding – whether it is tennis, writing a novel, cooking or anything else – You unconsciously begin to think, live and behave in ways that reflect the image You are being told. (You may go to the gym even more, pay more attention to the recommended diet for bodybuilding, etc.) In other words, the more You are stigmatized – whether You consciously believe it or not – the more likely You are to gradually incorporate that trait into Your self-image.

Labels can therefore have a strong impact on Your personality, and can easily reflect a particular trait and thus a state or condition, such as Your occupation or social status, including Your social class. So they essentially act as self-fulfilling prophecies, in that expectations often shape our thinking and behavior in ways that eventually come true. However, this may not at all match Your talents or what You could achieve to the best of Your ability – thus, it is not at all certain that You will be satisfied in a given role, which can be a fundamental obstacle to self-fulfillment. (Of course, is also important how much fun we have in what we do, and the circumstances in which we do it.)

What's more, people are not in fact completely static, i.e. fixed personalities, but are for the most part complex, intelligent and versatile beings who can change over time, including in their habits, interests and tastes, in response to environmental stimuli and their own internal development. But because of this, there can be countless different areas or activities in which You could find Yourself, but definitely much more than a single one. It could be some kind of art, sport, journalism, gardening, DIY or anything that gives You pleasure and meaning without harming others.

I would like to draw Your special attention to the latter statement, Dear Reader, because it is essential to the rule of social coexistence mentioned earlier, that being part of a civilized community is far from being about doing whatever You want. For some, for example, acting out their violent tendencies can be a means of self-actualization – such as serial killers, who seek fulfillment in such distorted ways because of their uncommon, pathological urges. This, obviously, is not normal or acceptable in any civilized society, since civilization

is fundamentally contradicted by violence, which is the most extreme and most ancient and barbaric form of existential opportunism. Therefore, everything must be done to ensure that people with similar urges do not cause harm, and find fulfillment in something else instead. And this is true not only for serial killers or other criminals with perverse tendencies, but also for people who have an urge not act out their aggression or other instincts in an appropriate, civilized and way.

There are some, though probably not in a very high number, who join the police, the military or other 'enforcement organizations' for this very reason. These people frequently find pleasure, satisfaction or stimulation in situations where they can exercise their power over those at their mercy with impunity, thereby abusing the position and responsibility that society has given them. They are often characterized by a belief in social Darwinism or one or more forms of chauvinism, which may be combined with racial prejudice or even outright racism. The presence of such people in law enforcement agencies can exacerbate social and cultural tensions by contributing to atrocities against people of color or other groups.

The problem is that the rules are also usually set by the adherents of social Darwinism (whether they were social Darwinists in the first place or have become so through the power that comes with their position) or at least existential opportunism, who mostly stick together and only take counteraction when they are under sufficient social pressure. It is therefore also necessary to work together to prevent such practices through the power of the community, ensuring that only people who are not abnormally violent or extremist in their tendencies, and who do not abuse the power vested in them, are involved in the maintenance of law and order. As for those in this category, it is essential for them to channel their aggression into some other, harmless activity (sports, games, competitions, virtual reality, etc.), while at the same time receiving effective help to emphasize and assert their other personality traits.

At the same time, in order to avoid stereotypes, I would warn against thinking of all police or soldiers as people who live for, desire and enjoy violence, without exception, because of the phenomenon described above. This is not at all the case, as can be seen, for example, from the fact that war usually causes physical and mental torment even for professional soldiers, from which they often cannot escape even after the traumas of combat. Just as, on the other hand, one does not need to be a member of any armed forces to become a mass murderer or suicide bomber, driven by various extremist views and fanaticisms, in order to embark on some kind of 'alternative self-actualization'. The point is that we should preferably not seek self-fulfillment within the framework of existential opportunism, let alone social Darwinism or extreme fatalism, which are incompatible with the norms of a truly civilized society.

Fortunately, our needs that go beyond our own existence and self-preservation can be much more complex than, for example, suicide bombings committed in the name of our faith or beliefs. Raising one or more children would typically fall into this category – but if

You want to feel the direct benefit of what You do for wider society, You might find fulfillment in caring for or helping others (e.g. fire or rescue work, social work, volunteering). Active participation in public affairs is also extremely useful and even essential in a modern society and in an advanced democracy. Remember, we are doing all this not just for ourselves, but for the generations that will come after us – so that they have even more opportunities and a better world than we have now.

Following criticisms and practical experience of the original five-level pyramid of needs, Maslow himself recognized that his model had its limitations and that additional aspects might be involved in order to describe human behavior in more detail. He realized that a significant proportion of people are most fulfilled when they are doing something beyond themselves, or doing something for others, which may even manifest itself in a spiritual form. The point is that in some way, through our actions or spirit, we transcend the limitations of our bodies, our own physical reality, often motivated by our desire to create something lasting, something of value to others or posterity, despite our mortality. This is the level of the so-called transcendental needs, and it is at the top of the hierarchy because it involves goals and motivations that transcend the personal self.
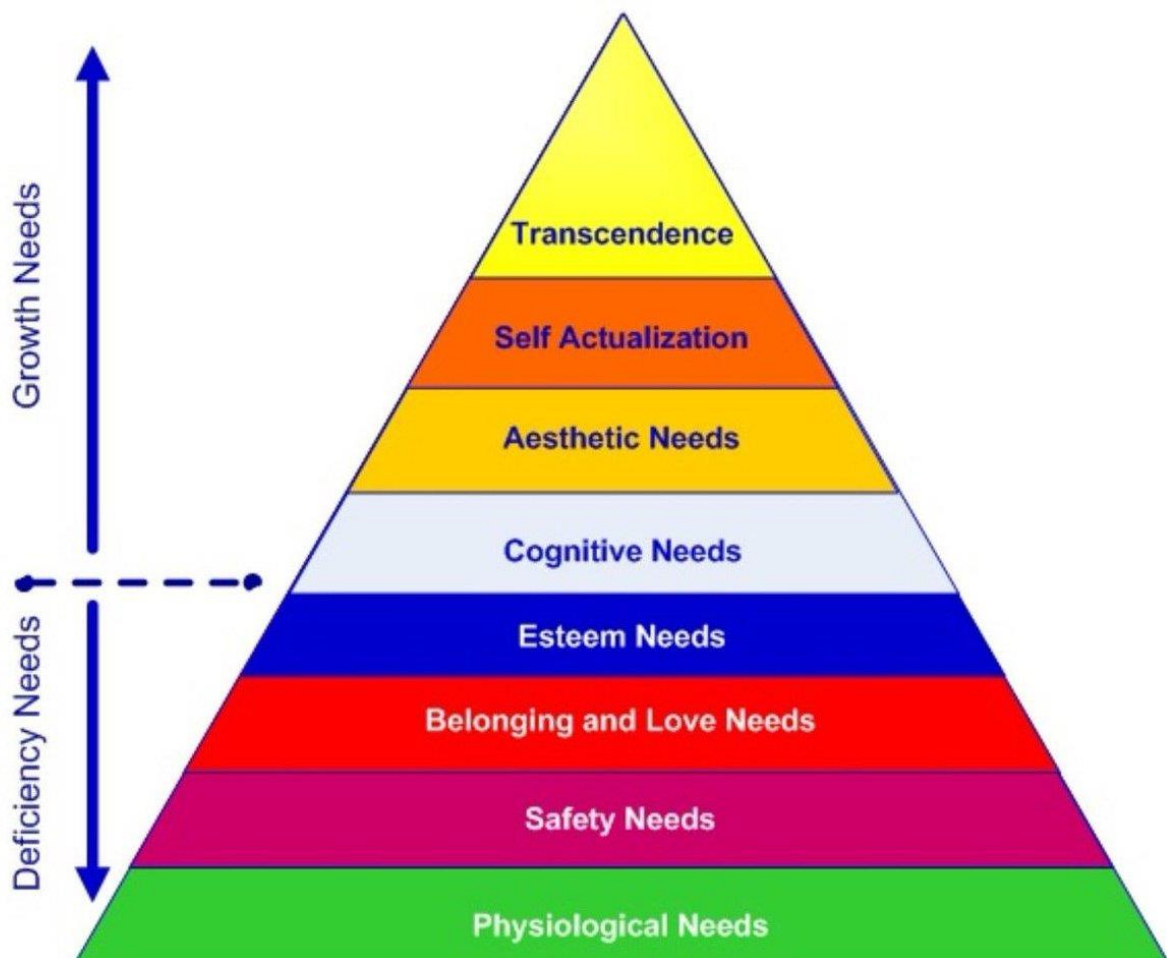

Figure 10 - Maslow's motivation model (based on Maslow, 1970)
Source: Simply Pscychology (https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html)

Our higher-order needs and motivations, as we have already seen in the previous examples, can also be multifaceted, so the more recent motivational model now includes both cognitive and aesthetic needs. The cognitive level includes curiosity and the desire to explore, all our efforts to understand things and increase our knowledge, the search for meaning and significance in the way the world works, and the need for predictability and regularity to provide a framework for our lives. The search for order is also an important element of aesthetic needs, but here it arises more in the sense that experiencing it gives us positive stimulation, essentially pleasure. Beauty, symmetry or balance can have a similar effect on us, so it is no wonder that each plays a fundamental role in the practice and enjoyment of the arts.

But what is the reason why self-actualization and the transcendental level are listed separately? Well, since not all of us need to do something beyond ourselves to achieve the former – many of us can be perfectly happy just to win chess tournaments or build the house of our dreams –, in this sense, the lower positioning of 'simple' self-actualization in the hierarchy seems to be logical and understandable. In this case, there is no question of us doing something for others that will make us more – simply fulfilling our desires or exploiting our potential, which in itself can fill us with a great sense of satisfaction.

Self-actualization can therefore mean many different things to each individual, as we all have different abilities, ideas, preferences and goals. For some, running a successful confectionary is a fulfilling experience, while for others it is discovering the wonders of the universe and how it works. Some will be content to visit a few sights in their entire lives, while others won't even stop until the surface of Mars. Some are fully engaged in bringing up the next generation, while others are already occupied by taking care of future generations.

But despite our differences, because of our similarities, there are commonalities – commonalities that stem fundamentally from what it means to be human, to be the representative of an intelligent species. And an inalienable part of that quality – for me at least – is learning about how the world works, its mysteries and wonders, and continuing to learn and grow throughout our lives, from birth until the day we die. After all, it is our curiosity and thirst for knowledge that drives us forward, both as individuals and as a species that forms a global civilization.

So as tempting as it is, we must avoid generalizing, pigeon-holing others and ourselves, while at the same time striving to ensure that everyone has the opportunity for self-fulfillment throughout all of society. And in a way that makes them a useful member of society – if only because a sense of usefulness is not only a powerful motivator, but also improves our self-esteem and is a major source of happiness. This, in turn, requires a supportive social environment where everyone has the opportunity to try and learn different activities – and even, in some contexts, to change their career path or career completely – at any stage of their lives, without or despite the constraints of self-preservation.

To ensure that the majority of people are not overburdened by the shackles of self-preservation, however, we will need a much more organized, caring and fairer society than at present. In these, everyone must be guaranteed a minimum standard of living required by human dignity, which presupposes that no one is deprived of the satisfaction of his or her deficiency needs. This includes food, drinking water and safe shelter, as well as sanitary conditions to maintain our health and uniformly available medical services. But of course we must not forget to meet our sexual needs in the right context, regardless of one's gender.

In order to meet our growth needs, education and learning must be made universally available, so that everyone has the chance to achieve intellectual excellence and, through it, to fulfill their potential in many different ways. Nonetheless, if one's fulfillment comes from doing a specific kind of work, or an activity related to self-support (e.g. animal husbandry or backyard farming), it should be respected as long as it does not cause harm to others. At the same time, ensuring variety is critical, because it can play a central role in maintaining our mental and spiritual health, and therefore our zest for life.

The range of theoretical possibilities is almost endless, as there are countless activities that can be individually and socially beneficial. These can be social, cultural, entertainment, educational or other, ranging from gardening, crafts and performing arts to guided tours, while activities related to mass production and services are increasingly automated, using robots, computers and the ever-evolving artificial intelligence. So, in our world of thousands of different options, if You can't help Yourself, it's either because You have too little external stimulation (or too much, or of too low quality, which can also be a problem), or you simply don't have enough information (which is becoming easier to get these days, with quality also being an issue).

In addition, one may certainly perform many other activities that are not directly related to self-preservation and earning money. If You have children or relatives who are partly or wholly unable to look after themselves, or depend on You, You must look after them beyond Your own needs. But the need to socialize, to recharge, to gain experience, to learn more and to explore the world, and the need for constant physical and mental exercise are also absolutely legitimate for every human being. So You have to make time for many different things in Your life, such as Your household, Your family, Your relatives, Your loved ones, Your friends – and last but not least, Yourself. Therefore, in a society that is highly advanced – both technically and in terms of organization – and is truly civilized, the ultimate goal can only be to enable everyone to concentrate primarily on the higher levels of the hierarchy of needs.

As intelligent and sentient beings, it would be optimal if we could devote at least as much time and energy to the activities discussed above as we do to self-preservation. To achieve this, we need to promote and foster a cultural environment and institutions that do not contribute to, but rather work against, stigmatization and 'binding people in knots'. While thinking in schemas can be useful for any living creature with even a modicum of

intelligence, remember that we are now not exclusively subject to the rules of our natural environment, where almost everything revolves around mere survival. Because of our intricate cerebration and our highly complex emotional and social relationships, we have a much more diverse system of needs, which requires correspondingly more attention and planning, and greater awareness at both individual and community level.

Therefore *balance* is yet again a keyword in the relations between the triad of body, mind and soul, and our various needs and the wide range of activities that go with them. If this is not possible for many in our current societies, dominated by existential opportunism, then change is clearly needed – both for our own sake and for long-term social sustainability. But in order to find a lasting balance between our societies and our environment, as well as within our societies, we must first achieve it within ourselves.

The first step to change, Dear Reader, is to try to consciously control how You think about Yourself. As much as possible, You need to distance Yourself from the opinions of others – especially the labels they put on You, while taking well-meaning criticism or advice from those close to You may be a good idea. Then You need to let Yourself know that You do have an influence on the course of Your own life – even if it means breaking out of the box and sometimes going against the community or social conventions. In the end, however, the only way to have a chance of self-actualization is to always take responsibility for Your actions, accepting that every action You take has consequences that You will have to face sooner or later.

If You do, it will provide You with an opportunity to live and act according to what You really want to be. (Unfortunately, desire alone is not enough.) In general, You can break out of the box only if You remain patient and consistent, and stick to Your resolve. Remember: the longer You practice a particular behavioral pattern, the more it becomes a habit, and even a completely different way of life eventually. This can really open up the possibility for You to find Yourself, and to prove and fulfill Your versatility.

Childbearing, Childrearing and Education

As we discussed earlier, the instinct for species preservation is essentially as strong in us humans as it is passed down in animals from generation to generation. Just think about it: if it weren't for that, it would probably have been in serious danger, and even impossible, for our species to have survived. In both cases, the conception and birth of a child is a natural, in some ways 'automatic' process, because it happens in basically the same manner, regardless of the intelligence or consciousness of the parents. (We modern humans, of course, with our complex worlds of thought and emotion, generally demand that everything should be as controlled as possible, and as safe as possible, both in terms of the duration of the pregnancy and the process of childbirth.)

In nature, there are some species of animals that leave their offspring behind almost immediately after birth. But many will continue to protect them for a long time, trying to teach them everything they need to know to survive and give them the best possible chance in life. Normally, human parents also instinctively follow this method, as well. The real difference between rational beings and animals is that, if we happen to belong to the former category, it is extremely important to us how we prepare our children for life, how we care for their future, and what kind of world we leave to them. Let us not forget: we are a species capable of significantly changing and shaping our environment, and of actively influencing the future conditions of life – both in the environmental and social sense of the word. Therefore, a species or society can claim to be truly civilized if it makes it a priority to ensure the best possible conditions for future generations.

The birth of a child is first and foremost the joint responsibility of the parents – both the woman and the man, especially when both are of age – but its upbringing is also the responsibility of society as a whole, because of what was said above. (For from the moment a new life is born, it is as much a member of society as anyone else, except that it does not yet have all the rights and responsibilities of an adult.) Although it is the direct responsibility of parents, relatives, caregivers, tutors and educators to ensure that a child is cared for and develops properly, the environment in which this takes place has a major impact on their fate and future. In other words, both from the point of view of the parents and other educators, and from the point of view of the child, it can make a lot of difference under what framework conditions the process of upbringing takes place.

By framework conditions I mean practically all kinds of external circumstances, from the family's financial situation, place of residence (country, city, community, etc.) and dwelling (especially its quality and facilities, availability of public utilities and adequate sanitation, etc.), and the availability of basic food and goods, to the availability of schools, health, cultural and other institutions, the cleanliness of the environment of the locality and the region, or even the entire planet, or the possibility of living a peaceful life free of violence, for example. But such a critical condition for the viability of our planet today is

also population growth, which can have a major impact on the problems that future generations will face in producing and providing the goods and resources they need.

Controlling the number of births is perhaps the task in which society and governments have the most serious role to play, as we cannot expect individuals or communities to solve it on their own. Therefore, political leaders and independent NGOs need to raise awareness of the problem of overpopulation, the aging society and all related issues, among prospective parents, in order to make them more informed and conscious about having children. In addition, depending on the country or culture, there may also be a need for programs to promote sexual education and the availability of contraceptive tools, as well as gender equality in education and health services.

Optimally, a woman will give birth to two children in her lifetime, which can be seen as a guideline to prevent further overpopulation in the world. At today's mortality rates, this would be just enough, on average, to stop the overall population from growing, or even slightly to reduce it. (In fact, in most countries today, an average of 2.1 children would be more likely to be needed to ensure a stable population – unless they have a much lower mortality rate than others –, but a figure of 2 is much easier to interpret in terms of the number of babies, and would help to curb population growth even more.)

At the same time, we cannot lose sight of the central question of how large a human population our planet can support. There is considerable disagreement even among experts on this matter: since there are too many variables, there is virtually no chance of an accurate prediction. In any case, most estimates fall between less than 8 billion and 16 billion people, which means that the lower threshold has essentially been reached, while the total population, although at a slower rate, is still growing rapidly. (Nonetheless, we cannot ignore the fact that, according to some calculations, the average standard of living in the US today, for example, can be guaranteed for no more than 1.5 billion people in the long term.)

It is therefore clear that if we do not want to experience the limits of the Earth's capacity in a drastic way very soon, perhaps even before the middle of the century, we need to change current trends as soon as possible. There are basically three aspects or options to consider:

1) Increasing capacity through technological progress, which allows for increased efficiency and sustainability of production.
2) Curbing and optimizing consumption (i.e. consuming less overall while minimizing differences in individual consumption).
3) Gradual reduction of the population.

As the solution lies in the combination of these different factors, it is obvious that all three aspects need maximum attention.

This also implies that we cannot continue to allow long-term population growth in a responsible way, but must instead strive for a moderate decline. I suspect some are now

raising their eyebrows a little, thinking that, in fact, a rather rapid reduction in the population would be more justified. Nevertheless, I would still insist on gradualism and the term 'moderate', because a drastic reduction seems almost unachievable in practice, and would also be extremely worrying from a human rights point of view. After all, who knows what the impact would be if we were to introduce, say, a worldwide policy of birth control that took place in China from the late 1970s to the mid-2010s, allowing only one child per family, which has caused hundreds of millions of people constant grief and suffering...

A maximum of two children per family also seems a realistic target because, in addition to the measures and programs mentioned above, it does not necessarily require a drastic intervention in people's lives. Even if a narrow minority has more than two children, this is not necessarily a problem, as there will be some who will stop at just one or have no children at all. (For which, by the way, no one should be condemned, but at most encouraged and supported to have children if they are unsure about their decision.) If fertility rates could be kept sufficiently low in most countries around the world, within a few decades, the total population could reach a relatively sustainable level, while at the same time allowing a decent enough standard of living for virtually all of us. (Depending on the severity of climate change and other 'aggravating circumstances'.)

While Homo sapiens lived in a less civilized, nomadic way, both birth and death rates were high compared to the current population: on the one hand, women gave birth to many children, but on the other, many died at a very young age by today's standards, from disease, starvation or violent death. Later, however, as our communities and societies became more civilized, advances in agriculture, technology and medicine led to a steady growth in population – until it reached a point where births far outstripped infant and juvenile deaths, leading to a population surge. And as prosperity and more individualistic thinking became more widespread in the world, the number of births fell, causing the rate of growth to slow, indicating that priorities were shifting.

In fact, the more developed a society becomes, the more natural it is that the focus is no longer so much on the frequency of procreation, but on extending life expectancy and improving the quality of life. It is only natural that, as science and technology continue to advance and our possibilities increase, people will want to live longer and longer – and as healthily as possible, with the effects of ageing minimized. You may be of the opinion that this is contrary to nature, Dear Reader, but if You think about it, the very existence of a species capable of altering its environment is already a kind of anomaly, an 'inevitable' abnormity in the natural course of things, which we have to live with, because we have no other choice.

Nevertheless, the tendency to live longer and the fall in birth rate may offset each other over time, meaning that the total population could roughly stabilize and even become controllable. In the longer term, there may still be a risk that our planet will eventually become unable to support a human population with a birth rate that persistently exceeds the mortality rate – for the time being, we can only hope that it will happen later than we can

possibly make other planets habitable, which would help to solve the problems of over-population and overcrowding. Even so, the pursuit of a longer and healthier life is absolutely normal for an intelligent, self-conscious species – but at the same time, it is totally unacceptable that only a relatively small group of people can really afford it at the moment.

Therefore, regulation should rather be taken strictly in the context of the economy, so that social inequalities are minimized, and preferably no one is deprived of their needs. The aim should be to raise the general standard of living in all countries, and to ensure access for all to the conditions necessary to meet basic human needs. (Which, as has been said, the poorest and most fertile nations are unlikely to be able to achieve without external support.) Social sustainability is therefore also an inescapable aspect of tackling over-population, and equal opportunities and freedom of choice are essential in a civilized society – even more so in a global civilization.

Accordingly, everyone should be guaranteed the opportunity to decide whether or not they want to start their own family and live in it (even for the rest of their lives). What should also be avoided in this respect is stigmatization, the pigeonholing of the parties into roles that guarantee them little room for maneuver but more shackles. Despite stereotypes that are still prevalent, women are not incubators or household appliances, and men are not necessarily handymen, let alone cash dispensers. (Just as, for example, scientists are not certain to be crazy nerds, and immigrants and minorities should definitely not be viewed as inferior slaves.)

However, as caring for the next generations should be a fundamental goal in any civilized society, the future of raising one (or more) children should not depend on how much money a mother or single parent can earn, or on finding a supporting partner after a break-up. That is to say, a single mother cannot be expected to bring up her children without effective help and assistance – but on the other hand, a father cannot be expected to support a whole family (or even more, if he has to look after children from a previous and a new relationship) as a sole breadwinner, under all circumstances. After all, the birth of a child is the joint responsibility of the woman and the man, isn't it?

And while equal partnership is essential in any family, no relationship can legitimately require the parties to share equally when it breaks up, unless both have formally agreed. Why? Because it offers the possibility for one party to 'prey' on the other, which is incompatible with civilized, reciprocal coexistence. To this You would likely say, Dear Reader, that a relationship should be built on trust, which is essentially the case. Nonetheless, we have seen many, many couples split up, where they seem to have trusted each other at the beginning, but ended up beating each other up over the division... Or how much better is it if two people stay together out of necessity?

If it comes down to separation, a father may be expected to support a mother left alone with her child, but not beyond limit, only to a certain, basically satisfactory standard of

living. There is no doubt that women's rights are as important as men's in a democratic society, but they must not exceed them – which is always true vice versa, and not only for the genders, but also for different races and ethnicities. Despite this, women should not complain at all that society leaves them to fend for themselves, as long as it provides maximum support for raising children through various benefits, such as the appropriate forms of basic income. (More on this later.)

In such a world, the current family culture will inevitably change, as individuals – even women – will no longer be under so much pressure for their decisions to be as dominated by family formation and childbearing, even for the rest of their lives. (That is, as much as possible, we would finally get rid of existential opportunism in our family relationships, too.) For example, if a parent doesn't have to worry about how to care for their children or being left alone with them, it can have a big impact on the choice of couple, giving everyone much more freedom. So finding a man who can provide for the family's financial well-being for a lifetime should no longer be the main concern for women, as society would still provide for all its members without a head of household.

I am aware, Dear Reader, that a family without a father is not the same, especially as I myself was brought up in a broken home under the protective wing of my mother (and without any paternal support). And even if they don't live together, it is obviously ideal if both parents are involved all the time – but that doesn't mean one can force people to stay together under any circumstances. Such a relationship, fraught with frequent disagreements, quarrels and hostility, can have a serious impact on a child's psyche, which can hinder their development or, in the worst case, can make it difficult for them to cope in adulthood, even long after the psychological trauma they have suffered.

Make no mistake, none of this is intended to encourage anyone to avoid starting a family, or to give up a marriage or civil partnership at the first serious obstacle. However, it must be acknowledged that compromises have to be made in a relationship, and that they always have to be worked for, because without sacrifice on the part of both partners, it will not work for long. But it can still be absolutely true that it is worth staying together – especially if there are more advantages than disadvantages for both parties, and the child doesn't suffer too much from the downsides of living together.

However, a high level of community involvement and the development of closer bonds between children and adults can go some way towards replacing the role of the father, and even the mother at a certain age or maturity. To do this, society needs to play a greater part in the education process, not just financially, but also actively - a bit like a child having many adult parents. This can be accomplished in part through families and groups of friends whose adult members see each other's children virtually as their own. At the same time, the concept could be substantially extended by the organization of specialized communities based on mutual cooperation between families and parents and relatives, which could provide childcare, as well as entertainment, development and cultural programs.

Nevertheless, the strongest ties are likely to remain those of kinship in the future, so nurturing and strengthening them is just as important. Grandparents, although they have played a key role in raising children in many countries and cultures for some time, could be given even more prominence. On the one hand, because they can be of great help and can contribute with their experience and wisdom to the healthy development of children, and on the other, because they can receive a lot of love from them – which they may also need in order not to feel superfluous and to live as full a life as possible even in their last years. To this end, it is always advantageous to have grandparents, uncles, aunts and other relatives living close to the family.

With the spread of the above community pattern, it would not necessarily be a problem even if one does not have grandchildren of their own, as they could be in similarly close contact with other children. (Unfortunately, a serious epidemic situation is a major obstacle to such cooperation. That is another reason why effective vaccination should be available as soon as possible, and for it to reach everyone, including the poorest.) Community spirit and unity could be further strengthened by the creation of specialized residential communities where individuals and families are brought together by similar interests, so that they have less to fear from bad or indifferent neighbors. If the neighborhoods have different types of residential communities, a lack of homogeneity or local expertise would not be a problem, either.

With the closer involvement of society and communities, parents can therefore become increasingly relieved as their children grow up, allowing them to fulfill their own goals and ambitions – so in essence, themselves. As prosperity increases in a society, it becomes more and more natural and common for people to want to live a full life, so this is an issue that we should definitely not ignore. Because when we become parents we still remain human beings and individuals, our needs do not disappear completely, at most they will be temporarily pushed into the background. A young child in particular needs a lot of attention and care, which often takes up a lot of the parents' time and energy, especially with work and other commitments. The point is to strike a balance between family and private life (or individual existence) in the same way as in any other area of life.

The problem is when parents neglect their children despite all the help they can get, as their offspring can easily get mistreated, get into bad company or suffer from poor development. For wealthy parents, the trend has been to entrust their children to a childminder, or even a qualified carer or educator for a significant proportion of the time. However, no matter how good the person is at their job, it is far from certain that younglings will get what they need emotionally – moreover, it cannot be expected that those forced into such work will always be available to wealthy families (especially if the minimum standard of living and general well-being rises over time.) At the same time, regardless of their status and financial situation, there are people who are simply not suited to parenthood, because they are incapable of responsible caring due to their personality. Such people should not be

pushed into having children, but rather talked out of it. And if birth parents are unable or unwilling to perform their duties properly, they must be deprived of their parental rights.

Compared to such parents, a child may even be better treated in a specialized institution. This, however, requires that children's homes and foster homes do not resemble overcrowded training camps or prisons, but a real home where love, care and understanding prevail. But this can only be ensured by people who not only know what they are doing, but who also genuinely care about the fate and development of children. If birth parents cannot be relied on, adoption may be the best option, as it allows for a closer relationship between the child and his or her foster parent(s) due to less divided attention.

As child-rearing is an extremely difficult, complex and multi-disciplinary activity (or rather mission), it is not enough to have specialists in the field, but it is equally important to train and educate those who spend the most time with children and those closest to them (especially parents). As already mentioned, ideally, relatives and other communities close to the families will also be actively involved in the process of parenting, so they will also need to be educated. To achieve this, young people (and not only girls!) need to be trained, preferably from school age, to feel responsible for children in general, so that they can treat other people's children almost as if they were their own.

Of course, in order for several adults to be effectively involved in the education of a child at the same time, it is again essential to have some common set of values to avoid conflicting practices. Differences between individuals, individual interests and ambitions must be balanced by a sense of community and belonging in society. And community consciousness involves recognizing that, despite our racial, ethnic, gender and socio-economic differences, we have common goals and aspirations, and a shared responsibility towards others, especially children who are still in development.

As we know, society, educators and teachers, and of course parents, relatives and their communities, have a fundamental responsibility to provide maximum support to the child to enable his or her to start life in the best possible conditions. But to thrive in later life, everyone has to learn and gradually discover what to do with their own lives, and this discovery begins in early childhood, practically from birth – or, in some ways, in the womb already. Therefore, the circumstances in which someone is brought up make a lot of difference, beyond the fact that their basic needs are hopefully adequately met. If care is not accompanied by adequate spiritual support and intellectual guidance, it can lead to disaster in the long run – just because it is useless to give someone anything if you don't teach them how to use it.

It is fair to say that all this comes with a huge pressure and burden for adults. This is true, but the burden is always less the more people share it. On the other hand, it is not much easier for our kids, either, especially nowadays. They are under much more stress in today's world than they were a generation or two ago, due to the increased demands of school, the myriad of influences they face (including from the internet), the accelerated

pace of life, the conflicts in the world and the uncertainties of the socio-economic environment.

However, our personality, even if it is not set in stone, depends to a large extent on the circumstances in which we are brought up as children and the influences we are exposed to, as well as the kind and amount of help we receive in dealing with them. And this can be very different in various parts of the world, or in communities with different cultures and economic situations.

Existential conditions can be a particularly decisive regarding the parenting style and strategies that parents choose, and this is fully supported by research in this area. Where there are more opportunities and a higher standard of living, they tend to be more permissive towards their children, and rather than being ironclad, they try to guide them along some path they hope will lead to prosperity. Although parents are usually torn between strict instructional guidance and putting their children's desires to the front, the more favorable financial situation tends to tip the scales towards the latter. In contrast, in poorer families and in societies offering gloomier prospects, an authoritative, uncontroversial style tends to prevail. This may be because parents are desperate to navigate their children towards a secure livelihood, or because they themselves have learned or seen this from their own parents – a controlling style often combined with an authoritarian upbringing. (It is hardly a coincidence that authoritarian leaders are also more common in such societies.) Nevertheless, experience shows that the most ideal strategy seems to be the one that is sufficiently controlling, but relatively permissive, and allows the children to learn from their own mistakes (as well).

Different parenting styles can take a child's life in completely different directions, though, from the type of experiences they have, the extent to which they can try different things, the schools they go to, the friends they make, what motivates them, what they see as their goals, etc. If neither our family's financial situation nor the way we are brought up opens up a wealth of opportunities for us as children, we can once again fall victim to the stereotyping that unfortunately happens in most cases. It is no coincidence that even when we officially become adults (at 18 years of age in most countries), we usually don't know what we want to do (or at least what we will do) as a profession – or if we do, it's often because something is forced upon us.

This, in turn, leads to a very early uniformization of people, which mostly pays minimal attention to the fact that every child is unique and special. To maintain and even increase diversity in society, parents, as well as educators and teachers, should focus more on what a child can do, instead of what he or she cannot do. For this, however, it is essential that all children receive as much attention and care as possible, regardless of the family's or parents' existential situation. Optimally, in a highly developed and civilized society, the future of a child should never be an economic issue – but for this to happen, they should not be 'programmed' and pigeonholed into different economic roles, among others.

This does not mean, of course, that one cannot be steered or motivated towards a particular area if he or she is genuinely interested in it. The problem lies more in the very common phenomenon of young people being forced into a profession that is indifferent or inappropriate for them, or where a new entrant to the labor market has basically no idea what job he should choose, expecting his future job to provide him with an identity. On the one hand, such an expectation is understandable, since virtually all of us would like to do something we can identify with professionally – but unfortunately, in today's world, dominated by money and economics, few people can actually do that.

Yet it is not a good idea to rely on a profit-oriented organization, created primarily for financial gain, to endow us with an identity. If You think this way, it is no wonder that You become addicted to material things, status and status symbols – while on the other hand, You are usually identified with Your current job, which may not correspond at all to how You would define Yourself. To avoid this, You need to build Your own identity based on Your individual skills, aspirations, education, experience and values, and a job can only provide the small elements of support needed for Your development. If only because if You do not have an independent identity, which implies an independent thought and will, You can easily be exploited and become a tool or enforcer of others.

At the same time, the awareness of young workers can vary widely depending on their country, culture, wealth and status, family situation, education and other factors. While less conscious career starters expect their jobs to provide some kind of framework for their lives, with a full career and competitive salary, Millennials and members of Generation Z, who start out on more favorable terms – especially those who have been brought up with 'unlimited' access to the web from an early age – tend to look for jobs that meet their expectations. Increasingly, these needs include a company or organization that is environmentally aware, socially responsive and flexible, provides a good and friendly working environment, supports their personal development, and is made up of like-minded people.

According to a survey conducted in 2014, those born just before the turn of the millennium in the US said that building a successful career was even more important for a happy and fulfilling life than for the previous generation (X): while 71% of the latter thought that professional success was a prerequisite for a quality life, 91% of younger people thought the same. So the gap between the importance of a personal life and a career at work seems to be narrowing in the eyes of the newer generations, as they are now committed to a more informal approach, focusing on performance rather than strictly determined working hours (and workplaces). And if a company is not able to meet their expectations, they will leave very quickly – it is no coincidence that in more developed countries there is an increasing turnover of workers, especially among Millennials.

Even if the expectations of today's young people may sometimes seem unrealistically high, the fact is that they are generally more aware of career and self-fulfillment than their parents were. And although I myself am still a member of Generation X, I have to say, Dear Reader, that if they think that the duty of an advanced society is not to turn individuals

into automatons, droids obeying commands that are intelligent within certain limits, but still (mis)usable as tools, then I agree with them completely.

As already mentioned, one of the main duties of modern society should be to ensure that the environment is livable for the next generation (as well), which is not an area we are doing well at all for the time being. At the same time, it is equally important that they are provided with a wealth of actual opportunities, so that their whole lives will not depend on where they are born, their ancestry, gender, color, religion or other characteristics and circumstances. For the more these factors are eliminated, the less insecurity there is, which – alongside the guarantee of civil rights – means real freedom in an organized society.

But to achieve this, children must be brought up in such a way that they can decide for themselves what to do with their lives. We must therefore do everything possible to ensure that they start with a clean slate, while at the same time being as prepared as they can, and carrying as little unnecessary baggage as possible. To that end, we must avoid, as far as possible, their being pigeonholed or coerced into different categories – economic, political, cultural, religious or any other.

Make no mistake: this in no way means that You should not pass on or teach Your children any valuable customs or traditions, any edifying myths or wisdom, or that You should not discuss different views and ideas with them. The important thing is not to influence them too much, not to impose unnecessary restrictions on them, and especially not to fanaticize them, but to let them remain open to the world. So that when they are old and mature enough, they can form their own opinions, decide for themselves what they believe or don't believe in, who or what they see as a role model, and so on. Instead of dictation, what is rather needed from adults is guidance and attention, so that the child is able to manage things properly and is not following harmful patterns (e.g. smoking, Satanism) inadvertently.

Just as it is unfortunate for a child to be told what occupation or career to choose in life, so should religiousness not be pushed on them, especially at an early age. Not that anyone can prohibit it in practice – but every parent should be aware that doing so will drastically limit or restrict their child's future options and freedom of choice. Although in order to pass on real values to Your children, You also need to have faith – in what You are passing on, in any case –, it does not necessarily have to be religious faith. It is more than enough to transmit a civilized set of values reflecting sustainability, which provides a solid moral and ethical basis on which to build in the future.

However, as I have already explained, raising and providing a child with the tools – including the knowledge and insight – he or she will need to lead a successful and quality life is as much the responsibility of society as it is of the parents. This is partly because a given society or community has at least as much cultural influence on young people as their immediate family environment. On the other hand, parents themselves are often unable to

create and maintain the optimal conditions for having and raising children. So in fact, it is parents, relatives, educators and teachers, as well as our communities and the adult population of society as a whole, who should help us to develop our own personalities, preferably healthy and with a set of proper values, by the beginning of adulthood.

There is a great need for more concerted cooperation in raising children, if only because, in addition to our inherited traits and family circumstances (such as financial situation or parenting style), our environment also plays an important role in shaping our personality. Indeed, research confirms that we are more influenced by external influences and our individual experiences over time than by the shared experiences we have with our families as children. Experiments with siblings and twins have shown that genetics plays a more important role in determining our behavior than parental influence, but environmental factors that have a separate impact on individuality are even more important.

So, for example, members of a twin pair behave in a similar way mainly because of their biological similarity, not because they have had the same influences and experiences within the family. Additionally, even if they are brought up in close proximity to each other, if they go to different schools or classes, socialize in different groups of children and people, learn and practice different activities (like one of them plays sport while the other goes to music lessons), over time there may be more and more differences in their habits, behavior and thinking, in essence in their personalities. Different teachers, classmates and friends can take brothers and sisters in completely different directions, even if they are always together and doing the same things at home. The culture of each place can also lead to decisive differences: for example, in a religious school and a secular school, children may be exposed to very different impulses, which may then stay with them for a long time.

Because our values and norms are predominantly shaped by our cultural environment, there are significant differences in various parts of the world and in different communities. At the same time, as we have seen, we do need common values and norms – just not necessarily the ones that are now globally shared and fundamentally shape our lives. If our environment in general conveys to us that existential opportunism is only natural, we should not be surprised if, after a while, we almost completely believe in it and will think and behave according to its rules. But since so much of our problems come from the way we humans treat each other, the mentality we adopt as children and young people can make all the difference.

To achieve fundamental change in this area, we need to promote a culture that allows young people to develop, and that transforms them from being advocates and puppets of existential opportunism and consumerism into adults who are conscious, independent, adaptable, tolerant and empathetic towards others, in order to live together in a civilized and sustainable way. In order to ensure that existential opportunism does not determine our thinking and actions in our societies, it seems essential to present the reality of how it works and what its effects are in an organized society of rational beings, compared to how

it manifests in nature. Our children can only understand the way the world really works if school education is not just about the usual factual knowledge, but also involves a more in-depth evaluation of things and details, presenting them from many angles and putting them into context. So it would not hurt to learn in history lessons, for example, that war and conquest are not necessarily associated with glory – at least for most people they certainly are not –, but with a degrading and humiliating event, accompanied by a lot of unnecessary death and suffering, which usually serves the interests of a narrow minority.

In education, therefore, it is not good to focus on the tedious and burdensome accumulation of lexical knowledge, that is, to memorize too much data, which, in turn, can be found whenever we need it in the age of the internet. Apart from passing on the most important facts, young people need to be taught how to interpret and evaluate information, how to draw the right lessons, and how to make good decisions based on them – in essence, how to think analytically, critically and creatively. At the same time, it is necessary to point out the importance in everyday life of the qualities of a civilized species, which have already been mentioned (reciprocity, solidarity, compassion, etc.), which make us truly human. Empathy and tolerance for others and for the animal and living world as a whole must be developed from an early age (and should not stop to be emphasized later), just as environmental education and training in general is essential to move closer to sustainability.

Apart from existential opportunism, young people should also not be indoctrinated into materialism, because if competition is materialistic, it can be more destructive than constructive for civilization in the long run. On the one hand, consumerism has already seriously undermined the physical and mental health of the global population, and on the other, it has pushed environmental sustainability to the brink of collapse through excessive waste, pollution and destruction. As we have seen, growing social inequalities are not encouraging in terms of social sustainability, either, which is another strong argument for steering young people towards other goals at an early age that are not related to the accumulation of material wealth and social status. Such motivation may be to learn more about the world and ourselves, to constantly improve, to increase and pass on our knowledge, to help and support others, to promote social utility and progress, or to use our creativity and other skills to create useful things.

In order to bring about a general change of attitude as soon as possible, it would be beneficial to extend this kind of approach to virtually all education and training institutions, from kindergartens to higher education. It probably goes without saying that ensuring equal opportunities and conditions in education would also be a significant step in this direction.

The education and upbringing of girls is a particularly important issue, but even today, depending on culture and social status, it is often undermined or neglected altogether, dominated completely by parents, relatives and educators. Outside richer democracies, many societies still operate on a highly patriarchal basis, where the male kinship group is

the dominant basic unit of the community. Although such structures were once useful for self-defence, today they mostly cause trouble: different groups and tribes often compete violently for control, to divide up jobs and wealth among their kin. These states easily become corrupt and dysfunctional, alienating citizens and increasing support for extremist forces that promise fairer governance. (See the example of Afghanistan and the Taliban.)

In these and similar societies, it is common to subjugate women, who are often not allowed to go to school at all as children, and are not allowed to make decisions about their own lives later on. Thus, among other things, they have to put up with being forced by their families into marriages without love or against their will. This may be in exchange for a substantial dowry or bride price, which is still common practice in about half the countries in the world. As this encourages fathers to marry their daughters early, one-fifth of the world's young women marry before the age of 18, and one-twentieth before the age of 15. Child wives, however, are more likely to drop out of school, less able to confront their abusive husbands, and less likely to contribute healthy, well-educated children to society.

In some places, it is also common for girls to be aborted before they are born or 'neglected to death' later. This in turn leads to a skewed gender ratio, meaning that millions of young men are doomed to remain single. Frustrated and lonely young men are more likely to commit violent crimes or join extremist armed groups. Boko Haram and Islamic State recruiters know this, and promise them 'wives' as spoils of war. Polygamy also creates a surplus of single young men. In cultures like that, more wives for men at the top of the hierarchy means bachelorhood for those at the bottom.

Researchers at Texas A&M University and Brigham Young University have compiled a global index of premodern attitudes toward women, including sexist family laws, unequal property rights, early marriage of girls, patrilocal marriage (when the married couple resides with or near the husband's family), polygamy, bride prices, son preference, and violence against women and the legal indulgence of it. The data clearly showed that such practices are closely linked to the instability of a country. In other words, where women are scarce or repressed, war, violence and injustice are much more common – or you could say that in male-dominated societies, existential opportunism (alongside testosterone) is typically even more rampant.

In the fight against barbarism, however, it would be a mistake to forget that, despite our civilized (or at least striving) societies and the artificial environment and infrastructure that surround us, man is still part of nature and its constant cycle, and is therefore not independent of its functioning and influence. To ensure that we do not live in societies that are comforted and lazy to the extreme, sheltered from all dangers and negative effects, and unhealthy in body and mind, we must continue to maintain a certain degree of competition, uncertainty and hardship. Failure to do so will reduce our own capacity for life and

resistance – just think of the immune system disease allergy, which is an exaggerated response of the generation growing up in cities to various environmental influences.

It is therefore important not to try to protect our children from everything, but to get them out into nature as often as possible, and to challenge them physically and mentally (but not to an undue extent, of course), so that they harden in all aspects. But a kind of competitive spirit and curiosity-related opportunism that stimulates motivation and healthy ambition are also essential in learning and exploring the world. Just as young people need to be reminded that humanity has had to fight hard for the achievements of civilization, and that life would be very different without them. That is why they need to be shown in practice how nature works, and what it would mean for them if they had to survive on their own, without the shields of civilization (while it is also important to prepare them for such an emergency). The point is that the emphasis should always be on cooperation and reciprocity, focusing on the principle of 'strength in unity', rather than on prevailing at the expense of others.

At the same time, the acquisition of the necessary (self-)discipline is essential for functioning in unity in an organized way – obviously not on a military or training camp level, but rather on a cooperative and conscious basis. The way to do this should be to involve young people as equals, rather than directing and instructing them in an autocratic style, and the main tool should be to reason with them, explaining the causes and possible consequences. (If this does not work, a practical demonstration may be necessary.) In addition to a sense of freedom and equality, everyone must therefore be made aware from an early age of their obligations to society and their responsibilities toward others.

While it is clearly the duty and responsibility of the current generation to ensure the best possible conditions for their children, grandchildren and future generations in general (even if they are not yet born), the latter are rightfully expected to show due respect for each other, their parents and grandparents, and the community institutions (teachers, educators, etc.), as well as to care for the elderly and the needy. (After all, life is almost always about something for something.) And while everyone deserves to be treated humanely and with dignity for as long as they are among us, young people should not be expected to sacrifice their own future for the sake of their elders. Therefore, society as a whole must help new generations to care for their parents to the maximum, just as it must fully support parents in bringing up their children.

So the ideal of a nurturing society is absolutely based on reciprocity, which accompanies us throughout our lives from birth until the moment of our death. That is to say, alongside liberty and equality, the third, equally indispensable pillar of civilized coexistence is 'fraternity', which ensures that none of us, regardless of age, gender, color, origin, or even kinship or any other relationship, is ever left to our own devices in times of trouble. On the one hand, this requires the right legislation and framework conditions, but on the other, there is something else without which it is not feasible. And that is nothing less than de-

veloping a high level of community spirit and collective consciousness that is an integral part of our way of thinking.

Collective Consciousness

Whether it is an anthill, a beehive, a pack of wolves, a troop of monkeys or human society, it is basically the so-called collective consciousness that holds communities of individuals together. In essence, it involves the acceptance of and adherence to the norms, written and unwritten rules of the community, where individuals put aside their self-interests, desires and drives for the sake of some 'greater good', the benefit of a common existence or activity. We can also say that in practice, being collectively conscious means the ability and willingness to be selfless towards the community.

In human society, sociology refers to the phenomenon as a set of shared knowledge, ideas, beliefs, convictions and patterns of behavior. In this respect, the collective conscious(ness) plays a central role in defining our sense of belonging and identity: it is how our values, beliefs and traditions are passed down through generations. Although the life of the individual is finite, this collection of intangibles, including the social norms associated with them, is clumped together in our culture and institutions, and thus continues to exist independently of the individual. For humans, the fundamental cohesive force of the collective conscious is the sense of belonging and solidarity towards each other, which increases our altruism, helpfulness and humility towards the community.

While group cohesion can also be observed in the animal kingdom, animals are known to be guided more by instinct than by emotion or even rational thought about each other and the world. For example, although we do not know for sure how thousands of birds can fly in apparent unity as a flock and move together as if they had a single consciousness, we are quite sure that their behavior is essentially instinct-driven. The swirling movements of schools of fish or even the synchronized flashes of fireflies work in the same way, but ants and bees also function in seemingly perfect organization because of the genetic programs 'encoded' within them. A common example from human society is the instinctive synchronization of applause when people are expressing acclamation, or the phenomenon of mass panic, when a few or even just one person in the room panics, and everyone else starts fleeing without thinking at the same time. (So instinctive imitation or adaptation to the behavior of others can also be emotionally based, including the expressions of negative feelings such as fear.)

The most primitive manifestations of the collective conscious are thus still present in Homo sapiens – along with the fact that, of course, they are present at the level of meeting social needs and the need for belonging in the same way as in certain animal species. For example, what fashion is for us, for some apes it is grooming: both are essentially a way of accepting and fitting into the community by following the norm and imitating the majority, while still feeling comfortable in one's own skin, if possible. (Especially if the sexual aspects of the matter are not ignored.) Elephant families keeping together and supporting each other's offspring is also based on solidarity, in addition to instinct, giving the whole

community a better chance not only of self-preservation and species survival, but also of a more varied and meaningful life.

But as You may have guessed, Dear Reader, collective consciousness in the case of humans is about much more than programmatic cooperation or mere instinctive or even emotional solidarity. There is a form of it that is specific to advanced, intelligent species and the organized societies they create. The essence of the latter is that as individuals we seek to adapt to the community not only because of some instinct or to satisfy a certain (deficiency) need, but because our deep and complex emotions and rationality, or reason, dictate it. And in this respect, it is the development of our conventional and emotional intelligence that is relevant, normally well above that of most other species inhabiting the Earth.

Emotional intelligence (EQ) refers to our ability to identify and manage the emotions of ourselves and others. Basically it involves three different skills:

1) the emotional awareness required for identification;
2) the ability to harness emotions and use it in tasks such as thinking and problem solving;
3) the ability to manage emotions, which includes controlling and regulating one's own emotions when necessary and helping others to do the same.

Emotional intelligence is therefore one of the most important interpersonal skills we use in our social interactions – it is no coincidence that many workplaces now test candidates for EQ, as well.

And the cornerstone of emotional intelligence is empathy, which is necessary to temporarily see the world through someone else's eyes, to empathize with their situation. Empathy is our basic capacity to feel for others, which at the same time enables us to integrate into the community through ethical behavior and effective and sympathetic communication. In general, the more empathy and EQ we have, the better relationships we can build and maintain, both in our personal lives and at work, because the more effectively we can manage our emotions and those of others.

Here You can certainly say, Dear Reader, that empathy is not an exclusively human trait, since we have often seen monkeys, elephants or even cats mourning their fellow species in nature films or on the internet, which immediately catches and spreads everything extraordinary. In fact, the only animals capable of empathy are the more evolved species – but remember, in a given case, we may not be able to tell whether the animal is actually mourning its dead mate because it feels sorry for it, or because it is more likely to panic out of self-pity and despair. While the former is a manifestation of true emotional intelligence, the latter merely proves that a living being has certain emotions – not necessarily that it really feels for the other, let alone sacrifice itself to save it. (However, we cannot rule out the possibility that there are animals and situations where this happens, which we have also seen examples of.)

Empathy nonetheless is an important part of collective consciousness, because in its absence, individuals can become antisocial, unable to integrate into society, and even dangerous to the lives of others. This may pose the same, or at least a similar, problem among great apes, which have a highly developed social culture compared to other animal species, just as in civilized human communities, where adapting to each other and to common rules is a basic expectation. But in the case of cognitive collective consciousness, based on the cognition and interpretation of the world, there is little room for debate or error in claiming that it is unique to us, the advanced (self-)conscious representatives of Homo sapiens.

For humans are able to consciously put the interests of their groups before their own, by analyzing the current situation and considering the possible future consequences. An essential part of the process is understanding the complex and sometimes intricate system of cause and effect, which is fundamentally different from the instinctive cooperation of animals based on solidarity or occasional empathy. Compared to the animal kingdom, a higher order of collective consciousness also implies that we think and behave altruistically towards the community, and seek to assert the interests of our wider community and society as a whole, not as a result of some instinct or external compulsion, but as a result of conscious deliberation.

I don't know about You, Dear Reader, but I, for one, regularly feel a strong inner urge when a product in a shop is misplaced or lying on the floor to put it back on its designated shelf. This is despite the fact that it is obviously not my job and I have no personal interest in doing so. My motivation is simply that I believe that the store is a kind of common space that works really well, efficiently for everyone, when it is orderly, where shoppers can easily find what they are looking for without having to navigate around obstacles. Such an approach may not be common nowadays, but anyone who volunteers will probably know what I mean – small, seemingly insignificant deeds or help, but which can make a big difference in everyday life when done on a large scale, with many people involved.

But if we broaden our perspective and look at the current state of our environment and climate change, we are faced with a global problem that cannot be solved (rather mitigated at best) by occasional or randomly occurring good deeds – and unfortunately, even regular compliance with government regulations or guidance is not always enough. While it is very important that we do not litter, apply selective waste collection as much as possible, avoid the use of plastics, save energy, use public transportation (and so on), to achieve long-term environmental sustainability we need organized, globally coordinated cooperation, which is still a long way off. Since pollution and global warming, wherever we live on the planet, affect all of our lives (almost exclusively negatively), the first, inevitable step to solving or effectively curbing it is to recognize our global interdependence. This is as crucial for human civilization as a whole as it is for smaller communities that do not contribute to climate change and may exist outside civilization – if we were in their shoes, we

would hardly be any happier to see our habitat becoming more and more unlivable every year.

So the presence of rational thinking and empathy are equally essential components of advanced collective consciousness. And while these are skills that may vary from individual to individual, fortunately, both traditional and emotional intelligence required for them can be developed, so that collective consciousness itself can absolutely be enhanced throughout our lives, too. But because, like in the case of our other intrinsic qualities and skills, our upbringing matters, it is essential that active development takes place from an early age, at home and in our communities, and that it is prioritized and delivered as effectively as possible in the context of school education.

The role of the different forms of intelligence and (collective) consciousness must be a priority for young people because it can be a key factor in their development, and can also be an effective tool in preventing their lives from derailing. As You may have figured out by Yourself, Dear Reader, cognitive-based collective consciousness does not represent the level of scarcity needs in Maslow's hierarchy, but the level of growth needs above them. Accordingly, the motivation behind it is not the persistent lack of something, but the desire to learn about the world and ourselves, and the need to improve.

However, while the more knowledge we have, the more we want, our deficiency needs work the other way round: the more we are forced to do without, the easier it is to be persuaded to do things in the hope of being able to meet our needs. Seducing a man fueled by sexual desire, for example, is not too difficult a task, especially not for an attractive woman. Just as it could be easier to recruit a person who wants to socialize or belong to a community into different groups than someone who does not lack social contacts or needs related to belonging. But joining different faith communities can also work on a similar basis: the more You need some kind of spiritual support to cope with the difficulties and uncertainties of everyday life, the more likely You are to fall in with the wrong crowd.

In extreme cases, we can go so far astray in our search for belonging and purpose in life that we join a cult that seems to turn us completely inside out, and may even end up destroying us. So it was with the more than 900 of our fellow human beings – many of them children – who committed mass suicide in 1978 under the influence of just one man, Jim Jones, who founded the cult called Peoples Temple. The charismatic man represented a unique blend of evangelical Christianity and the New Age movement in America, promising a life based on social justice and equality to those who joined the community.

In the 1960s, Jones assigned the followers of the Peoples Temple to a place in California, USA, to create their own commune, a supposedly perfect socialist community. But following hopeful beginnings, life there became increasingly sacrificial for the community members: they had to hand over all their personal possessions to the leaders, receive no money from the church in return for their hard work, and had to cut off all contact with the outside world. After an increasing number of attacks, Jones, who had become paranoid, moved the community to Guyana, South America, in 1977, where the cult was able to con-

tinue its activities for a time. The head of the church, by making those at home look bad, assured his followers that they ware on the right path, and successfully brainwashed them with his constant propaganda.

Concerned about the lack of letters and all other communication, the relatives eventually managed to send a delegation from the United States to the sect's camp, dubbed Jonestown, to assess the situation. The meeting turned into a bloodbath, however, and Jones' rabid gunmen shot almost all the visitors, along with the believers who tried to leave in their company. The next day, on the orders of the church leader, as a last and 'inevitable' solution, the members of the sect collectively ended their lives.

It is alleged that Jones' followers were mostly ordinary, hard-working people, including some with higher education, who simply wanted to live a decent life and help their fellow man, and serve God rather than a self-proclaimed deity. To a certain extent it is even plausible that they were socially conscious, yet it is highly doubtful that they would ever have committed themselves to such a dangerous ideology if they had not suffered from a lack of certain basic needs. At the same time, it should be noted that it may have seemed at first a harmless and even noble cause to the participants, which gradually turned into a nightmare, until finally it proved difficult or almost impossible to escape the clutches of the sect. (But we must also see how dangerous credulity and trust in others can be when used against us to manipulate and keep us in check.)

The extremely sad and shocking event is, nevertheless, a good example of the fact that collective consciousness can even manifest itself in extreme forms. In fact, a sense of collective consciousness can be created in us by many different communities or institutions – apart from a church or a religiously based group, it can be the state, a nation or an ethnic group, a school, a sports team, a band, social media, etc. Today, the World Wide Web also plays a pivotal role in shaping the community spirit and its diverse manifestations, ranging from fan or creative groups with various themes to the establishment of a global collective consciousness, covering virtually all levels of its existence. (Including manipulatively created communities.)

In a truly sustainable society, especially as a member of a global civilization, in addition to the increasingly general individualistic and self-fulfilling aspirations, we also have a fundamental need to function as communal beings, as part of a larger whole. At the same time, it is vitally important to develop and nurture our individualism, our independence, our identity, and to maintain a healthy self-image, so that we are not too easily influenced, making us vulnerable to dubious intentions. Remember, Dear Reader: You must never completely give up Yourself or Your own identity to join communities that may lead You astray or take advantage of You.

Giving up Your individuality can also mean that You become uniformized and, in extreme cases, You can even become a one-dimensional and boring puppet without independent thought, who do not add color or progress to the world, but rather preserve it in a

rotting, putrid, unhealthy state. And, as we have seen, if You focus solely on belonging, You can easily end up being dominated, and possibly made to do things You would never have done otherwise. However, mass suicide is not the same as self-actualization, because by committing it, You are by no means performing to the best of Your abilities, and You are certainly not maximizing Your potential – not to mention that You are unlikely to be satisfied afterwards.

A high degree of self-consciousness is therefore a prerequisite for a well-developed collective consciousness, because if it is lacking, our community life can easily lead to fiascos such as joining an extremist sect. It is conceivable that many of Jonestown's unfortunate residents believed that as members of the community they could achieve the highest level of spiritual fulfillment, for which they were willing to forgo even their most basic needs – after all, we know that humans, being complex creatures, can temporarily and without further ado favor levels near the top of the pyramid of needs, even at the expense of the lowest levels. However, it is quite certain that they did not heed the numerous warning signs about the increasingly controversial, extreme and dictatorial behavior of their leader and his church, i.e. they were not (self-)aware enough of the situation.

That being said, a lack of awareness can be greatly contributed to by a lack of previous similar experience or knowledge to make the right decision in the given situation. Thus, the Jonestowners may well had been unaware that socially based communities can only work if they are genuinely based on equality and justice – which was clearly no more true of the Peoples Temple and Jim Jones than it was of most societies and leaders calling themselves socialist or communist, where in fact one or a few people rule over the rest, often through a cult of personality organized around them. But in such a system, respect and admiration for leaders, or unconditional adherence to them, is never born of internal motivation or common sense, but is the result of external coercion, propaganda and manipulation, popularly known as brainwashing.

Wherever it has reared its head, such a system, like fascism, absolute monarchy or any dictatorship, has become dominant, has survived and is still functioning today only because of the ignorance, conformism and indifference, or misleading and intimidation of the majority of society. You can be sure, Dear Reader, that none of these societies is characterized by a generally high level of collective consciousness, whereas the so-called herd mentality is more likely to determine the nature and quality of community existence. This means that people follow each other's example a large percentage of the time – just as most of us tend to follow the crowd, and adapt our behavior to that of the majority. As we have already seen, this is not always a problem (for example, it often simplifies our choices between different things or between a plethora of options), but when we should be listening to our morals or our wits, knowledge and experience, it does us no good at all.

Émile Durkheim, the French sociologist mentioned at the beginning of the book, observed as early as the 19th century that in traditional or primitive societies, religious symbols,

rhetoric and other rituals greatly facilitate the formation of a collective consciousness, and this is essentially no different today. He described the automatic cohesiveness of such and similar, relatively homogeneous communities as mechanical solidarity, which is fundamental to coexistence in more primitive cultures. However, mechanical solidarity is as much with us today as it was in the past, as shown by the way sports, fashion, social networks, among others, work – but it also provides the cohesion within different tribes, ethnicities, nations or even armies. This is possible because Homo sapiens as a species was not much less evolved than it is today, even at the time of the formation of religions, because biologically (especially in terms of our brains) we are still very similar in structure to what we were a few hundred or even thousands of years ago.

What does mechanical solidarity have to do with herd mentality? I believe a lot, even if the former does not always go hand in hand with the latter. But when we cheer on a fellow countryman at the Olympics, for example, we usually do so simply because we are daughters or sons of the same nation as that person. Many people will support a compatriot even if he or she is has dubious, unsympathetic personality, or is not very committed to fair play and sportsmanship, even if he or she is up against a foreign sportsman of impeccable integrity, or a popular figure with a winning style and personality. Furthermore, in the heat of cheering, some people not only applaud or appreciate less the good moves of, say, an opponent from another country compared to the home team, but even erupt in cheers when the former makes a mistake. We may only think about the glory of our own country when we cheer, but isn't that what is essentially called tunnel vision, the main driver of herd mentality? Nevertheless, it seems that most people – at least those with nationalist leanings – simply call it patriotism, and regard it as a social expectation, while those who do not comply are very quickly labeled 'traitors'.

Experience shows that the herd mentality has to go beyond a certain tolerable limit before the community, which has been held together by mechanical solidarity, will condemn its manifestation and the group members who cross the line. As is the case with cheering for our sportsmen and sportswomen, many things are considered acceptable, but if, for example, an extremist group of our compatriots at a football match starts to riot and act violently against other supporters or even the police, we generally stop associating with them. However, in acute situations such as war, we may observe a radical shift in norms: when it comes to very high, typically existential stakes (like survival), a much wider range of extreme behaviors are typically considered acceptable, including (mass) murder in some cases. So is it possible that the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which claimed hundreds of thousands of innocent lives, were seen by many as a legitimate argument to prevent the loss of more domestic lives, or that the majority of Nazi soldiers who took part in the execution of Jews and other enemies felt absolved of war crimes under pressure and duress.

Don't get me wrong, Dear Reader: fighting for the reputation or prosperity of Your nation, Your people, Your team, Your school or other community, there is nothing wrong

with that in itself. But it can make a world of difference how and by what means we do it, and what and how much damage we cause to others in the process. This is the case even if we happen to represent the whole of humanity, against the living world of Earth or, say, that of another planet, or against a species as intelligent as ourselves, as we saw in James Cameron's hit movie Avatar. Although the majority of the people who arrive on the planet Pandora in the film are intentionally obnoxious and callous, their goals, and especially their methods, of exploiting the planet's resources are absolutely rightly condemned by all beings who consider themselves civilized. (Especially in the light of the many similar examples in our own history of the subjugation of other peoples for their lands and various possessions.)

Nevertheless, looking around the web, there are many opinions that clearly defend or sympathize with the invading humans in the film. For them, it may have been easier to exercise empathy with their own kind than with the representatives of some alien, apparently primitive culture, but there is no doubt that, in addition to their indifference to the latter, they are influenced by a blind mechanical solidarity and consequent racism or racial chauvinism, regardless of the humans' behavior. For those who think this way, however, others may be seen as abnormal or disloyal, or even as traitors to their own race (sharing the emotionalist view of Colonel Quaritch, who leads the destruction of the natives' homes in the film).

But such stigmatization bears nothing more than a primitive and counterproductive smear campaign against each other, which would lead nowhere. On a similar basis, those who stand up for the colonists and soldiers in Avatar could be said to be even worse, as they flout the idea of the attitude and behavior of civilized beings. In fact, if we were to judge by this logic, we could say without further ado that anyone who today is only looking after the interests of a particular group or community, instead of working to sustain and save our global civilization, is betraying humanity as a whole...

Our goal, however, should never be to point fingers, but instead to recognize that herd mentality is still one of the main drivers of our societies, both allowing us to be relatively easy to control and facilitating the formation of homogeneous groups or cliques with similar characteristics, mindsets or interests. While this has the advantage of being able to hold certain communities together and to make them cooperate or even do useful work, tensions and hostility between individual groups can fundamentally prevent the united action of people. This has been turned to its advantage by the ruling class in virtually every historical era (see the divide and rule principle) to exploit the majority for its own interests, while it has sapped our planet so much by now that only global cooperation could hope to fix it – which fails precisely because of the great divisions.

At the same time, we also know that, according to Durkheim, there is what is known as organic solidarity, which is the cohesion and cooperation that results from the interdependence of individuals and groups, and their understanding and acceptance of each other.

This is essentially the basis of a more developed form of collective consciousness, which can also be seen in the work of colleagues who complement each other effectively, or in the work of those involved in flood and other disaster response. It is the conscious recognition of interdependence and the division of labor that comes from combining individual knowledge with our different skills and strengths that makes a society strong, resilient and sustainable, and thus livable for all.

That is why we need to be as conscious as possible, and to rely on rationality and common sense, rather than on our momentary needs, personal desires and emotions, when making the most important decisions that will affect our future and the fate of countless fellow human beings. To do this, however, it is essential that we get to know the world in which we live, and ourselves, in its full reality, and that we start to hone our intellectual and logical qualities at an early age. As already mentioned, of course, we must not neglect our empathic skills, either, which are necessary to reduce and minimize social inequality and injustice. (Indeed, empathy is central to the goal that we humans should not treat each other as no truly civilized being treats even animals.) And empathy with our environment and with other living creatures is, naturally, an important part of achieving environmental sustainability.

I hope that You too, Dear Reader, can see that a modern society is only truly functional if, the decisions we as its members make to cooperate and live together in a civilized way are not the result of some kind of compulsion, but of our own common sense. The possibility of free choice – within the framework of civilization, of course – is a basic necessity for our self-fulfillment. But without sufficient collective consciousness, a small minority will always dominate the majority, leaving many of us to only dream of our freedom. That is why we need to do everything in our power to raise and spread collective consciousness, so that we can finally leave behind existential opportunism and the vulnerable and (self-)destructive lifestyle that goes with it.

Now, I can almost hear the indignant exclamation from many: "What then will happen to the competition that ensures the operability of the economy and society, and the development and viability of it and its members?" My answer to this is that competition and a kind of competitive cooperation can play a very important role in innovation, just as we can constantly improve ourselves with the right support and the right challenge. On the other hand, I believe that a high and widespread collective consciousness has the potential to ensure the sustainable functioning of the economy and society, together with the establishment of a properly regulated system. (I will explain the details in the next, final part of the book.)

The generalization of collective consciousness can therefore serve not only as a reason or a means to replace the main opponent and obstacle to civilization, as it is suitable to replace both existential opportunism and social Darwinism in our lives. Since we are able to understand when and why we need to subordinate ourselves to our common interests, collective consciousness and the solidarity and cooperation that it engenders can serve as

the main driving force of our societies in the future. The only thing that is needed is to create the right culture, which may seem unthinkable to many given the current dissention and lack of unity.

Still, the fact that something is unthinkable for many does not mean it is impossible. A hundred years ago, for example, most people could never have imagined that we would one day walk on the moon, or that scientists and astronauts of different nationalities would work together on the International Space Station. They did not know that the various substances and gases we emit into our planet's atmosphere can change its climate on a global scale, nor that we can get lessen it effects by not using or gradually replacing those substances and technologies. Nor could it have seemed realistic to our great-grandparents that by vaccinating hundreds of millions of people, we would almost permanently get rid of such insidious pathogens as polio, smallpox, measles or whooping cough. And it probably didn't even occur to them that from the opposite side of the Earth we would be able to communicate with each other in a second or two, in such a way that we could even see each other.

The internet, on the other hand, which makes the latter possible, is of much greater service to us than simple socializing and entertainment, or the occasional shopping, administration and information acquisition, with lots more untapped potential for the future. Without further ado, it can be suitable for creating a global collective consciousness, and – if used appropriately, as a kind of complement to our real (social) lives – to lay the foundations of modern society and community existence. Sharing information instantly and presenting it in the right way both makes an almost unlimited knowledge base available on any topic, and allows for easy and quick comparison and transparency.

But the web can also be used for abuse and manipulation, for spreading false or inaccurate information and dangerous views, or for promoting hatred and mistrust, so the most important is how we use it. As already discussed in the chapter on the hazards of technology, some regulation, filtering and moderation is definitely necessary, but it cannot be overdone, because then the whole point of the system, the free flow of information, is lost. What is clear, however, is that the internet is once again something that needs to be learned to use properly, both in terms of its functions and reliability, and in terms of the ethics and culture of interactions and content posted. Therefore it is vital to help young people, and even older generations, to do this effectively, through various schools and educational institutions, as well as literature or even free online courses.

Scholars and thinkers have already suggested that if the internet will eventually function as a kind of 'collective mind', won't this mean giving up our individuality and, in the long run, the uniformization people? If we are constantly being watched by 'Big Brother' who knows almost everything about us, won't we be completely vulnerable? If we are not careful, there is a real danger that companies, governments or even criminals and their organizations can manipulate or dominate us through the ever more sophisticated tools of technology. (As is already the case through the various news portals and social networking

sites, and through personalized advertisements and recommendations.) To avoid this, it is also good to be aware and conscious of the different tools and methods, but this alone is not enough: we also need to be fully aware of our social relations. As part of this, we must insist on proper regulation and ensure that politics and the economy serve us at all times, instead of feeding off us.

At the same time, we must also be careful that social cohesion can provide the kind of motivation for those in power that can lead to drastic restrictions, censorship, fragmentation or even the disappearance of the web as we know it today. Politicians and lawyers (the two are frequently one and the same) can come up with practically any excuse why, even in a democracy, it is in society's best interest to prevent the free flow of information. So instead, we must always insist on independent regulation and use the web, in one way or another, to be an open platform for sharing knowledge, skills and real information and for public communication, which belongs to everyone, and therefore cannot be owned by anyone.

Whether it is about the internet or anything else in terms of our existence in society and our connection to it, it is essential to ask: where does the individual end and the community begin? But you could also put it this way: how far does our private sphere extend, and at what point do we need to talk about the common sphere? In an organized society, this is an extremely important, but far from always clear-cut problem, which fundamentally determines our relationship with each other and with the community.

Perhaps You will agree with me, Dear Reader, that in a civilized society, everyone should have the right to privacy and the respect for it. As already has been stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honor and reputation". On the other hand, every person shall enjoy freedom of movement and freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the right to manifest and change his or her religion or belief, and freedom of opinion and expression.

The collective existence or communal existence, i.e. the sharing of goods and knowledge, however important it may be, cannot therefore be ranked before our individual existence, since both play an equally fundamental role in our lives. For the fact that we are part of a community from birth cannot override the fact that as individuals, autonomously functioning and thinking beings, we each have our own needs, or our own little world, so to speak. And part of being civilized is that in order to exercise certain functions, whether of our body, mind and soul (e.g. sanitation, sexuality, sleep and rest, work and study, personal entertainment, etc.), we need an intimate sphere that can only be violated by a few people close to us – or, in some cases, by no one.

This is precisely the reason why communism in the literal sense of the word, which considers everything to be common, cannot work as a social system, since man by his very nature – at least at his present level of development – cannot exist without private proper-

ty. To have virtually everything in common, including all goods and material things, could only work in a society where individuals have, as it were, completely let go of material and individual considerations, and are essentially focused on the common spiritual plane, while material things play a role at most in the mere maintenance of existence. But in order for us as members of an intelligent species not to be motivated by personal material prosperity and accumulation at all, we would have to reach such a high spiritual level that we cannot yet even begin to imagine. This presupposes drastic lifestyle-physiological changes, such as, say, the existence of telepathy. (After all, if individuals could see each other's thoughts, they would essentially share everything anyway, wouldn't they?)

Not only would we find it hard to imagine such a thing, but in the Western world, most of us would likely be reluctant to even think of living in a commune. In a community where practically everything is shared with many other people, where there is little or no personal property, while we have to constantly adapt to others. And while adaptation is inevitable in any civilized community, we all need privacy – even the homeless, who are often reluctant to share accommodation for a reason. Therefore, everyone's privacy must be respected, and under normal circumstances, we need to draw a certain physical or imaginary line that no one can cross without our consent.

How much personal freedom or privacy someone needs depends on their personality, culture, current life situation or state of mind, and other factors. As we know, some people are more open while others are more introverted, which can be influenced by the culture in which they were raised: while in some communities it is quite natural for a family or a larger group to be together virtually all the time, in more modern societies there is an increasing demand for the so-called 'me-time'. And of course there may be days or times in all our lives when we have no need or are less able to tolerate the company of others, such as when preparing for an exam or other test, or after the loss of a loved one. It is important to always respect the privacy and freedom of someone in such a situation – even if we are watching to see if we can help in some way –, which we must do regardless of our own customs or culture, if we are to remain within the bounds of civilized coexistence.

If You are looking at a small housing community, for example, whether it is individual houses or flats in the same building, you can't expand beyond Your own territory: You can't start building a garage in Your neighbor's garden, just like You can't put Your own trash in front of the door of the people who live next to You. You cannot listen to music so loud that it disturbs the people around You, and You cannot just wander through other's backyards, invading their privacy. Just as, of course, You cannot take food or any personal items from other people's tables without asking.

It is clear, then, that alongside common property there must also be some kind of private property, as well, which everyone regards as their own, and which others must respect as an integral part of the private sphere. A couple of the most fundamental questions are what the optimal ratio of private to public property should be, and where the optimal

boundary between the two lies. (This will be discussed in more detail in the next section, in connection with economic aspects.)

But even if something – say, a specific property or area – is not in possession of its user, it must be considered his personal space, which must not be violated without his permission or against his own will. Just as cultured people don't usually penetrate each other's aura, unless the extreme nature of the situation (e.g. a crowd on a tram) warrants it. So no one should be surprised if someone reacts with disapproval or protests when, for example, accosted in the street for some banal reason like begging. Although the latter is now almost a common or ordinary occurrence in many large cities, it is by no means normal – either from the point of view of the beggar, or the victim of the panhandling.

And this is where it comes into play that some things are on the whole community or society, in which everything has to function within a given framework. There are certain rules for this, which must be determined by common sense and the laws of civilized coexistence, and which form part of a common set of values that allow people, and even different cultures, to live together peacefully in a society. Before a truly borderless world, as imagined and desired by more and more people today, can be created, it is also essential to establish and accept a 'universal' set of shared values. And essential to a common set of values is a relatively precise and well-defined understanding of what is public and what is private – that is, what should be considered a part of the private sphere, and what should not.

Even though there is not always a sharp dividing line between the two, it is usually possible to get a fairly accurate idea of which category something falls into, simply by looking at who it affects, and how much it affects the lives of a wider range of people. For example, how and where a family stores household waste in their own home is a matter for the family members living there. (Unless there are leaks or contamination, or unpleasant odors to the outside world.) Once the waste is out of the house or flat, however, the whole neighborhood and living environment is affected by what happens to it, and how it is stored and disposed of.

And if we look at how different types of waste can pollute the wider environment if not properly disposed of or treated, it becomes clear that it is in the interest and responsibility of society as a whole to take care of waste, including environmentally sound storage, recycling and other processes. Because of shared responsibility, however, the problem goes all the way back to the households, which should be expected to collect waste selectively for the benefit of all of society, for example – in addition to the fact that obviously no one can throw their garbage wherever and whenever they want. (Remember the compromises that were essential to enjoying the benefits of civilized coexistence?)

In the eyes of many, the already mentioned begging can also be an individual problem or, at most, a matter that falls under the jurisdiction of the police, just as when, for example, excessively loud music coming from a neighbor disturbs them. Yet, like homelessness and poverty in general, it is a society-wide issue that is not solved by giving money to

someone once or even several times individually, nor by the police holding them to account on a particular occasion. In this case, the only way to eliminate such an undesirable situation is to join forces at the societal level and, after identifying the root of the problem, to take action against it by changing the framework conditions accordingly.

"Why would I do that when I have my own problems, and it is none of my business, anyway?" some may ask. But regardless of Your doubts, Dear Reader, all I can say is that it is definitely Your business, too. On the one hand, in today's uncertain and often hostile world that is still dominated by existential opportunism, even You could find Yourself in a similar situation, and You would obviously not be happy if society left You high and dry. On the other hand, however far-fetched or unlikely it may seem, social inequalities are as much a growing threat to social stability and peaceful coexistence as the increasingly unsustainable pollution, destruction and depletion of our environment.

So deeper connections are often lurking in the background even when we don't notice them, because we are only concerned with our own immediate concerns, goals, desires, communities and interests. This is why collective consciousness plays a central role in the effective recognition and separation of the private and the public spheres, allowing us to control our lives and our future much more with the right knowledge and attitudes than without them. An advanced level of collective consciousness is quite simply indispensable for solving global problems such as overpopulation, climate change, pandemics, and practically everything we looked at in detail in the first part of the book.

As we have seen in the discussion of epidemics, for example, it is in everyone's best interest that effective COVID vaccines reach virtually everyone, including people in poorer countries and those in disadvantaged situations, in order to establish adequate global protection. With this in mind, we must put aside economic profit motives and the like, and act for the greater good, otherwise the number of epidemic-related illnesses and deaths could rise again, while hopes of normalizing our lives and halting economic and other crises as soon as possible are also threatened.

But through collective consciousness, it also becomes clear that the observation that we ourselves can shape our future through our choices is true not only at the level of the individual, but also at the level of society and humanity. We all have an impact on the events and future of our world, however small or large that impact may be. For example, something as simple as taking an antibiotic when you are ill without consulting a doctor can make bacteria more resistant to the drugs developed to fight them over time. These pathogens adapt through mutations the more they are exposed to the same active substance, which means that antibiotic treatment no longer works for many patients. According to WHO data, more than 700,000 people currently die each year just as a result of infections resistant to previously proven drugs (of which around 230,000 cases are attributable to multi-drug resistant tuberculosis alone), indirectly caused by those who use antibiotics without adhering to medical prescriptions. So we all have a responsibility for the future of

our fellow human beings and our world, even if this responsibility is divided into many small parts among the members of a population of millions or even billions.

And although the existence of self-awareness is an essential condition for a well-developed collective consciousness, it is much more than just that, as it means that we work for the well-being not only of ourselves, but also of our community and society as a whole. At the same time, the connection between our individual and social needs is obvious, as our collective consciousness is closely linked to our transcendental needs and motivations, which are at the top of the hierarchy of needs.

What does this mean for us? In essence, that we can achieve little more in our lives than to work towards a viable and prosperous future for our society and human civilization (including the unborn), as part of a greater whole that includes us all, while transcending us all at the same time. As such, our own self-actualization can be an integral part of humanity's collective self-actualization. Similarly to individual self-actualization, this means that our species brings out of itself the rare and fantastic abilities it possesses, and while ensuring peaceful and harmonious coexistence with nature, it increasingly exploits its potential as a species that is, by definition, intelligent and sentient.

However, we must also see that, while one side of the coin is collective self-actualization, the other is the nightmare of collective suicide. The latter, in the form of the current civilizational crisis, now threatens us directly – if not with total extinction, then with the failure and collapse of our global civilization, which would mean the end of civilized life, along with the end of faith and hope in it (at least for a while). And, as we have seen, there are many different paths that can lead us to failure, whether it is the inappropriate use of technology, excessive greed and waste, inadequate management of climate change, the exacerbation of social inequalities, or hostility and rivalry with each other.

In order to be able to successfully overcome the problems threatening our civilization, our moral and social development should have to make leaps and bounds. If we fail to undergo such a radical and general change of mindset in the next few decades, there is a good chance that our current civilization will no longer be sustainable – in other words, humanity, still in its adolescence, will have to grow up incredibly fast. This may seem like an unrealistic expectation, but if the will is there, anything is possible – and when could we need it more if not at the time of the worst global civilizational crisis ever?

Can we do it? I do not know the answer either, Dear Reader, but I do know that the power of people and the collective conscious should never be underestimated.

**FOR A MORE CIVILIZED
AND MORE SUSTAINABLE FUTURE**

Conscious Consumers Society

Now that we are finally in balance with ourselves – or at least we know how to get closer to it –, it is time to look at what we can do at the level of our societies to ensure stability and sustainability. There has already been some discussion about the kind of changes in approach and concrete measures that may be needed, but as we have seen, fundamental changes are essential to the functioning of our social, economic and political systems. For without a radical paradigm shift taking place in the short term, within a few decades we can easily reach the point where we can no longer recognize our own world and natural environment – and not at all in the good sense of the word.

But systemic change – in a democracy at least – starts with a change in the mindset and behavior of individual people. While these are improving for many people as they become more aware, dependency on consumption, excessive consumption and wastefulness, and the lack of a culture of waste management are still commonplace in most parts of the world. And as long as we are not in control of our own shopping and consumption habits, and are even unable to keep our own households and communities in order and adapt to the challenges of our time, it is little wonder that 1.3 billion tons of food (about a third of the total produced) are wasted globally every year, while hundreds of millions of people go hungry. Nor is it surprising that more than 2 billion tons of waste are being generated, while the use of unsustainable technologies and inadequate waste management and recycling are slowly (read: extremely quickly) making our planet uninhabitable.

But those who have little or no money cannot be expected to choose what they eat or what consumer goods they buy and use regardless of their cost, or to adopt expensive environmental solutions or hire specialist service providers to remove and properly manage waste. To a certain extent, people living in more difficult circumstances too can obviously be aware of how much they pollute their environment, but as they are usually struggling on a daily basis to make ends meet, they are often unable to provide even basic sanitation in their households and communities.

In addition, these people, wherever or in whatever country the live, are usually in a completely vulnerable position to others with power and wealth (politicians, big business, etc.), so they have very little real influence on the way things are done. We also need to do everything we can to uplift these 'classes' and to level the playing field – apart from humanitarian reasons and the prevention of civil wars – so that they can join the slowly growing camp of environmentally and socially conscious citizens, the so-called 'conscious consumers society'.

Although it is common nowadays to think of consumers who are aware of their rights and seek to maximize their own interests as conscious consumers, being a member of the conscious consumers society (CCS for short) is about much more than that. The difference is essentially that between self-consciousness and collective consciousness: while the practi-

tioner of the former is primarily concerned with his or her own interests, the latter seeks to shape his or her buying and consumption behavior in ways that benefit other consumers, society as a whole, and the natural environment. So, Dear Reader, You may regularly hunt down the best bargains, or You may stick to the tried and tested manufacturers and brands, but that does not in itself make You a pillar of the CCS. But when You, say, report a poor quality, potentially dangerous product to the consumer protection authority, or just make sure that a food does not contain unhealthy ingredients and if it does, You choose another product, You are already contributing somewhat to the well-being of others.

So while CCS embodies the characteristics of self-conscious buying and consumption, it also has maximum regard for the interests of the wider community and society, in effect taking them as its own well-understood interests. But to be able to do this, we need to be well informed and aware not only of the products and services, but also of the companies that provide them, and, in fact, of the functioning of the whole economic system. Thus, we should also be aware that in the current economic world order, the primary goal is constant growth and profit maximization – this is what investors, shareholders and other business owners expect, and they are usually looking for a quick return and growth of their money. All other aspects, however much they are emphasized by the managers of large companies, are in most cases secondary, and rather an outward image, which serves to gain the trust and sympathy of customers.

This includes, among other things, environmental considerations, which, although they are receiving more and more attention and are becoming more and more fashionable (green companies and technologies, etc.), are often insufficient in reality, or simply serve to deceive the public. A blatant example of the latter was Volkswagen's diesel cars, which the company advertised with slogans specifically promoting their low emissions. In 2015, however, the US Environmental Protection Agency revealed that the iconic carmaker had used software in many of its vehicles that was able to distinguish between driving in traffic and testing, and in the latter case, switched to a much lower emission mode than the former. As a result, the cars involved were emitting forty times more nitrogen oxide-based pollutants than allowed in the country while on the road. In the wake of the scandal, Volkswagen had to recall millions of cars worldwide, which hit hard not only the company's wallet, but also the confidence of customers.

An example such as the one above is obviously not very common, but it should be remembered that in terms of manipulation and irregularities of this kind, this case may only represent the tip of the iceberg, while many other abuses are never detected. It is always easy for a capital-rich company to claim that its production technology is environmentally friendly, or even that a product is made entirely of healthy ingredients (especially if no one holds them accountable), but it is usually not so easy to prove otherwise – even more so if you don't know what you're looking for. And, just as in sport there is a constant battle to root out performance-motivated doping, in business, companies often push the boundaries of the law, by exploiting legal loopholes and benefits from time to time, if necessary.

Unfortunately, this sometimes means that not only our natural environment is damaged, but also human lives are endangered or lost. As was the case in October 2018 and March 2019, when Boeing 737 Max 8 aircraft crashed in Indonesia and Ethiopia respectively due to a concealed new on-board system, killing 346 people altogether. Despite the fact that Boeing, which has put hundreds of thousands of Americans to work, was once a model of reliability in many sectors of engineering and aviation, including the human moon landing, the giant has undergone changes over time that have indirectly allowed similar disasters to occur.

The decline of corporate culture can be traced back primarily to the merger with McDonnell Douglas in 1997. Then Harry Stonecipher, the former CEO of McDonnell Douglas, became the new head of Boeing, who put the (monetary) value to shareholders – essentially the profits the company made – above all else. Before, when the company was run by aeronautical engineers rather than financial experts, quality and reliability were always the primary concern when designing and manufacturing aircraft, so that passengers could feel as safe as possible. After the merger, however, cost reduction and efficiency were the most important guiding principles at Boeing, while technical and other problems were increasingly swept under the rug. And if the pressure from the stock market alone was not enough, the market competition with Airbus in Europe pushed the company even further towards prioritizing financial aspects.

Boeing's downfall is one of the most telling stories of corporate greed: it makes it clearer than ever that money saved on the lack of development and professional training can even lead to disaster in an unfortunate turn of events. Furthermore, the case ended up costing the company a lot more financially in damages paid and aircraft grounded for long periods of time than if it had been willing to spend more to ensure greater safety in the first place. This is certainly the case in many other situations, where companies that follow similar practices escape more serious consequences. But even if they have to pay the price, things generally go on as before...

In fact, the need to grow and make profits, and often just to survive in a competitive market, means that manufacturing and service companies now have a clear interest in maximizing sales, and the most effective means of doing this is to create and maintain a dependence on consumption and a constant urge to buy. They usually do this by constantly bombarding us with messages that tell us that the product or service brings us pleasure and contributes to our happiness, and that we need it – even if we would never have thought of buying it before. A super-comfy chair, an uber-efficient cooking pot, a health-boosting salt lamp, the one hundred and twenty-fifth fat-burning miracle cure, the cutest stuffed animal, the coolest tattoo, the biggest TV, the latest smartphone... The list could go on for days.

Through marketing that relies on advances in human psychology, companies manipulate our natural desire to reward ourselves – which is often all the more necessary because

in our tiring, boring, often lonely and hopeless daily lives we get too little of what we really need to maintain our mental and spiritual health: physical and spiritual balance, a sense of purpose and meaning, opportunities for self-expression and self-fulfillment, and real human relationships that provide intimacy and love. In their absence, most of us are willing to trade them in for ego driven consumption compulsions that often offer quick pleasures and relief, while giving up our true selves, our higher-level desires and longer term goals. And because our personalities partly or entirely switch to 'material mode', we also reinforce among ourselves, through our relationships and social networks, the subconscious perception of certain consumer goods that those who do not have them, or even the latest, trendiest, coolest version, are missing out or less worthy than others.

Even if You are not always aware of it, Dear Reader, when You are under its influence, dependence on consumption and shopping is basically the same pathological condition as, say, gambling, drugs, sex or even work, which all fall under the category of addictions. They are all about finding the source of pleasure in a given activity and escaping from the bleakness and difficulties of reality and everyday life. Such addictions, however, can only offer a fleeting pleasure, while You feel desolate or even depressed, Your consciousness becomes narrowed, empty, indifferent and sometimes unstable, self-indulgent and aggressive. Which partly explains the increasing impatience, intolerance and indifference in the so-called developed world, and the phenomenon of people suddenly starting to act crazy, often out of character. Who knows, you may have experienced some of the warning signs Yourself...

In most cases, of course, the situation is not so extreme, but the addictions developed in the average consumer are just enough to maintain their constant compulsion to buy. To do this, as we see around us every day, we don't necessarily need products or services that are potentially highly addictive, such as alcohol, cigarettes or gambling (which can have a very harmful effect on our health, mentally or physically), as almost any well-marketed consumer product will do the job that is being foisted on us for private gain. In addition, the huge demand means that manufacturers and sellers of many different counterfeit products (shoes, clothing, bags, jewelry, beauty products, medicines, food, electronic devices, toys, etc.) often make a good living from distributing cheap imitations, while the quality of the counterfeits usually leaves a lot to be desired, and in some cases poses a significant health risk.

Addiction can be created and maintained through both physical and virtual media and channels – a typical example of the latter is the nowadays manipulative advertising pressure we are exposed to from various internet sites and service providers, especially social networks, which can influence our habits and values beyond our knowledge. As Shoshanna Zuboff, professor of social psychology, describes in her book The Age of Surveillance Capitalism, tech companies with the tools to do this are constantly collecting data about us and our shopping habits and interests, which they use to predict our behavior with increasing

accuracy. And those who have this information can very easily use it to their advantage, including through personalized advertising and 'services' to encourage purchases.

But this kind of data collection can also be misused in other ways, which can again have a harmful impact on our health in an indirect way. According to one of Zuboff's vivid examples, breathing aids purchased by people with sleep apnea have in some cases sent data on the device's operation to health insurers without the owner's knowledge, which they could use to justify reduced insurance payments.

Our data can thus be used by different organizations for their own gain, which may involve changing our behavior and thinking. Accordingly, the concept of surveillance capitalism essentially refers to a socioeconomic system that disregards people's privacy, and seeks to make profit by effectively influencing our behavior and selling our personal data. Dependence is usually developed through the use of rewards and punishments, making us unwittingly active perpetuators of consumerism, along with social injustices and inequalities.

At the same time, inequalities within our societies and between countries provide an opportunity for the corporate sector to minimize their costs through cheap labor, while their profits and influence sometimes grow to outrageous heights. In a globalized market economy, virtually anyone can locate their factories and shops wherever they want, so they can choose the cheapest option in terms of skilled labor costs, in addition to favorable tax and other conditions. And when conditions are no longer so favorable, companies simply relocate their factories to other countries, regardless of how many people will be out of work as a result.

Employee welfare is therefore not, or at most, a secondary concern in a typical modern company – especially as in most of our world today, politics is much more about protecting the interests of businesses and their owners, while trade unions and workers' interest organizations have disappeared or are fighting a losing battle. That being said, workers' rights vary from country to country and, as logic also dictates, are generally better enforced in the more developed countries. Despite this, negative discrimination (for example against minorities or women) is still very much present in the treatment of the workforce, which is a serious problem even in a country with a massive economy like the United States of America.

In extreme cases, not only people's sweat, but also their blood contributes to the production of individual products, as in the case of so-called blood diamonds or gold. Both are typically practices that exploit people in poor countries, whereby valuable minerals are illegally mined and sold to richer countries. Organizations outside the law are often involved in the process, which, among other things, include arms or drug trafficking, money laundering and similar activities, but they usually do not shy away from the use of slave and child labor, either. The latter is widely illegal in any form that may be mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous for children, or prevent them from participating in an

education appropriate to their age. And while authorities are working to reduce the phenomenon, which is on a downward trend worldwide, it is estimated that tens of millions of children are still affected.

Of course, these and similar practices affect at most a few percent of the world economy, and there are many companies that value their employees more than others and try to take care of them, in addition to offering competitive wages and benefits. Nevertheless, extreme differences in earnings, often of an order of magnitude, are generally as common within these firms as in the rest of the market economy. But in the field of salaries determined purely by managerial bias and the law of value dictated by supply and demand, the differences are significant not only per country and per sector, but also depending on the position or job title. So while an assembly line worker working three shifts can often barely make ends meet, a middle manager may earn up to five or ten times as much, whereas the income and other benefits of senior managers can be sky-high.

For most companies, a significant part of the wealth goes into the pockets of the managers, owners and shareholders, who typically make up only a fraction of the people who contribute to the success of the business and the revenues it generates. Don't You think it is hypocritical, Dear Reader, that while large and medium-sized companies are constantly talking about cost-cutting and optimization, those in power and private investors are pocketing huge sums of money? And this is by no means always dependent on the success of a business – after all, how many cases have we seen of managers walking away with staggering sums of money, even in case of a company that has gone bankrupt or came close to it? All the while practices such as tax evasion or offshoring of production to developing countries to maximize profits are also quite common.

If it wasn't obvious before, perhaps now You see, Dear Reader, that in a market economy, companies – just like people – basically operate according to the laws of existential opportunism. And because regulation is variable or minimal, the lengths to which they will go to achieve their goals are mostly determined by their own decency or unscrupulousness (the more money they have, the more this is true), against which individual people, whether customers or employees, have little chance of successfully standing up to on their own. In such a socioeconomic environment, it is hardly surprising that many people do not trust companies – as we have seen, even a good-sounding name or brand with a long history is not necessarily a guarantee of due integrity and reliability.

However, it is the collective consciousness-based behavior and potential cooperation of consumers and employees that is the cornerstone of CCS. There is in fact a very close link between these two seemingly separate 'camps' – for example, when we as consumers do not buy certain products of dubious origin or linked to illegal work, we are clearly supporting decent working conditions. And as workers, we are just as much part of the consumer society, which means we are just as affected by its impacts and issues. Thus, the only way

we can become an integral part of CCS is by practicing daily sensitivity and awareness of our social and natural environment, and acting and making decisions accordingly.

The gradual growth of collective consciousness is essentially a natural evolutionary process in the history of an intelligent species, even if it does not always show uninterrupted development in individual societies – thanks, among other things, to still dominant forces such as existential opportunism. 'Cultural transmission' can also be an inhibiting tool when people pass on outdated ideas and concepts to each other and to their offspring, reinforcing a kind of narrow-mindedness rather than a broader vision. The spread and generalization of collective consciousness, on the other hand, can be artificially prevented, or at least greatly hindered, which is perhaps more the case today than ever before, thanks to the increasingly advanced and widespread use of technical means. This may be done, for example, by reinforcing stereotypes and influencing people's instinctive selves, or by creating addiction and compulsive consumption through the transmission of suggestive messages typical of a consumer society.

We must see, however, that on the other side of the equation is the constant need to sell, driven by money as the main means of creating, maintaining and growing an existence, but without the human aspect. In this light, it is hardly surprising that our world has now been virtually conquered by 'pushy culture', which uses the full range of marketing, psychology and manipulation to encourage purchase and consumption. The passive-aggressive methods of this culture now pervade our lives completely, through advertising and promotion on every possible surface and medium. But because these are less successful in increasing the number and value of sales, we now also see much more direct forms of pushing every day, such as being accosted on the street or in a shopping mall, or even being called or personally harassed in our homes and being talked our heads off.

All this may be common, but I definitely wouldn't call it natural, let alone normal. Or are You, Dear Reader, not yet unspeakably fed up with the extremely irritating pushing that almost crawls into your face, without respecting Your personal space and private sphere? With the stupid and often hypocritical advertising that distort facts and truth with impunity? With the ads, pop-ups and spam that pop up all over the internet, often blocking your browsing? With the formal, self-glorifying statements of the managers and representatives of various companies, mostly devoid of any sincerity and genuine humanity? And in general, that hypocrisy, distortion, concealment and manipulation are common and fully accepted practices in so-called civilized societies?

When a company claims, in the popular but clichéd phrase, that it puts the customer first, it does so mainly because it needs You – or not so much You, but actually Your money. As a typical example from a deregulated market economy, businesses are motivated primarily by selling their stock, but are not really interested in whether You as a consumer can buy the product You need. This is perfectly illustrated by the fact that You often can't even buy what you want in a supermarket or hypermarket because it is out of stock, or simply sold out due to a sales discount. However, shops are usually not bothered by the

fact that they could sell more of something if it were available, as they are more likely to try to persuade You to choose a more expensive product, for example, instead of the familiar or tried and tested one. (Or even the smaller version of the same product, which usually costs more per unit.)

And that's not even mentioning the constant rearranging of shelves, the products placed near the checkout register that encourage impulsive buying, and other widespread marketing gimmicks. Of course, this is not just a matter for different shops or even online stores – separate industries have been created to take advantage of people's ignorance, carelessness, laziness, pride and other qualities that can move huge amounts of money around. (So that a significant part of it is then concentrated back in the hands of a few.)

Yet the problem is much broader than that, as the phenomenon is not only common in companies, but is also present in all of our lives, as if we are now trying to sell ourselves to others in our everyday relationships. (Just look at our pretended perfect lives, posing and other such distortions on social media.) But while we strive to maintain appearances to others in order to conform to real or perceived norms and expectations, we are in fact serving the selfish and highly dubious interests of a consumer society sharpened for sale, and driven by existential opportunism.

The question is: is this really what we want to build a modern and sustainable society on? A system that relies fundamentally on materials above all else, in which the most important aspects, humanity and sustainability, can be secondary at best? And what can we hope to gain from following such a hypocritical, lying and manipulative 'value system' when we are facing the most serious civilizational crisis ever, anyway? As far as I can see, apart from sweeping problems under the rug and postponing facing and solving them, not much. As for our attitudes towards each other, we should be kind, considerate, thoughtful, polite and helpful to others not because of the coercive influence of money, but simply because it is the civilized and forward-looking behavior that is expected under the principle of reciprocity. This is also why we should take much better care of our environment, because without its health and balance, we cannot expect much good for ourselves, either.

As we have already seen, it is very much within human nature to be able to do this. It is a matter of culture, education and appropriate patterns and practices on the one hand, and of will and organization on the other, of which there are positive examples even today. Circular economy, as mentioned earlier, could in the future be a very effective way of environmentally friendly consumption and recycling, along with the concept of green cities. The latter is a comprehensive approach to making cities, which are home to an increasing number of people, as livable and sustainable as possible, by using solutions such as reducing emissions, making extensive use of renewable energy, increasing the number of green spaces, parks and buildings, in addition to waste minimization and recycling. Well-planned and rigorous water management is also extremely important, as exemplified by the emerging concept of 'sponge cities', which is currently gaining ground mainly in China. It has the

great advantage of being able to significantly mitigate the sometimes catastrophic effects of severe flooding, in addition to water scarcity, by increasing the amount of water-absorbing areas and green spaces, and by draining and storing excess water with adequate capacity.

The ever-increasing number of self-sustaining residential communities, often referred to only as eco-villages, essentially serve as an excellent example of combining the above, even if on a smaller scale for the time being. They seek to minimize their ecological footprint by optimizing their consumption and energy use to ensure long-term sustainability and 'climate resilience'. Energy efficient homes, the use and storage of renewable energy, the recycling of drinking water and waste, the protection and conservation of biodiversity in surrounding areas, and high-yield bio-food production are all essential parts of a holistic solution for such communities. Efficient food production is achieved through low-land-intensive and environmentally friendly livestock and crop production and soil regeneration farming, as well as modern technologies such as water and nutrient solution hydroponics and vertical gardening.

On the social side of things, there are also many examples of how people are not always motivated by individual gain and money. In more developed countries, but basically all over the world, there is now a growing number of volunteers who, without any financial reward or compensation, freely engage in a range of activities to help others and contribute to the well-being of the wider community. Voluntary work can be very varied in nature, ranging from public order protection and disaster relief to childcare, elderly care and nursing, and various cultural and educational activities. Apart from their obvious benefits to society, they also have the advantage that volunteers get to know the world better, learn different skills, gain experience, build relationships with others and become part of a new community. This can also help them to meet their own social and spiritual needs, and ultimately to achieve self-actualization.

Working for the benefit of society, but without any financial gain for the person doing the work, is also a characteristic of communities of people helping each other, often made up of relatives, friends or neighbors. These are colloquially referred to as bees (named after beehives), and are usually found in construction work, but can also take many other forms – harvesting and other agricultural work, cooking and catering, repair and installation, domestic work, childcare and eldercare, etc. –, provided by community members to each other without material compensation, mostly on a reciprocal basis. Although it is mainly specific to villages, small rural communities and households that may exist outside society, it can in principle manifest itself anywhere and in any other form, whether it is teaching, medical examinations, counseling or legal assistance.

In democratic states, bees are usually not prohibited by law, but a community that relies heavily on labor done on a reciprocal basis without compensation (referred to as 'black' in the vernacular), especially if it is of a recurrent, regular nature, is almost universally frowned upon by the authorities, and generally sought to be eradicated. In such cases, they

often claim that the work carried out by incompetent persons may be of poor quality, or not always in line with the legal requirements. This kind of activity is also known as 'stolen labor ', because it 'takes away ' from others the opportunity of gainful employment. And, since it is not part of the circulation of the economic system – i.e. it does not involve the movement of money –, it cannot even be taxed to generate revenue for the state.

From an objective point of view, the concerns about quality are well-founded, and it is therefore reasonable to expect that specialized construction tasks and work requiring expertise should always be entrusted to a competent professional, if only to protect our lives and health. But in other areas that do not require special knowledge or experience, why should people not help each other, even on a regular basis? Also, if they have the appropriate qualifications, why shouldn't they work for others of their own free will on a reciprocal or even courtesy basis, even in a specialized way that requires requiring a certain expertise? Why not reconcile this with paid work and service activities?

Before You even suggest, Dear Reader, that this is basically communism, You must see that this means not by any chance that everything is common and for free. It is only the movement of money that is lost in some cases, and within some communities – which means there is no disproportionate, corruptly obtained, unearned revenue to be gained from a chain of interdependent subcontractors. The problem is that companies and politicians generally don't like not to benefit (directly or indirectly) from something, because such practices simply don't fit into their economics-dominated worldview. And, in addition to contradicting existential opportunism and material utilitarianism, they can also make exploitation and dictation through it rather difficult.

This raises a related question that no one seems to ever ask, let alone answer: how can the state force the taxing of labor at all costs, while allowing individuals to amass vast fortunes that could provide a basic livelihood for thousands of people? But it is equally questionable whose interests are served when a single-rate tax system is legislated rather than a multi-rate system with a higher tax burden on higher incomes, or when the biggest companies receive huge tax and other benefits. This may be able to stimulate the economy on its own, but it is certainly not at all conducive to leveling out social inequalities and reducing insecurity, so it does not benefit the majority of citizens in general.

As we know, in economic terms, a modern society is basically made up of three parts:

1) Businesses: provide the products and services used and enjoyed by 'all of us'.
2) Civil society: as consumers, they are users and beneficiaries of the goods and services produced, and as workers and owners, they are active participants in the production and service sectors.
3) State: the apparatus that determines and controls the rules of the economy and the functioning of society.

From a certain point of view, it is also the role of the state to ensure a balance between the corporate and civil spheres, but in today's democracies (and often even in essentially autocratic regimes like China) this is usually heavily tilted towards the former.

This is not at all surprising, however, given the close links between the state and the corporate sector: in partnership with corporations, and often with vested interests in them, political leaders frequently prioritize their interests over those of the wider citizenry in their decision-making. In countries where lobbying is strong, this is even more the case – as the party with the most money and resources is usually the most persuasive. And if these same people and companies receive the most support from politics, it will tend to keep it that way, as it forms a self-perpetuating or even reinforcing cycle.

As You may have guessed and experienced already, Dear Reader, as long as social Darwinism and existential opportunism are the generally accepted guiding principles, we cannot expect any significant change. It is, one might say, the natural way and inherent feature of a system based on such a foundation to turn people against each other and divide them, using this to dominate them, while the minority at the top gets rich. Slavery, ecclesiastical supremacy and feudalism based on inherited privileges or other types of autocracy, fossil energy carriers, control and manipulation of information, or anything else, depending on current trends and opportunities, can serve as a means of this.

Today's consumer society exercises control over us with the help of the latter two, among other things. Big business is becoming more and more successful in manipulating us for profit through new developments and methods, information technologies and the web, while the majority of politicians are also primarily looking after their own gain before getting concerned with the longer-term interests of society. Thus, however, there is almost nothing to prevent the consumer culture that encourages frequent purchases and the ever-expanding surveillance capitalism from keeping us in check, and bombarding us with veiled or less veiled messages about how we should behave.

Thereby the corporate sector and the state combine to put and keep the majority in a vulnerable position – either because they do not question their attitudes and power, as they do not have the time and energy to do so in the constant cycle of consumption and money-making, or because they are so poor financially and otherwise that they are both blind to the way things work and so preoccupied with day-to-day survival. Only a few manage to escape from this trap, which means either to withdraw from the system (see hermits and self-sustaining communities), to join the camp of the minority dominating the majority, or to become 'deviants' and try to consciously change their way of life, or the way of thinking of their community or the wider society.

But the latter runs into serious difficulties precisely because today's socioeconomic and political world order fundamentally hinders the natural development of people's (collective) consciousness. This is extremely difficult to change also because, on the one hand, those in power argue that the economy could not function otherwise, so the system must be maintained at all costs. On the other hand, because the people who serve them, econo-

mists and many other intellectuals, as well as the multitude of people who are led by the hand and see only negative examples, echo the same, thus re-establishing money and economics as the central religion – and with it the social Darwinism and existential opportunism that have been running through our history.

If You abstract from everything for a moment, Dear Reader, what does it say about a system to You if it has to artificially limit people's consciousness in order to remain in any way functional? Where they have to be kept in a constant state of dependency so that they don't have the time or energy to try to change, or to even think about the whys and hows? All while we would need unprecedented global cooperation and collective consciousness to bring about sustainability change, and sooner rather than later. Since to avoid an impending environmental catastrophe, we would all have to act as more conscious consumers and producers who use natural resources carefully, which unfortunately we are still a long way from.

But since becoming more conscious is a natural process in the evolution of an intelligent species, it can only be limited or hindered for a time by methods such as advertising and messages that appeal to primitive, 'basic' instincts, one-sided information and propaganda, inadequate information, and a lack of high quality education. And this is where the conscious consumers society comes in, which, although still in its infancy, is beginning to take off in more developed parts of the world. Today, fortunately, more and more people realize that we all have a common interest in a fundamental change of mindset, starting with changes in our consumption and lifestyle habits, which also affects the technologies we use in production.

Those who try to minimize unplanned, impulsive purchases have already taken the first step in the right direction. Of course, this is harder to achieve the more money one has to spend – but it is by no means a prerequisite to have a higher than average income. You may also be familiar with the situation, Dear Reader, when, after receiving Your paycheck, You suddenly let go of the reins You've been holding on to until the end of the month, and start spending. It is a completely natural psychological phenomenon, and part of it is that You sometimes feel the need to reward Yourself, often with a consumer good such as a new handbag or jewelry, or even a service such as a nice weekend at a spa. When You have (more) money, it is always easier to afford such things for Yourself and Your family – and when You don't, retailers and service providers try to tempt You into buying with discounts. It is hardly a coincidence, after all, that major promotions and discounts usually take place at the end of the month...

Advertisements, of course, are constantly trying to encourage us to buy, and personalized advertising is particularly effective. These are able to exert their effect on us even subconsciously, despite the fact that many of us are already saturated with advertisements, and have become almost immune to them. So when the commercial break on television comes on, as conscious consumers we either switch channels or go about our business un-

til the interrupted program resumes – but we don't typically make our decisions based on what they are trying to push on us. Just as we are not motivated to compete with others in our purchases, driven by the possession of various status symbols (expensive, branded phone or car, clothes, jewelry, etc.), but primarily by the function, value for money, ingredients and other practical qualities of the product.

If You are a conscious consumer, You also tend to do Your research before making major and important purchases, which is helped enormously these days by the use of e-commerce and related sites on the internet, and of course the now indispensable search engines (above all the one with the initial 'G'). However, the most useful sites are often those that compare the features and prices of different products and indicate their current availability by trader, which can make it much easier to make a decision by bringing together information in one place. So much so that many of us can no more imagine our lives and shopping habits without weighing up the data and customer reviews here, or without browsing the product descriptions, reviews and videos on other sites.

As far as minimizing waste and being frugal goes, it starts by trying to buy only the things you plan to buy, or the goods you actually need at the time or in the near future. To do this, however, we need to be aware of the difference between our real needs and our desires, which for many people is not an easy task. The former cover goods and services that we either cannot live without (e.g. drinking water, basic food and clothing) or whose lack can seriously endanger our health (e.g. shelter, water for sanitation, electricity or gas for heating, medicines, vitamins and mineral nutrients). In addition to these, there are other things outside the category of necessities that we may need in our daily lives, work and other tasks (cutlery and other utensils, furniture, cars and other means of transportation, telephones, computers, various machines and equipment, etc.), and therefore (can) also serve to meet our real needs. We can also include here most of the goods and services we use to maintain and improve our physical and mental health and for our recreation and entertainment, such as books and films, cinema and theatre, sports equipment and training, spas, and so on.

At the same time, there are more expensive or, shall we say, luxury versions of many of the items and services we need to meet our basic or everyday needs, be it a dress, a pair of shoes or a heater, a restaurant, a hotel, a car, a telephone, a home, or almost anything else. The more expensive or luxury version, on the other hand, tends to cost a lot more, and in many cases requires more energy to produce or operate than its simpler or more functional counterpart. For example, an SUV consumes more fuel than a conventional car, so its emissions are higher. A luxury home with a spa, numerous rooms and electronic equipment also has a much larger ecological footprint, with a greater impact on the environment, than its more modest counterparts that can perform their basic functions in the same way.

If we are truly forward-thinking and conscious consumers, we will try to avoid such luxuries, which are more for the satisfaction of our desires or our vanity – both for the

sake of the environment and our own wallets. Again, make no mistake, Dear Reader, it is far from being the case that all our desires are wrong and inappropriate. Our intrinsic motivation for comfort and relaxation, for entertainment and culture, for learning and travel is perfectly natural – but it is also important not to overdo it. Because having three apartments, ten bedrooms, five cars, several high-end smartphones and dozens of expensive jewelry, and going abroad on holiday or on luxury trips several times a year is by no means a way of meeting real needs, but rather a high school of luxury and extravagance.

Nevertheless, staying grounded is not easy even if You are short of money, only for very different reasons. On the one hand, You must always make sure that You allocate it well, and that You can at least buy the things that meet Your real needs. However, the cheapest products, food, services and more are not always of acceptable quality... On the other hand, You must also face up to the vices of the 'pushy culture' of consumer society, which encourages You to spend in the opposite way to frugality and planned buying. But the poor quality and lack of durability is even more pronounced in this case, as products, clothing, utensils and appliances are often not designed and manufactured today to last long or to be easy to repair, and thus they may need to be replaced soon. Such an approach is particularly common in more developed countries, where a wide range of products and constant supplies mean that many people live in the knowledge that everything is available in virtually infinite quantities.

Nonetheless, there are now more and more opportunities to practice frugality, if we really look after our environment. For example, using energy-efficient light bulbs, tools and appliances, and insulating our buildings so that they require less energy to operate and maintain. This, of course, requires a certain amount of funding, so to put them into general use, increased support and input from communities and society may be necessary to make them widely available.

What we can all do in practice, however, is to try as much as possible to minimize the amount of plastic we use (bottles, cups, straws, bags and nylon bags, etc.) and to collect waste of all materials and types in a selective way, even if it is not mandatory. (If selective collection and processing does not work in Your area, You may propose its introduction to the local self-government, supported by a petition for signatures.) You can also play an active role in recycling and recovery, which is now greatly facilitated by dedicated applications. Too Good To Go, Olio, Share Waste and others provide a simple and quick way to connect people and businesses, so that food left over from restaurants, hotels, shops or even our households is not wasted, and that items and equipment that are surplus to requirements but still usable by others do not become municipal waste. And if You have no choice but to get rid of some food that is no longer fit for consumption, You can ensure that it is used as compost in agriculture by collecting it and processing it properly.

No matter how we look at it, conscious consumer behavior always involves some level of organization. And as collective consciousness becomes more common, we can gradually

move from individually conscious consumers to collaborative action on global sustainability issues, which is really what CCS is all about. The high degree of organization of civil society can provide indirect control over the activities of companies, for which price comparison and other information websites are only the beginning. In fact, there are already initiatives today that call for an increasingly active involvement of society in the economy as a first serious step towards a more level playing field.

One such initiative is community funding, where a large number of individuals contribute relatively little money each to make a project they want happen. This is usually a product or service that does not exist (yet) in the market in that form, and for the development and production of which the donors essentially provide the necessary credit. Crowdfunding is made possible through online networks, social media and specialized websites such as the very popular Kickstarter or Indiegogo. The great advantage of this method is that start-up entrepreneurs do not need to have substantial capital to make their project a success, which means that the process of raising capital is significantly democratized. It is also a major driver of innovation, as often a valuable innovation cannot be realized simply because its inventor does not have the necessary financial resources.

While this can be very beneficial to society, it should be remembered that products and services financed in this way can serve any purpose, i.e. they can be as addictive or damaging to the environment as those produced and provided by traditional projects funded by large investors. In doing so, however, crowdfunding may once again promote the individual enrichment of a few people, instead of serving the long-term interests of the majority – after all, it can make a world of difference whether we support a new flavor of soft drink packaged in millions of plastic bottles, or a revolutionary solution that replaces or effectively breaks down plastics. The problem is that, for the smallest investment, the greatest returns are usually not generated by products and technologies that serve the public good...

Sure, we need to admit that so-called ESG criteria, which emphasize the importance of environmental, social and corporate governance aspects, are now playing an increasingly important role in more developed countries. Environmental considerations can range from a company's energy and water use habits and resource conservation, to its polluting activities and how they are minimized, to its treatment of local wildlife, animals and vegetation. In addition to ensuring decent working conditions, social criteria generally refer to the impact of companies on local communities and the wider society, i.e. essentially the direct human aspects of their operations. And governance aspects cover, among others, issues related to taxation and accounting, transparency and compliance, potential corruption, and the appointment and remuneration of managers. Thus, environmentally and socially conscious investors are, in principle, given the opportunity to favor companies that meet ESG criteria as closely as possible.

While this is certainly a positive trend, unfortunately ESG alone will not change the world. Although the strategy proclaims that, if implemented, it can improve the perfor-

mance of companies and thus their return on investment through more sustainable and fairer management, this often contradicts reality. The most environmentally friendly and socially beneficial investments tend to fall into the category of those that only pay off in the long term, while the biggest and fastest profits are almost always generated by the most popular sectors, products and services at the time. Therefore, no matter how much attention companies pay to ESG considerations, in a competitive market they will always seek to maximize revenue and growth – even if they may accept some extra costs and conditions for environmental protection or social justice. And if they do so, it is most certainly not good for environmental and social sustainability...

But what if, Dear Reader, instead of (or at least in addition to) investments to make more private gain, the sums raised through crowdfunding (at least partially) were given to community companies owned by larger municipalities, cities or counties, or to independent non-profit organizations serving longer-term social goals? Conscious consumers and citizens who want to take control of their own lives and those of their communities are already supporting similar initiatives, and as their numbers grow, the amounts they can raise will grow, too. At the local level, this kind of civic community funding is great for cleaning up public spaces, improving community infrastructure or organizing education and training programs – but it can also be used for larger social projects and donations (helping victims of devastating storms and hurricanes, supporting preparations for floods and other natural disasters, etc.).

Community funding can therefore be a major step towards a high degree of self-governance, as it can increase social participation, transparency and, under the right conditions, accountability, which are essential to ensure equity and sustainability. Thus, money can more easily find its way to where it is needed most, rather than being sucked away by the greed and constant growth pressures of consumerism, or drowned in the winding channels of bureaucracy. But for such financing to be truly effective, instead of increasing the power and influence of the elites, it is essential to level the playing field so that as many people as possible can participate. The existence and continuous increase of collective consciousness and organization is also an essential condition, without which the interests of the community will always be secondary to those of individuals and groups with money and power.

Gradually increasing social participation and increasingly effective community self-governance can therefore be a means of making our lives and our future more independent of the interests of profit-driven corporations. And there is much to be afraid of: companies driven by existential opportunism are exploiting natural resources for profit, just as they exploit our data (and the information they gather about us), our instincts and our needs. Private investors, through specialized companies and businesses with an interest in the energy industry, are increasingly seeking to expropriate available freshwater resources, with or without bypassing local governments. As they become increasingly in-

debted and vulnerable, opportunists can easily persuade them to sell or lease their water assets, or even to hand over full control of local water and sanitation services.

That is why we also urgently need a conscious consumer attitude to tackle water scarcity, as well. It is a growing problem in many places across the world, including major cities – for example, residents of Cape Town, South Africa's famous port city, recently faced the threat of Day Zero, an ominous name for the day when the city's taps simply run dry from lack of water. Fortunately, the problem has been averted – at least for the time being – through the elimination of leaks in the system, the efficient allocation of supplies, and the exemplary cooperation of the population. However, as this may not be enough for the future, Cape Town has already started to optimize its water management system, including by extracting groundwater and building water recycling plants.

Thanks to climate change, irresponsible waste and outdated technologies, water scarcity is becoming a problem on a similar scale in more and more places around the world, meaning that the nightmare of Day Zero could soon become a reality for most of us if we are not careful. While some areas and countries (such as Canada) are much better off than average, supplies are far from inexhaustible (as residents of California, one of the richest states in the US, are experiencing), so water could soon become a 'niche article'. And if the price of clean fresh water rises, it will be the poor who will once again be the main victims, which may push them even further down the social ladder, while also increasing tensions. As the problem can have a direct impact on almost everyone in the near future, we need to be more aware of our resources at community level, and ensure that water management is overseen on a local, not-for-profit basis.

Failure to involve and cooperate with local communities in the food sector could also lead to an insoluble problem, as we are already heavily dependent on a few large multinational corporations. This means that they supply a significant proportion of the goods in supermarkets and hypermarkets, so when You shop through them, You actually have much less choice than You might think about the origin and characteristics of the food You buy. Competition dictated by the multinationals, however, has not led to an improvement in quality, but to more cheap and unhealthy processed foods and mass-produced products that bear only a trace of the original (see dairy products). Thanks to mass production, a large proportion of crop cultivation and livestock breeding takes place on large-scale farms, where a plethora of pollutants and harmful substances (pesticides, fertilizers, etc.) are used, and where masses of breeding animals, which are considered to be mere raw materials, are kept in circumstances unworthy of civilized beings.

Due to their financial power, such large corporations have come to dominate food markets and supply chains, often leaving small farmers and communities vulnerable. In doing so, they typically determine the market prices for their products, which has succeeded in squeezing the incomes of small farmers, just as they set the payment conditions for the majority of livestock farmers, while seeking to maximize their own profits. Only through collective consciousness and cooperation can family farms and rural farming communities

hope to curb their unruly activities, as waiting for policy-led change seems to be no more than a faint hope in light of the current trends.

Yet an alternative for both producers and consumers could be offered by the emerging community markets and community food supply networks, which link them together, leaving out large corporations and multinationals. In the case of the latter, it is especially true that platforms for this purpose allow the parties to find each other easily and quickly through an online interface, so that the goods produced and the needs can meet in an efficient and independent, or so to speak, democratic way. One such solution is offered by the Open Food Network, a non-profit organization that helps community food supply enterprises to thrive through its own software. As well as being an excellent way of ensuring local food supply, it can also help to ensure that the link between supply and demand, and any surplus and shortage, is maintained at all times, even on a wider scale.

We all (should) have a well-understood interest to become more independent from multinational corporations, to prevent them from determining in the future who can benefit from consuming water and food, and for how much. But the situation is similar in other sectors, including the real estate market, where due to the lack of sufficient regulation, prices tend to skyrocket, while banks are auctioning off more and more houses and apartments over the heads of people unable to pay their loans.

In order to secure our basic needs for the future, it would be futile to stand alone against the various profit-oriented companies, financial and other institutions, or even bureaucratic government offices, and we must stand together to defend our interests. The more of us live and consume more consciously, the stronger social advocacy can become, which can lead to a dramatic increase in the advocacy power of civil society. Then we can make significant changes not only to the products and services meant to satisfy our basic needs, but also to consumer goods in general.

For different goods and services, we should basically consider the following five aspects:
  - environmentally friendly production (primarily depends on the materials and technologies used);
  - 'society-friendly' production (i.e. production that is in the interests and well-being of workers, communities and the wider society);
  - adequate quality;
  - an affordable price that is also fair to those providing the products and services;
  - availability and accessibility.

As You probably experience Yourself every day, Dear Reader, market competition based on existential opportunism is far from always able to guarantee those criteria – so much so that it is usually not even the intention of the companies. However, consumers' awareness and organized action may be able to do so, which, as already mentioned, is greatly assisted by the tools of modern technology (computers, smartphones, etc.), as well as the world

wide web, which enables immediate and extensive connectivity, and the infrastructure provided, that is, the various networks, websites and applications.

In addition to dedicated software, the latter include professional portals specializing in a particular area or type of product (e.g. cars), forums, often run by experts, where everyone can contribute and exchange ideas, and the price comparison sites mentioned before, which aggregate products (e.g. refrigerators) and services (e.g. air transportation) of various kinds. Although these can already be very useful to consumers in choosing and buying the product or service they need at present, for the time being they are at least as much a tool for advertising and marketing for retailers and manufacturers, even if customers may criticize them or their products.

Nevertheless, such online platforms have a huge potential for CCS, as they can be used as a model to create databases with the participation of communities and civil society, independent of any economic interests and financial influence. Just like crowdfunded websites themselves, these could be community-financed, non-profit based, and their sole purpose would be to allow consumers and shoppers to compare products and services as objectively as possible. This would be achieved, on the one hand, by allowing users – as is already possible on many sites – to narrow down exactly what they are looking for within a given category based on a number of filtering options (e.g. color, size, etc.), so that they can find what they need quickly and easily. On the other hand, all available data and descriptions of the various goods and services – and even of the companies that produce and sell them – would be made available, together with reviews and consumer ratings.

While there is potential for bias and corruption even in such a system, a sufficiently large base of informed consumers and their feedback could quickly expose such misinformation, ensuring that real, up-to-date information is available at all times. Thus, the database would allow shoppers to view, in addition to current prices and availability, the detailed characteristics of different products, the materials and technologies used in their manufacture (and their potential impact on the environment), and the public perception of the manufacturer or retailer, together with information and warnings on its practices in relation to the environment, workers and other participants of the economy. In other words, the system would provide all possible assistance for truly informed purchasing, while at the same time exerting pressure and a kind of control over companies. (Therefore, it could be called CCS system for short.)

Over time, such a system would naturally have the 'side effect' that the majority of its users would buy the better and cheaper of everything – i.e. the product or service that offers the best value for their money. This strong selection effect, however, reduces competition in the long run, and can easily lead to a monopoly situation in which one or two firms essentially dominate an entire market. At the same need, we need to recognize that this is already the case in some fields, and that the key is to exercise and maintain proper consumer control. A solution to this could be the so-called Unified Supply System (see later), which sets out requirements for the supply of different sectors and individual regions.

As You will probably agree, Dear Reader, it is highly questionable how far the duality of the political and corporate spheres, which elevate the economy and money above all else, would allow the spread of such systems, which promote awareness and equality, while at the same time weakening their power. The maintenance of a social order based on continuous secrecy, lies and hypocrisy is essentially a means by which the current ruling class seeks to – and for the time being is able to – hinder the natural course of evolution of an intelligent species. But, as has been said, this is only feasible for a while, and from an ethical point of view – especially when You think of the billions of people who suffer because of it, including, quite possibly, Yourself – it is highly questionable, to say the least.

Repressing the growth of collective consciousness rather than supporting it raises a dilemma similar to the limitation of general technical progress. How realistic or long-term thinking is it to not use the results of science and technology simply because it takes jobs away from people, or because we don't trust machines and new things in general? In addition to ethicality, however, the goal (to be) achieved is also questionable, since it is precisely conscious cooperation and the use of modern technology that can be the fundamental keys to the sustainability – or, if we look at it, the survival – of our civilization.

So it must be seen that what we are talking about is essentially the confrontation between existential opportunism and collective consciousness in our societies, and the constant struggle between the two. One of the cornerstones of the latter is the strengthening and prevalence of a conscious consumer society, and if the laws and artificially maintained practices and systems in a society are an obstacle to this, then the state power is either too weak or is actually working against progress. This is something that civil society, a.k.a the general public must not let continue – at least if it wants to live in a truly civilized and sustainable way.

Therefore we need to build and use the various advocacy tools and methods to counter the dominance of big business, billionaires, politicians and other opportunists as soon as possible. If we create well-organized consumer and environmental networks, they can enable us to negotiate as equals with organizations that have much more power, influence (and usually legal connections) than the average person. Petitions are an increasingly common way of expressing public will, allowing us to make our voices heard on a range of issues, but there have also been examples of effective boycotts of products, services or companies.

Combined with the aforementioned online presence and awareness-raising solutions, we can get companies to operate in a more environmentally friendly and sustainable way, and to truly serve the interests of their customers and society (rather than money and power), as they so often claim. Thus, consumers can also ensure that they do not have to bear and swallow the damage, disadvantages and costs caused by the negligence, disorganization, bureaucracy or profit-hunger of various companies, shops, service providers and other businesses, while their own interests are properly protected.

But the first and most important thing is that hypocrisy, secrecy, lies, distortions and the deliberate spread of misinformation must be replaced as soon as possible by full transparency, and for this to happen, it is essential to ensure and constantly demand open, honest communication that is based on facts. This includes cutting down on increasingly aggressive advertising and spam – unsolicited ads, messages and impulses that often unwittingly influence consumers –, but in the longer term, all kinds of vile practices that manipulate people must be banished from companies and the entire supply chain once and for all. Not least from the networks used for the dissemination of information, the internet and the various media, where the situation is not improving, but is rather getting worse.

In addition to the fact that most profit-oriented organizations use almost any means possible to increase their sales and revenues, the situation is not improved by the fact that markets are often dominated by a few (oligopoly) or a single (monopoly) company, which, without sufficient counterweight, allows them to dictate the terms. This gives them the opportunity to determine not only prices or the availability of products and services, but also their quality and nature, in essence the consumption patterns of a large part of society, whether it is a product, software or information itself.

Microsoft, the developer of the Windows operating system, which is still widely used on computers and other IT devices around the world, has a similarly dominant role, although the balance of power has shifted somewhat. At the turn of the millennium, the corporate giant was not even held accountable for its operating systems, but was accused of seeking to dominate access to content on the web through its Windows-integrated web browser, Explorer. But the new regulation introduced to address this has only led to Google Chrome now dominating the majority of the market, with a global preference of two-thirds of users. What's more, a significant proportion of the smartphones that are now taking the world by storm are also running Chrome and the company's Android operating system.

Browsers and operating systems, however, are the lesser problem when it comes to internet content and control over it. Also owned by technology mega-corporation Alphabet, the Google Search search engine has held more than 90% of the market share for years, including web and image searches, as well as searches on the hugely popular YouTube video sharing platform and Google Maps. Why is this such a problem when Google makes our lives so much easier? Well, mainly because Google evaluates, filters and ranks individual web pages according to its own ideas, so that they essentially give us the picture of the world that the company's strategy managers deem appropriate.

This is obviously not a bad thing if it is a way to curb hate speech or racism, or to protect children from potentially harmful content. But when a profit-oriented organization subjectively decides which company or source of information it prefers over others, or which results to show for a given search in a given country or culture and in what order, it influences users in the same way that television and other media do, as discussed in the context of cultivation theory. It is also a fact that the largest and most successful compa-

nies tend to appear at the top of the search results, as opposed to local businesses, even if the former cannot necessarily offer the easiest or cheapest way to provide the product or service users are looking for.

While this increases social inequalities rather than equality (of opportunity), the personalized advertising that is pushed on us by algorithms that monitor user habits effectively maintains and deepens our dependence on consumption. Furthermore, Alphabet plans to expand YouTube, which it now also owns, into an online store, which could further consolidate this dependency by offering quick and easy shopping. This also shows the tendency of a platform designed to perform a completely different task – in this case, sharing videos – to become commercialized, i.e. a service designed to generate direct revenue, rather than one that actually serves the real needs and well-being of users. Just as Facebook started out as a simple social network to connect friends and acquaintances, only to grow into a money-sucking machine that operates on a mass of ads and information...

An alternative to such and similar monopolies and dominance in the future may be presented by the so-called open source projects, which actually focus on sharing rather than making private gain. The concept originated in the world of computer technology, where it refers to software that has open source code that anyone can view, use, modify and enhance at their discretion or demand. (Source code is the fundamental part of computer programs that we never encounter as ordinary users, but programmers determine the look and feel of various software and applications by writing and editing it.) This allows for a wide variety of improvements and applications to be implemented, which in turn will enrich the knowledge of the whole community, while being used by a wide range of people in their daily lives.

Among other things, the internet itself was created using open source technologies such as the Linux operating system or the Apache HTTP Server web server application – so every time we browse websites, send emails or chat, listen to music or play games online, we are essentially doing so through an open source network. The same principle works behind the Open Food Network's digital platform, which allows food producers, consumers and the various members of the network to find each other free of charge.

But open source is far from being just the realms of software, as the potential of the concept goes well beyond the development and licensing of computer programs. In fact, the world and the web are full of all kinds of 'source code' – in the form of blueprints, rules or recipes – that define and constantly shape our lives. Technically, however, all such code can be shared (as in many cases it is) and can be tailored to the needs of a particular task or application by anyone who is authorized to do so. Thus, open source projects can be applied to so many different areas of life, be it science, medicine, education, manufacturing, law or even (self-)governance itself. The method has the clear advantage of sharing knowledge and involving a wide range of professionals and society, not only to improve transparency of information and activities, but also to promote the equalization of power

relations and opportunities in the longer term through collaborative participation and community-driven development.

A major limitation to the general uptake of open source projects may be the problem of setting fees – although it should be noted that, contrary to popular misconception, this does not necessarily mean that they offer free access for all. The price may actually be the decision of the producer or the subject of mutual agreement, although in certain cases a product or service may indeed be available free of charge. In computer technology, for example, an open source license may require programmers to publicly release the source code, while charging users money for software support and various services.

On the other hand, there are also ways to ensure that the creators of various intellectual or physical products get the recognition they deserve for their work. For example, Creative Commons, a non-profit organization and the platform it operates, makes different types of licenses available to users, where creators must be credited in all cases. At the same time, license holders are free to decide under what conditions they allow the sharing of their intellectual property. Depending on this, licenses are basically a combination of three conditions, which are:

- Share Alike (SA): the reused work must be licensed using the same Creative Commons (CC) license as the original.
- Non-Commercial (NC): the reused work can only be used for non-commercial purposes, meaning that no payment can be accepted for it.
- No Derivatives (ND): the original work can be distributed and displayed, but it cannot be modified.

Based on the above, the dissemination of any kind of intellectual product, such as a scientific article or technical documentation, can be regulated, but not related objects, such as a component part or a complete piece of equipment. For hardware documentation, the most commonly used licenses are CC BY, which allows others to freely use, modify and distribute the original work (even for commercial purposes), and CC BY-SA, which differs from the former only in that new works can only be licensed under the same conditions. Both of these are very close to the spirit of open source, even if they are not technically open source, because the original work must always be acknowledged.

The great advantage of this type of licensing is that, while preserving intellectual property rights, it allows further development of the results obtained, which favors innovation. Nevertheless, the non-commercial use condition severely limits the possibilities for licensees, as they cannot benefit financially from their work. However, most companies are not even willing to give up full intellectual property rights and the potential royalties that go with them, as they are usually looking to maximize their own profits and influence. This is hardly surprising, though, given that the 'doctrines' of economic supremacy and its advocates still have the majority of people and companies thinking primarily in terms of their own immediate interests, while more distant or higher goals are either ignored or pushed to the background.

In other words, it is far from enough to wait and rely on open source and similar projects, but instead – and in parallel – it is necessary to exercise social control over the activities of corporate giants as soon as possible, especially if they are responsible for a significant part of a market or sector. But a conscious consumer society can also, for example, promote responsible media practices. To monitor content, check its factuality and detect manipulation, communities can employ professionals on a non-profit basis who, if not as authorities, can at least act as rating and warning bodies for society. In the longer term, CCS could even lead technology companies and media to develop and deploy ethical tools and programs, and solutions that serve public interests rather than maximizing their own profits, provided there is enough support.

Conscious and organized consumer action is not only appropriate but, as things stand, because of the close intertwining of economic and political interests, it is practically the only realistic way to regulate surveillance capitalism. And it affects not only our shopping and consumption habits, but also fundamentally the way we see the world, and thus, indirectly, our way of life. But by working together, we can ensure that the news is not typically about people being intimidated, pigeonholed, made dependent and vulnerable. Instead of a predominance of news about the economy and politics, why not talk more about achievements, events and happenings that are positive examples and actually move the world forward? Or, in the worst case, each topic would be available on its own platform – the point is to get the current information the way You want it, not the way the dominant minority sees fit.

CCS can of course also do a lot to improve the quality and durability of traditional consumer products, as well as to protect and preserve real values through proper organization and advocacy. The general problem is illustrated by the case of the furniture market, which (like other sectors) is increasingly flooded by mass-produced, low-cost products from multinational companies worldwide. It is also true of furniture, among other things, that if it is made with less or cheaper materials, it is less durable and will need to be replaced much sooner. This in turn means that, overall, due to the much shorter lifespan, in the long term, the use of materials will be higher and more frequent compared to more durable furniture that can serve its owners for a lifetime, i.e. the forest area lost to logging is also larger.

In addition, cheap furniture – like cheaper products in general – can be dangerous: in recent years and decades, many children have been injured by unsafe furniture (especially unstable and therefore overturned dressers and wardrobes), and, unfortunately, sometimes even killed. However, consumers can, as they have done, draw attention to the problem, so that others do not have similar accidents or buy the same product. (In fact, if the manufacturer does not react properly, they could even put the company itself in a very difficult situation.) Moreover, with the necessary cooperation and support, they can force the introduction of binding standards to which all manufacturers must adhere.

Apart from the various advocacy organizations and online tools, building and strengthening consumer and shopper communities can also be a significant step towards quality and value preservation. For the time being, these are mainly found in the market for locally produced food, where local producers are favored over global suppliers and traders. They also have an exclusive preference for products made from healthy, natural ingredients, free of biotechnological, industrial and chemical processes (genetic engineering, preservation, use of fertilizer and other artificials, etc.).

But why not apply a similar strategy to other products, consumer goods, or even machinery and equipment? With the help of the appropriate online platforms, it is now relatively easy to bring together buyers interested in purchasing the same or similar goods (for end-use purposes), even grouping them according to their product preferences. This not only allows preference of manufacturers that offer the right quality or durability, but also makes it possible to get better prices when buying in bulk. In addition to quality, other considerations can also be taken into account, including the possibility to reduce the use and proliferation of single-use plastics and other polluting and harmful substances. But organized purchases can also bring us closer to ensuring that availability is in line with real needs, which in turn is most effectively achieved through a controlled economy (see later).

As already mentioned, CCS can also indirectly promote fair treatment of employees, in particular by supporting through its purchases those companies that have fair and civilized practices and provide decent working conditions for their employees. But this alone will not be enough to bring about radical change, to end discrimination, racism and other injustices, and to level the playing field in the workplace and minimize social inequalities. Therefore, Dear Reader, it is inevitable that we act more consciously on the other side, that is, on the part of the employees, in order to protect and enforce the long-term interests of workers and society as a whole.

Although the general trend over time is for employees to become more aware, in low-regulated market economies the will of managers to maximize profits and minimize costs predominates. And with the law overwhelmingly on their side, it is little wonder that in recent decades, workplace advocacy has been weakened worldwide, and its main instrument and mainstay, trade unions, have been disbanded or severely weakened. In some countries, in various crisis situations, including during the coronavirus outbreak in 2020, policy makers introduced legislation that gave companies additional benefits, at the expense of workers. As a result, employees – especially less esteemed ones – have lost bargaining power vis-a-vis their employers, making them vulnerable to them and to changes in the labor market, and their benefits have also fallen farther behind those of managers. (According to a survey in the United States, for example, wage inequality has increased by 13-20% for women and 33-37% for male workers over the past 40 years, due to the decline of unions alone.)

But with better organization, by strengthening trade unions and working closely with conscious consumers, a greater influence can be achieved not only on future earnings, working conditions other conditions, but even on the basic operation and strategy of companies. Like our societies, the gradual democratization of various organizations, including companies, is a natural process in an evolving civilization, in parallel with the general increase in people's awareness.

Conventionally, however, the management of companies usually works on the same principle as the army: senior managers set goals and tasks, which are then assigned to their accountable subordinates, who do the same to their subordinates, and so on. This is called a top-down system – although it may also be known from textbooks as an autocratic management style –, which can have the advantages of efficiency and speed, provided that decision-making is well founded and implementation is smooth through the levels. The downside is that weak or dictatorial leaders lack trust and loyalty to management, and employees often do not feel ownership of the goals or methods set, which can lead to much lower levels of enthusiasm and satisfaction.

At the same time, young Millennial employees, who can be said to be at least partially conscious, increasingly expect their employers to stop seeing them as tools, whose only job is to do the tasks they are given without saying a word. They like it much more when an organization tries to make them feel that they are an important, even indispensable, part of the bigger picture, and that they can voice their own opinions and ideas from time to time. In other words, they want to play an active role from the get go in setting goals and determining the tasks and solutions needed to achieve them, which is a characteristic of bottom-up management, also commonly referred to as a democratic leadership style. Information and feedback from employees plays a key role in this, so there needs to be constant conversation between the top and bottom levels, as well as between managers and subordinates. The structure of such systems typically relies on independent teams with different skills and experience, which are self-governing, so that virtually the firm as a whole, rather than a narrow group of managers, is self-governing.

One of the criticisms of bottom-up management is that employees do not have the same qualities and experience as managers and that they cannot see the big picture in the same way, so they are less reliable in setting goals and tasks. On the other hand, the distribution and fragmentation of decisions can slow down business processes, reducing efficiency and productivity. But this is far from certain, given the right motivation, level of collective consciousness and willingness to cooperate – in fact, many people are more willing and creative when they are involved in company processes and decisions, rather than being told what to do without listening to any reservations. While the egos of equal partners can sometimes lead to clashes, clear rules and consistent adherence to them can usually alleviate the problem. And if You are worried that it is often too difficult and time-consuming to choose the best solution from the many different ideas and opinions, either take a vote, or

hope that the rapidly evolving artificial intelligence will soon help You make the optimal decision…

But why couldn't we, Dear Reader, take advantage of both approaches? The two are by no means mutually exclusive, even within the same organization, it is just a matter of finding the right place and time for the right application. While the final decision is made by a few people, the rules can be tailored to the given level, and the different tasks are carried out through individual ideas and the sharing of information, knowledge and experience. Increasing the knowledge and developing the skills of all those involved is important exactly because the more workers there are with good qualities and experience, the more likely they are to find the best solution together. Nonetheless, wise and trustworthy leaders are always needed to hold the system together and show the way in difficult or questionable situations.

The point is that there should always be adequate checks and balances in the system to avoid gross injustices and overly one-sided, biased decisions. A company – and indeed any organization – is in everyone's best interests if all its processes are fully transparent (i.e. you can see exactly how and why things are done) and if managers are as accountable as any employees (i.e. they are as liable when they make mistakes). If all of this can be promoted through CCS and collective consciousness, as well as unified consumer and employee action, then the corporate culture based on exploitation and elitism could gradually be replaced by a democratic community culture based on equality.

The ultimate goal could be seen to bring the producer and consumer sides virtually on the same side, minimizing conflicts of interest between them, which would also lead to the elimination of the constant pressure to sell, the 'pushy' and manipulative culture, and the vitally important reduction of waste. Market competition, driven by existential opportunism, would be replaced by cooperative competition, ensuring the continuity of development and innovation. Then, supplying the population with goods and services, their appropriate quality and availability could primarily be ensured by collective consciousness (if it reaches that level at last). At the same time, human imperfections require an economic system that is regulated in such a way that constant feedback and intervention continuously corrects mistakes while guaranteeing the necessary efficiency.

The control of the system as a whole, and the balance between companies and their employees as well as between businesses and consumers must be ensured by the state or regional authorities through legislation. But if it is not to do so in a biased way, civil society must also have some control over politics – in other words, governments themselves must be transparent, and politicians must be accountable in all circumstances. In essence, a balance between top-down and bottom-up organizational concepts need to be enforced in the case of the state as well as local authorities. The best way to achieve this is through constant communication and feedback between the parties, and by replacing the more or less autocratic style of governance that still characterizes most democracies today with a system that is truly democratic, which requires and encourages much greater citizen par-

ticipation. For this to happen, however, a radical change of approach is inevitable, which I will explain in a later chapter.

After all this, it may be clear to You as well, Dear Reader, why being part of CCS is not just about doing your homework on what You buy, from whom and for how much. But if You think about it, looking into the manufacturer or service provider of every single product – especially as a private individual – would be a rather unrealistic, almost impossible, expectation in the current circumstances. Instead, the normal, civilized solution would be for every single company in the economy to operate in a fully transparent way, so that there is no doubt about their ethical practices that truly serve society and the environment. The power of publicity and cooperation can often work wonders, so it would also serve the cause of reducing inequalities, and thus increasing social sustainability, if incomes and benefits were made public, as well. Not to inflame tensions (which are being deliberately swept under the rug), but to expose the grossly exaggerated differences that are unacceptable in civilized coexistence, as long as they are not reduced significantly.

In the light of the above, perhaps this is the best way to sum up the attitude of CCS members: people who do not allow profit-driven organizations (with the support of biased and corrupt politicians) to dictate unilaterally what and how they consume, nor what conditions they work under, especially if that serves to maintain an otherwise unsustainable consumer society. Neither as a matter of principle nor with our common future in mind do they allow themselves to be manipulated, addicted and being pulled on a string, nor do they allow themselves to be taken advantage of. Their consumption and purchasing habits are essentially determined not by their instincts, but by their real needs and awareness, and their decisions and behavior are as much in the interests of the community as their own. In fact, they probably already suspect or even know that if the corporate sector and politics do not care enough about the problems of the unfolding crisis of civilization and environmental and social sustainability, society will have to act in a more conscious way to force the necessary changes.

And if consumers become more conscious, they will have more and more influence on economic and political developments. With the rise of conscious consumption, and the emphasis on balance and serving real needs rather than growth, the role of disproportionate profit-seeking, which that pushes everything else down on the list of priorities, could be diminishing. Instead, society would increasingly value and reward efforts that benefit the community – not just one person or group, but humanity as a whole, including future generations.

But to overcome these times of crisis, we need a culture that rewards selflessness and collective consciousness, as opposed to materialism and the accumulation of wealth, all around the world. However, consumers are only one side of the system – instead of being essentially money-making machines, companies should also focus on their real purpose, and what they need to do to achieve them. At the same time, CCS, which can act as a coun-

terpoint to unilateral corporate domination, profit-hunting and injustice, can also play a decisive role in transforming motivational systems, given the right organizational structure and support. There is something we must realize, though, Dear Reader: in order to truly represent the interests of stakeholders, advocacy must always be organized by them (rather than by some centrally run bureaucratic organization), which is basically true in all the different fields – be it consumer protection, trade unions, civil rights organizations or something else.

In the light of all this, it can be said that the notion of a conscious consumer society is actually nothing more than a catachresis: if a significant proportion of society consciously buys, consumes and behaves, then it cannot really be called a consumer society anymore, the essence of which is virtually unlimited consumption and constant economic growth. From this point of view, CCS can rather be seen as a first step towards a society in which entrenched materialism, the vicious circle of maximizing money income and consumption, is not the most dominant driving force, just as the economy or money itself is not an end but a means. If we ever manage to achieve this – and let's hope we do, otherwise our whole civilization may regret it –, then we will more likely be talking about a conscious (civil) society held together by collective consciousness, as opposed to a continuous and (self-)destructive cycle of exploitation that is driven by existential opportunism.

So while the present belongs to corporations motivated by money and greed and to power-hungry politicians, the future can clearly be one of communities based on mutuality and humanism – if we really do something about it, that is.

Cutting Our Coats According to Our Cloth

Whether or not we are conscious consumers or citizens, living on it means that we need to be aware of the limits of our planet, and therefore of our own lives and opportunities. As I have already outlined in the part Gloomy Prospects, our Earth has finite resources in time and space, which is especially true for non-renewable resources. That means we are not able to extract any amount of minerals, fossil fuels and nuclear fuel from it to power industry indefinitely and feed a growth-constrained economy. At the same time, as we have seen, we are using far more renewable resources today than is sustainable in the long term, even if they are replenished over a certain amount of time. Add to this the population explosion and the resulting overpopulation, and we cannot be sure that we will have enough minerals, forests, soil, wildlife, food or drinking water to meet all our needs in the near future.

This limits our options at the local level, for a small community or a city, as much as in global scales. And even if we have everything we need, minerals need to be extracted, energy and goods need to be produced, food needs to be grown and processed, water needs to be collected and purified, and finally, all these need to be delivered to consumers. It all takes time and human (or machine) labor, which means that goods are usually not available to You immediately – even if they often appear to be just a matter of going into a shop, where You can simply pick what You need off the shelf, pay for it and use it right away. (And if You order online, You don't even have to go to the shop.)

However, far from everyone is in such a fortunate position – and even those who are will not always be, should current trends continue. We therefore need to set limits for ourselves, our communities and our organizations, as this is the only way to effectively reduce our ecological footprint and end the overuse of the Earth as soon as possible. Just as it makes a lot of difference how much we consume, it matters a great deal how much we produce – both in terms of substances that can be highly damaging to our environment (e.g. plastics, but also chemicals, greenhouse and other gases as by-products), and in terms of resources that are limited in quantity or renewable only over time. The fact that the two are not always in harmony is basically due to supply-driven and unregulated economy, which is one of our main tasks to eliminate through optimization. The other is obviously to control and limit quantities as much as possible.

The good intentions of some consumers, important and valuable as they are, are unfortunately not enough on their own, and it is therefore necessary to set a firm framework for the whole economy and all its actors. In this context, the concept of quotas arises inevitably. A quota is a fixed quantity or a proportionate share of something that a person or group is entitled to receive or is bound to contribute. It shows how much each part or actor in the system can benefit from the factor, resource or service in question, or how much of the burden they are required to share.

For example, schools typically receive funding from the state on the basis of capitation rates, meaning that the more pupils they have, the more money they receive. In the case of healthcare, funding based on the number of patients is also a common method. In recent years, the distribution of refugees and immigrants among member states according to quotas has been an almost daily topic in the European Union, mostly because it has not been unanimously supported. (On the one hand, because some argue that it violates the sovereignty of members, and on the other, because it encourages illegal immigration, often resulting in inhumane conditions for migrants and playing into the hands of the smugglers who profit from them.)

On the restriction side, many of us have seen first-hand how, in response to the panic over the coronavirus pandemic, many shops have set a maximum amount of a certain product (e.g. flour, sugar, toilet paper) that a customer can take home to prevent over-buying. Yet it is a long-established practice in trade that countries limit imports and exports of different commodities between themselves in order to protect their own economies and their operators. (This, incidentally, is called protectionism, which is much less common in domestic, federal and EU markets.) And, of course, there are increasingly frequent quotas set under international climate agreements to limit how much carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases participating countries can emit in a coming period. (Which is very useful and necessary, but of little use if the biggest polluters don't always abide by the conventions).

So quotas do exist and are commonly used in practice, because they are needed from time to time in society and the economy if something needs to be regulated. The real question is what and how much we want to regulate... Experience has shown that when it comes to setting quotas and limits, the elites or the so-called ruling class, tend to take the lead when it is not directly about their lives (see the EU refugee issue) or when it is in their interests (e.g. import tariffs), but when it is a question of limiting their own options, they are usually much less enthusiastic and cooperative.

When it comes to restricting consumption, for example, the self-regulating capacity of a supply-and-demand market economy is nowadays generally invoked. As it happens, the response to the sharp rise in gas and energy prices on the world market is also mostly presented as a positive, as it reduces people's energy consumption, thus promoting conservation and protecting the environment. The problem is that, in a free market, without external intervention, higher prices – often artificially maintained by the companies concerned and their shareholders (not to mention politics, wars and other influencing factors) – have to be paid by the much poorer millions of the population, as well, which they are often unable to do, or only at the cost of serious sacrifices. Less often mentioned, naturally, is the fact that consumption can be curbed – perhaps even more effectively – by penalizing its excesses. So a much fairer solution is not to let prices go up – especially for services that provide basic necessities such as electricity – but to set, for instance, a threshold

above which you pay more per unit of consumption, depending on the size of the household.

Since such and similar solutions are detrimental to the vested interests of the rich and the politicians of the ruling class, it is hardly surprising that they are very rarely introduced. It is true that philanthropy and support for important causes is very much in vogue these days among billionaires, who sometimes spend large sums of money to help those in need or to invest in environmental causes, for example. What is most rare, however, is that they voluntarily give up the vast majority of their wealth or income, or the extreme luxuries that go with it, simply because that money is needed more elsewhere. Not to mention the billions (of dollars) that finance the spending of politicians, the purchase of resources, the arms trade or, god forbid, drug trafficking and other illegal activities...

While doing a web search on quotas, I came across a definition used in computer technology that happens to also perfectly capture the essence of the concept in general. According to this, a quota is a limitation on the use of resources imposed by the operating system. The purpose of quotas is to prevent a poorly written or malicious program, or possibly user from hijacking some resources and compromising the system. Quotas are primarily set for disk and memory space, as well as processor usage.

Why is this definition so revealing and versal? Well, if we take a closer look, Dear Reader, the individual components can be substituted without further ado for the individual factors and actors in society: thus, a badly written program can be equated with corporations operating on inappropriate or flawed foundations (polluting the environment, making people dependent and exploiting them, etc.), a malicious software with organizations that perpetuate social inequalities and the current power relations, and such users with billionaires who prey on the majority and own a large part of the money and wealth. The system is, of course, society itself, and the operating system is what makes it all work – primarily politics, but also the entire state bureaucracy, which instructs, serves and sometimes even 'freezes'. And the parallel itself can be seen as a one-to-one correspondence, because a computer system, be it a network of countless machines or even a single machine, has finite resources, just like the human population of the Earth or a smaller or larger community, settlement or country – although in case of the latter, we do not call the different resources disk space, memory space or processor time.

The example is also expressive because it perfectly illustrates the concept in which the proportional and fair distribution of access rights ensures that the system can function without interruption. In such a system, errors, rather than being swept under the rug or left to pile up, are corrected almost immediately, so it is virtually inconceivable that its units could not have access to the resources they need for a longer period of time. Yet they cannot use much more than that, either, as they would then take them away from other units, which therefore would not function well or at all.

Humans are obviously not machines, so they have emotions, instincts, desires, and consequently often biased, partial, random behavior, which we have to take into account only

to a minimal or no extent in computer science as an exact science of reality. But since we essentially have to share the planet and its goods in the same way as individual units share the total capacity and resources of an IT system, the principle is the same – so the laws of nature and the 'power of numbers' apply to us and the ecosystems populated by different living things just as much as they apply to inanimate computers, a company, the climate of a continent, the weather of Jupiter, the movement of the stars in our galaxy, and even the behavior of the entire universe. And even though the latter may be infinite according to our current knowledge (or lack of it), our economies and societies, which share the Earth's finite resources, are certainly not.

You may of course rightly ask, Dear Reader, if our systems are fundamentally dysfunctional, how is it possible that they are still viable. The key word is once again sustainability, as has been mentioned many times, i.e. *how long* they are viable. As humanity has only recently reached the limits of the planet's capacity, this was not such a problem in the past, with far fewer people sharing the same amount of resources – and with the pressure on our environment sufficiently distributed globally, the system only occasionally broke down at the local level. (See the fall of classical Maya civilization, which recent research suggests was mainly due to overpopulation and an agricultural crisis caused by sudden climate change.) When we were far fewer in number, we did not interfere so much with the processes of nature, nor did we produce so much greenhouse gas and other harmful substances and waste in such large quantities that climate change and pollution and destruction have now begun to drastically alter the conditions of life on our world, which seems but an isolated oasis from outer space.

It is true that within a computer (at least for the time being) individual elements of the system cannot be reproduced, but in our world, in relation to society and the environment, this is only possible up to a certain limit and within certain limits. Therefore, in the case of the latter, it is equally true that as the number of errors increases, the system becomes more and more difficult to correct or bypass, until it reaches a level where it could collapse at any moment. We must therefore acknowledge that as long as we are 'tethered' to the Earth, we are limited in space and time, so we cannot reproduce, consume and expand without limits as long as we like, as much as our habits or our desires dictate.

It also implies that, instead of unsustainable growth, we need balance and stability in our societies and our environment, because the long-term viability of our habitat depends on it. And although we do it anyway, it makes a hell of a difference how we intervene in the processes of nature. We need to be as aware and in control of the processes of our world as possible, because once they get out of control, it will be incredibly difficult, or possible only at great loss and suffering, to stop or reverse them – if they can be stopped at all.

Those with greater wealth and power tend to oppose regulation because they feel in the saddle, which also increases their – usually false – sense of security. But the more rules

and restrictions, the less room they have to maintain their privileged position, and the more difficult it is for them to accumulate wealth and possessions, which goes against the very insatiable drive of many. It is no coincidence that they generally seek to set, or at least greatly influence, the rules and frameworks that today define the corporate sphere and politics in the same way as the alliance of interests between the nobility and the royal court or the church and the state did in the past.

Obviously not only those with the greatest wealth and power are among the opposers, since generally nobody likes restrictions. But think about it, Dear Reader: the more of us there are, the more limited our living space becomes. Today, more than half of the world's population, over 4 billion people, live in cities, and the UN estimates that this number could reach 7 billion by 2050. In some cities, congestion is already so high that real estate prices have risen dramatically, leaving many people with minimal living space. In Hong Kong, where there are around 7.5 million people, it is common to find small rooms in micro-apartments, where occasionally two people share no more than 2.6 square meters (28 square feet). Meanwhile, the overall wealth of the city is not decreasing, and some people live in huge apartments or 'palaces' of hundreds of square meters, often with several rooms, bedrooms, bathrooms and other facilities, where the living space per person is also one (or several) order of magnitude larger than the 1.4 square meters (15 square feet) sometimes found in the so-called 'coffin homes'.

Although in other cities this problem has largely been avoided by legally imposing a minimum floor area for housing, or by providing prefabricated houses, for example, overcrowding is becoming a serious problem in more and more places. While this is already a common issue in Asia's major cities, it is only just beginning to unfold in sub-Saharan Africa, which is on the brink of a population explosion. But while there are also more and more urban dwellers, the rapidly expanding mass of people seeking habitat and livelihoods are also appropriating ever larger areas of wilderness. This in turn brings them into daily conflict with indigenous wildlife – including lions and elephants –, and, in order to protect their assets and in retaliation, they often kill animals that are increasingly endangered due to their dwindling numbers. And by destroying rainforests and natural vegetation, they are not only destroying our planet's slowly renewable resources at an alarming rate, but also indirectly contributing to climate change.

At the same time, many people are not only looking for a place to live, but are also increasingly moving around: in addition to work or family ties, the number of travelers looking to relax, enjoy and see the world has been rising almost steadily for decades. (Only events such as the 2001 terrorist attacks, the 2008 economic crisis or the 2020 pandemic – and the latter by a very drastic amount – have been able to halt that momentum.) Although this is a very positive trend from an economic point of view for those involved in tourism and transportation (e.g. travel agencies, airlines and shipping companies), those who make a living from tourism in the places visited (hotels, museums, guides, other local

services and communities, etc.) and the economy of those countries in general, the increased volume is becoming a major problem in many respects.

One of the biggest problems is that an increase in the number of people always goes hand in hand with an increase in the pressure on the environment. Increased traffic, industrial, communal and other activities increase pollution (of water, land, air) and the amount of waste generated, which has a devastating effect on the surrounding wildlife. Due to the areas that are bulldozed and populated by tourists and the people who serve them, the forest and plant cover decreases or disappears completely, and the animals are pushed out of their natural habitats, which, in addition to upsetting the balance of the given ecosystem, threatens the survival of indigenous species. (Unless they become prisoners locked up, shown off and forced to entertain tourists, which mostly brings them nothing but misery.) Increased resource depletion can also put excessive pressure on fresh groundwater supplies, and soil erosion can threaten not only local wildlife but also people's lives through subsidence, flooding following major rainfall events, mudflows and other disasters.

Furthermore, increased tourism is not only an opportunity and a source of income for the local population, who also have to face certain negative impacts, which are far from negligible. Tourism often increases prices, whether for products (including basic goods), services or even real estate. Overcrowding can also increase aggression and conflict, and lead to increased crime, especially in poorer cities and countries. However, the work and earnings opportunities provided by tourism may not help to reduce social inequalities, as the jobs created are mostly entry-level, low-paid positions with few opportunities for promotion. On the other hand, most of the revenue often goes not to the of locals, but into the pockets of various companies that dominantly exploit the potential of tourism, or into the coffers of central government, often located far away, in the form of taxes. Reliance on tourists' money can also backfire, as many people have experienced, including lately with the 2020 COVID outbreak.

Finally, tourists themselves have to face the downside of congestion. On the one hand, the sight of lots of people and crowding is not usually what most of us like to travel for, especially when we want to see and experience something more thoroughly, something unique and special, with its own particular atmosphere. (Did You know, Dear Reader, that nowadays it is kind of normal having to stand in line to get to the top of Mount Everest during the climbing season?) Increased traffic and use also puts a strain on the visited sites themselves, which can eventually threaten their integrity or very existence. For example, Australia's Uluru (formerly known as Ayers Rock), instantly recognizable by its distinctive red sandstone mass, has been reduced to a desert by the inappropriate behavior of large numbers of visitors, and the regular defecation has even wiped out a local shrimp species. A seemingly trivial problem, such as the constant high humidity caused by the breath of so many tourists, was enough to cause King Tutankhamen's famous ancient tomb in Egypt to

degenerate, so it had to be closed in 2014 and replaced by a life-like replica for visitors to see.

It is no coincidence that by now, the caretakers of many attractions and national parks, including Macchu Picchu and Yosemite, have limited the number of visitors, while Bhutan, Venice and others have imposed visitor taxes and fees for similar purposes. To prevent even more serious problems, Amsterdam, Barcelona and other cities have held back on large-scale tourism developments and promotion, as they already attract just enough travelers. In fact, there are various ways to ensure the sustainability of tourism (ecotourism, green tourism and circular economy, community tourism, accommodation sharing and couch surfing, etc.) but the unlimited reception and service of tourists is certainly not one of them – nor is the pursuit of a quick return on investment and the maximization of profits. Why? Simply because no tourist destination, be it a natural attraction, a historical site, a cultural event or even a whole city, can receive an unlimited number of visitors at an unlimited pace, without any negative consequences for the destination, the environment or the population.

And that's the thing about anything in a crowded place (planet), or any community of civilized beings: if You want to be part of it, and You want it to work well, You can't do whatever You want, whenever You want. It is true that in a democratic society, everyone should have the right to move, to express themselves, their desires and opinions, but only as long as they do not infringe on the rights of others, as long as they do not cause harm to others and to society. So, in theory, everyone has the right to travel (to a given destination), but think about it, Dear Reader: what if everyone wanted to exercise this right at the same time?

If general prosperity and living standards are rising worldwide, the natural consequence is that the number of people who want to travel and who can afford to do so is also rising. But if someone is not allowed to travel where and when they want, we can already talk about their rights being restricted. This contradiction can be resolved by trying to give everyone the opportunity – as much as possible, equally – within limits. Or do You think the solution is to maintain poverty and misery by all means, so that the wealthy can continue to enjoy their various privileges, along with those they have in travel and tourism? Would that really be a humane or civilized strategy, worthy of intelligent and sentient beings?

Beyond the humane aspects, adherence to which can make a society truly civilized, extreme inequalities will not be sustainable in the long term for other reasons. On the one hand, because they can cause problems such as a deterioration in the general health of society, a drop in education, or even a (potentially fatal) breakdown in economic stability. And, as we know, high levels of inequality can lead to a lack of trust, solidarity and unity in society, and reduce people's willingness to act for the common good, while the number of violent acts can rise significantly, putting at risk the very civilized way of life that we as-

pire to. On the other hand, as one crisis after another comes along, the poorer and more vulnerable will find themselves in an even more difficult situation, and many more will face an existential crisis, until finally many will snap and revolt.

In today's democracies, policies that try to avoid this are generally futile attempts to keep poverty and inequality at bay, as they will inevitably increase with the onset of another crisis. But even if we expect democracies to be eclipsed in favor of autocratic governance based on dictatorships – a possibility that frightens not only me, but possibly others, including perhaps even You, Dear Reader –, the awareness of people in more developed areas is inevitably on the rise. And these people will not tolerate, until the end of time, to be manipulated and dominated by those who expropriate much of the world's goods and wealth – not only in the present, but also in part in the future, by snatching it away from others.

Social inequalities, on the other hand, can only be minimized or at least reduced if we eliminate or transform essentially all practices that contribute to their persistence and growth. Just as we need to limit the amount of resources we use to curb the overexploitation of the Earth, the use of plastics and other pollutants to protect the health of the planet, and greenhouse gas emissions to stop climate change to ensure environmental sustainability, we need to set a framework for reward and redistribution of wealth for social sustainability. The two things, as mentioned earlier, are closely related.

One part of the problem is that aspect of human nature that makes (almost) everyone want to make as much money as possible, and the goods and services that can be bought with it, with as little effort and as little work as possible. But even more worryingly, despite the fact that this is hardly the basis for a truly civilized set of values and social norms that promote equality, the current widespread attitude that dominates our lives around the world not only endorses but reinforces this trait. Seeing that while some people live in luxury on the mere money they make from the percentages and royalties they earn, or even the clicks they get on the internet, those who do decent physical work with their two hands, who work day in, day out on a production line or in an office, are often unable to make a decent living on their salary, You have probably also wondered why You should slave away day and night when You could be get by so much easier. Especially when in our distorted, out-of-touch values, it is fully accepted that there are grandiose differences of several orders of magnitude in how much money we can make, which is another major component of the problem.

This is primarily due to the rise of an extremely liberal and permissive mindset that is indicative of neo-liberalism, which identifies freedom above all with the freedom of business, proclaiming that liberty is based on economic independence. The idea can be traced back to the idea of natural rights considered inalienable by the founders of the USA, which were considered the right to life, liberty and private property. There is no problem with this in itself, but it must be seen that the idea of economic independence is essentially no more than an illusion. For in a civilized society, life is precisely about interdependence,

with reliance on each other being a constant feature: I trust that You will give me what I need, and in return, You will get what You need from me (or, if not from me, from a third person).

In practice, this means that within an organized community, it is not the individual that is self-sufficient, but the community itself: some grow crops, some fruit; others keep animals, while still others build houses, install electricity, design machinery, write newspapers and books, and so on. Moreover, in a technical civilization, individual communities often need the help of other communities to provide what they need: factories to make tools, computers, furniture, medicines and all sorts of other products; hospitals to heal them, schools to educate their children, circuses and theatres to provide entertainment, and so on. (The less something requires a specific technology or skill, the easier it is to provide within a community.) However, when some people acquire much more for themselves – that is, they own much more wealth than others and are free to dispose of it – the balance is upset and the 'playing field' becomes highly unequal. For significantly more money and property in our material-centered world means much more power and influence, which also provides opportunities to exploit, oppress and ignore others.

In fact, the owners of capital and productive assets are as dependent on workers as workers are on them – without them they would not be able to continue their economic activity, and thus would not be able to generate income and profits. At the same time, the former can generally exploit and benefit from the dependency of the latter much more easily than vice versa, as the majority of workers and citizens individually have relatively little money and influence. So unless they stand up for their common interests in a conscious and organized way, they are unlikely to bring about substantive change – especially in a world where business and politics are primarily concerned with their own interests. (If we get to the point where machines are doing the majority of the work, the dependence of the owners on their workers may cease to be an issue. But that would still leave the livelihoods of the jobless and unpaid and the stability of society an open question.

By protecting the right to private property and free business beyond reasonable limits, the laws thus protect the inequalities and insecurity of existence that are natural parts of social Darwinism and existential opportunism, but which can be at most the cancer that devours everything (and eventually itself) in an organized society. In this framework, fundamental rights such as equality (of opportunity), security (of livelihood), human dignity or freedom of work exist only on paper, but in reality they are never considered as rights with permanent and definitive protection, such as private property or freedom of economic contract. Indeed, nowadays, common practice sees the successful application of these economic freedoms as the key to promoting other aspects of freedom, which is quite simply absurd, as it ignores any commonsense reasoning or consideration – not to mention humanity.

Accordingly, it has become the prevailing view that the measure of freedom is simply how easy or difficult it is to run a private business, ignoring that the size and influence of a

business, once it is up and running, can be virtually unlimited. (Although state authorities sometimes prevent the merger of larger companies, in many cases gigantic mega-corporations and conglomerates in a monopoly or near-monopoly situation can still be created.) In this concept, a good policy is one that protects the free functioning of the economic arena by preventing the poorer majority from benefiting from the wealth and privileges accumulated by the more successful and wealthier elite through systematic legislative policies and constitutional limits on government powers.

As we have seen in relation to the conscious consumers society, in a liberal market economy, the dependence between producers and consumers is also very one-sided, as we and our habits are indirectly controlled by politically backed corporations, which have much more power than individual consumers. Naturally, producers are also dependent on consumers for their income, as they rely on their purchases and other 'consumer activities' (e.g. web clicks, ad views, word of mouth marketing). Nevertheless, businesses under pressure to sell do their best to make consumers addicted to their products and services, and then maintain and exploit them for as long as possible.

So, while we pollute the environment at an alarming rate with our forced and often unnecessary purchases, we also support the wasteful, irresponsible and unjust economic practices and their practitioners that perpetuate social inequalities. This kind of supply and profit-driven material cycle does not seek balance and harmony in relation to our environment either, because the constant need to grow, which is seen as the engine of the economy, always puts the accumulation of material goods as the first priority, despite all of the environmentally friendly technologies. And, if we add to all this the impact of the system on the human psyche, the futile search for happiness in consumption and the emotional-mental emptiness, we may finally see its utter unsustainability.

I don't know about you, Dear Reader, but in light of the above, it does not seem to me to be an exaggeration to consider as one of the most serious errors of Homo sapiens to believe that it is an integral part of human freedom that everyone should acquire and possess as much material wealth as they can. Just as it is an extreme and unrealistic idea that we can do anything we want at any time – which in today's context could be interpreted as meaning that money can buy practically anything. Although this misconception has been ingrained in people's minds almost everywhere thanks to globalization, freedom in a civilized society is not really about this, but about sharing wealth fairly and equitably, ensuring equal opportunities and minimizing insecurity, in order to find happiness and fulfillment through social relations and self-development.

To this end, the freedom of the individual is of the utmost importance, as I have repeatedly stressed – but it must never exceed or limit the freedom of others, now or in the future. The need to limit our personal rights is precisely to ensure that this does not happen, or at least happens as rarely as possible. The principle of reciprocity must apply as much to our human relationships and social systems as it does to society and nature, otherwise

there can be no question of equilibrium or harmony in the long term. Consequently, as a member of a truly civilized society, You should consider your fellow human beings and your environment in almost every decision You make, because if You don't, You are not only undermining Your own future, but also that of others.

Unlimited or minimally limited personal freedom is therefore as much a liberal delusion in an organized society as is the idea that a liberal market economy is sustainable in the long term. For the economy should not function as a money-making, scrounging and exploiting machine that squeezes everything out of resources and people, but as a structure that ensures the stability of society and the environment. This is why a system is needed to regulate the various factors and actors in the economy, so that no one can misuse the environment or other people, while unilaterally dominating them (through much greater than average wealth and power).

But if the economy is not properly regulated, then hardline opportunists will eventually get their hands on everything and expropriate it – even things outside the Earth, on other planets in the Solar System – land, resources, even whole planets. Businesses with minimal constraints and social accountability are always primarily motivated by their own profit, even if some of them keep the common interests in mind more than average – in other words, they operate exactly as the dog-eat-dog rules of existential opportunism and social Darwinism dictate to them. But if we allow too much power to be concentrated in the hands of a few, we have to expect that our future will essentially depend on them, while we will have little or no say in how things are decided. That is why they, and economic actors in general, should not be allowed to function in the context of existential opportunism.

At the moment, however, the trends that allow ambitious corporations and billionaires to play a dominant role, even in strategically important sectors, seem to be gaining momentum. They often do this in the spirit of philanthropic charity and out of a desire to promote progress, while concentrating so much money and power in their own hands that is almost unimaginable for the average person. Perhaps the most prominent among them is Elon Musk, the American inventor-entrepreneur who is credited with increasingly successful companies such as Tesla, which is revolutionizing transportation and energy, and SpaceX, which is on its way to conquering space. But other companies he has founded or taken over of are also doing serious research in crucial sectors for the future, such as medicine, robotics, artificial intelligence, or brain-computer interfaces to enhance human capabilities by combining the advantages of biological and artificial properties.

One of the things Musk has in mind is to provide a high-speed internet connection from anywhere on the planet using so-called low Earth orbit satellites, which he has already started to launch and deploy under the Starlink project. However, full coverage will require thousands or tens of thousands of such devices – a considerably large amount compared to the total number of satellites orbiting our planet in 2020, which was just over 2,500. (Even if the Starlink units are much smaller than most of them.) Furthermore, vari-

ous countries and other companies are also planning to deploy similar systems, with OneWeb having recently submitted an application to the US authorities for authorization to launch 48,000 (!) satellites.

"What's the problem with ubiquitous, high-speed internet access?" You may ask. In particular, the lockdowns and new practices caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have increased the load on the web and the need to connect to the internet, so there is no doubt that we need all the extra capacity we can get – not to mention the places where access to the network is otherwise difficult to provide. Nonetheless, wireless interference that may occur between different satellite fleets may interfere with or hinder the operation and efficiency of the internet service, the economics and affordability of which may be highly questionable. And from the point of view of space exploration, it is perhaps the least of our problems if the artificial saturation of the night sky with light-reflecting structures greatly hinders the observation of celestial bodies from our Earth through telescopes (or even with the naked eye). That is because the large number of satellites and other devices in orbit, and the space debris that has accumulated over decades, threatens to cause a chain reaction of high-speed collisions, which could soon make it impossible to launch further space assets or human spacecraft.

At the same time, competition for space could pose an equally serious problem in terms of social inequalities, if it is likely to increase rather than reduce them. For example, in the case of satellite internet access, known in professional circles as LEO (Low Earth Orbit), there is a major concern that the gigantic costs of deployment will give a privileged position to private owners, who will have a monopoly or at least be in dominant positions in the market. In some cases, this can put them above not only individuals and their local communities, but also nation states or even any confederation of states, through their technical and material influence, and the dependence that this creates. As weakened and indebted governments are often no longer able to support and promote science and innovation to the extent they used to, private individuals and their companies with the necessary motivation and background can easily expropriate entire sectors. (The dependence of democratic governments is illustrated by the fact that the United States was unable to put a man into space on its own between 2011 and 2020, and from 2020 onwards continues to rely on private companies, while leaning on them to launch not only scientific missions, but also military ones.)

Although this may lead to an escalation of geopolitical rivalry, it is far from certain that it will be in the interests of ordinary people. For many people, there is no alternative to accessing the internet – especially if the local government is not involved in its development. However, since LEO satellite reception requires rather expensive equipment, only existing telecom operators can provide the necessary infrastructure in the less developed regions, which is not a significant improvement compared to the past. Other, equally cost-intensive technical sectors face similar problems, whereby disadvantaged people – wheth-

er we talk about particular communities, municipalities or entire regions – may not be able to take advantage of the opportunities offered by innovation, or much less so.

The fundamental problem is that technical and industrial innovations and their biggest promoters often ignore environmental and sustainability considerations, or at best give them secondary importance to growth and profit maximization. Yet, they are usually not made to change their priorities by governments – in fact, they use taxpayers' money to finance their expansion through state subsidies, to which even military spending can contribute. In addition to the crucial issues of web communication and data security, the development of military applications raises the very serious dilemma that it is relatively easy to strike from space – given the necessary tools and weapons, of course, which are not cheap at all – at any point in the world, potentially threatening the lives and security of all of us.

Generally speaking, with the financial and economic support of taxpayers, and with the profits from our dependence on consumption as well as the use of the data collected through the web, the tech giants of our time are seeking to militarize, colonize and privatize space. What do the two have to do with each other? Well, it is a fact that Google, which has a significant influence over the internet – and through it society – is the third largest shareholder in SpaceX. And Amazon, another major player in this field, is owned by Jeff Bezos, who is not only one of the richest men in the world, but also the founder and owner of Blue Origin, a company as interested in building LEO satellite systems and conquering space as Musk-led SpaceX. It is not difficult to see the power of these companies and their owners, who are leaders in many areas of technology, while politicians are unable or no longer willing to prevent their expansion.

Thus, the growing influence of the private sector raises serious questions about space travel and the future accessibility of space, which are now a major concern for experts. Whereas previously only soldiers, pilots, engineers, scientists and doctors – the people governments deemed most qualified and talented – could become astronauts, nowadays you need almost nothing more than a lot of money, or a rich relative or friend. And as well as exploration and increasing our scientific knowledge, there is now equal emphasis on adventure and fun – which in itself would not be a bad thing, as long as it is done in a safe and environmentally sustainable way –, the problem is they are accessible only by the privileged.

It is true that as space technology develops, volumes increase and costs are cut drastically, the number of participants could increase. Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine that costs will come down and capacity will increase enough in the foreseeable future to make space access more than the privilege of a small minority. Yet, some billionaires are already planning to colonize space and other celestial bodies: Bezos, for example, wants to build space stations inhabited by millions of people, while Musk dreams of colonizing Mars on a similar scale. On the other hand, as owners and managers of profit-oriented businesses,

they are obviously hoping for some kind of financial gain, but it is questionable what they will spend it on.

If it becomes possible for these people and their enterprises to colonize Mars, for example, or to privately exploit the almost priceless quantities of valuable raw materials available on the Moon, asteroids and other celestial bodies, You can be pretty sure, Dear Reader, that this will further increase social inequalities. Although the Outer Space Treaty, signed in 1967 by 104 countries, prohibits all participating nations from expropriating space or any celestial body, the role of private companies is much less defined. The document, which contains just 17 short articles, essentially leaves it up to each country to interpret and enforce the letter of the agreement.

This, among other things, enabled the US Congress to approve a law in 2015 on the competitive commercial use of space, which allows private companies incorporated in the US to keep essentially anything they find in space. (In fact, in a 2020 executive order, President Trump called for the promotion of private incentives for the exploitation and use of space resources at international level.) And while the 1967 treaty explicitly prohibits the deployment of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction in space, the concept of weapons of mass destruction has not been clarified. In other words, until a much more comprehensive and specific agreement is reached, to which all major powers subscribe, the principle of 'first come, first served' will essentially apply to the use of space and its resources.

While private companies would certainly contribute to economic growth by exploiting resources in this way, they would also be likely to push our planet's ecosystem into an even more desperate state by increasing industrial activity and overall consumption, however much they might promote the use of environmentally friendly technologies. For this fundamentally changes nothing about the locust-like nature of the liberal market economy, which is driven by existential opportunism: if it is not constrained, it will sooner or later devastate and devour everything around it. If it is allowed to do it in space, it will do so there, too, just as it is already doing on Earth at a very advanced stage. Even though the Space Treaty stipulates the protection of other celestial bodies from 'contamination' with terrestrial life, and vice versa, the protection of our planet from potential alien organisms, it does so in vain if it is not specified how and within what framework all this should be done – just as no universally accepted law, regulation or agreement on Earth specifically defines how its wildlife and resources are to be saved from the rampage of the mushrooming human race.

So what happens in outer space can have as serious consequences for us as what happens on our home planet. That is exactly why our extraterrestrial activities should be as much about sustainability, equality and security as what we do on Earth. And while the private sector is increasingly powerful in both areas, it is far from certain that it is making wise or ethical choices for all of us. But just as the internet, like all other resources on Earth, can

be managed for public benefit, the same is true for space and the resources of other celestial bodies. While a good example of the latter is the International Space Station and international space research organizations and collaborations, the case of the B4RN can be considered exemplary in relation to the World Wide Web.

Broadband for the Rural North, an initiative in the north of England, delivers 1 gigabit per second internet access over fiber to homes in a region that the local market dominated telecom companies consider economically unviable. B4RN's ability to provide affordable internet access at speeds many times faster than the commercial average is based on an investment not only in local capacity development, but also in community engagement and commitment. (As opposed to the version offered by LEO-satellites, in which citizens act solely as consumers dependent on the service provider.) B4RN's success is also helped by the fact that the profits generated are invested locally, empowering communities rather than the already swelling coffers and influence of distant corporate giants.

Solutions created in a similar spirit, although slowly increasing in number, are unfortunately still a minority of cases. Social utility, however, is an aspect that we cannot compromise for the sake of our future. Therefore, if governments and the dominant players in the corporate sector are not willing to change priorities, it is up to civil society to force and actively promote it, including through non-profit organizations and movements. In order to finally achieve sustainability, we must not allow profit-oriented organizations and their leaders to have sole control over the issues that shape our world and our future, so we must limit and control them in some way.

This means, on the one hand, that the 'conquest' of space must take place primarily through joint financing, and under the strongest possible social supervision. Space exploration and the discovery and utilization of other celestial bodies must be carried out in the framework of closely coordinated international cooperation, rather than allowing unilateral exploitation by some. At the same time, similar principles should apply to the accessibility of the web and technology in general, in which international or even supranational organizations can play a key role to ensure that appropriate regulation and enforcement is in place. They would allow us to share tasks and to concentrate and distribute resources in an equitable way, with maximum respect for the needs of the environment and society, both outside and inside the confines of our planet.

Thus, space and the internet can, as it did at the beginning, give humanity renewed hope for shared progress and prosperity, and for a more just and equal future, without poverty but full of opportunities. Otherwise, the competition for profit, individual advantage and geopolitical power may lead not only to extreme inequalities, to an even more radical deterioration of the circumstances of consumer society and surveillance capitalism, but also to unlivable conditions on our planet in the short term, from which we will not be able to escape into space, either. Therefore it is of utmost importance whether we let the otherwise inevitable globalization continue to flow along the path of existential opportun-

ism, or whether we try to control it and prioritize reciprocity and the harmonious prosperity of our communities and societies.

To this end, power must be given to communities, but always in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, which states that if a task or problem can be solved by a particular person or community at local level because of their direct involvement, it should not be decided at a higher level, especially by excluding those affected. Conversely, when this fails, it is necessary to subsidize, or help out, those at the lower level, not in a spirit of exploitation but in a spirit of solidarity. This essentially means a bottom-up social structure that gives rights and imposes obligations on individuals, communities and states (or federations above them), which in turn requires individuals, communities and states that are capable of limiting themselves. This ensures that decisions are taken at the level to which they are most relevant, while guaranteeing the principles of fairness, proportionality and transparency, with the necessary solidarity and cooperation.

But remember, Dear Reader: as long as money rules above all, there will be billionaires and mega-corporations that will play a dominant role not only in the economy, but also in politics and the exercise of power, with little or no accountability. That is why big capitalists and their government allies should not be allowed to make arbitrary decisions on issues that affect society as a whole or the fate of a particular community without the involvement of that community, while simply appropriating the resources and the benefits they generate. To achieve this, we must insist on limiting the amount of wealth and power that can be concentrated in one hand, which is not only a perfectly logical step, but also essential if we are to curb the unsustainable and potentially catastrophic expansion of the liberal market economy in time.

The most important aspect for the entire system is the involvement, commitment, engagement and active participation of all stakeholders, which includes not only employees, local community members and consumers, but also company managers, owners and investors. If one is merely an investor or businessman, one's primary goal is usually not to create something worthwhile, but to make money, which is far from always beneficial to local communities or the majority of society, especially in the long term. For example, putting cheap, single-use plastic products on the market may be an easy and quick return on investment in terms of profit, but it can cause serious pollution to a community and its environment. But it is no coincidence that the big movie studios are creating less and less value these days, either, as they tend to play it safe and repeat the same templates in the hope of making more money with minimum risk.

However, while a company manager or a (certain type of) financial adviser exists as a real occupation, a 'businessman' or 'investor' is actually no more than the designation of a social status. But to build a society on statuses in the long run is basically like building a house of cards... The reason why we must not allow too much power to be concentrated in too few hands – or, if You prefer, in private hands or in the private sector – is exactly that in a well-functioning society, companies should serve the interests of communities and

society as a whole, not the interests of a narrow group or stratum. It is therefore high time for individual utilitarianism to be replaced once and for all by the social utilitarianism that is essential for sustainability. To this end, it is unavoidable that the future of management is geared to creating real value and meeting real needs, rather than to the unrestrained profiteering of money.

If at this point, Dear Reader, You point out to me that it is impossible to precisely define abstract concepts such as 'real value' or 'real need', I must agree with You, at least in principle. Although it is extremely difficult to concretize or quantify them, as they are largely subjective terms subject depending on judgment, they do have some objective meaning. If, for instance, we replace 'real needs' with 'realistic needs', the formula becomes simpler: in a given community, country or planet, it is in principle possible to roughly determine the amount of resources available at a given moment or period, which, divided by the number of people, gives the amount of goods that can be provided (maximally) for one person. From an economics point of view, we could say that we have a certain number of people who need X amount of goods and Y amount of services, which on the cost side consumes V resources and Z amount of money. Since all of this can be quantified, it is really just maths – at most, we need to agree on prices and how much goods and services are needed (to meet basic needs).

And the issue of 'real value' can also be approached by looking at the things that promise the greatest social utility. In this interpretation, the greater the social utility of something, the more people it proves to be useful to for the longer time. Luxury yachts are at one end of the spectrum in this respect, as very few people in society can afford to enjoy them, while there are far less people with interest in their production than there is money in the business. Plastic cups or nylon bags, on the other hand, are used by many people around the world because of their cheapness and practicality, but they also contribute to serious environmental pollution, which in the long run may cause as much harm to humanity as a whole as they currently do good. But if we look at hospitals or schools, there is no doubt that they are of enormous social benefit to almost all of us, both now and in the future.

As the above examples show, economic and social value can be radically different in many cases. The most important thing about social utility, however, is not to define exactly what it means – which is almost certainly impossible –, but to strive for it and to check that it is always achieved. And the presence or absence of the necessary attitude is only a matter of socialization...

So, while an important element in the reduction of social inequalities, the thorough taxation of substantial wealth and profits is not in itself sufficient. In decisions on investment and enterprise strategy, the communities concerned (and civil society as a whole in the case of general involvement) must have a say, which means that they participate in the economy as equal partners. This requires a continuous dialogue and feedback between

society and companies. The point is that the use of company assets should not only be decided by those who have an interest in generating and maximizing profits, but also by the local, residential or consumer communities concerned, as well as the employees involved in production. This kind of control can also ensure that a significant part of the benefits generated does not accrue to the pockets of private individuals (often not directly affected), but is reinvested in the development of enterprises and communities, with maximum consideration of environmental aspects.

At the same time, we need to be opportunistic (collectively) for the sake of progress and innovation, and the ideas, inspiration and contributions of visionaries like Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos and similar innovators are much needed – because ultimately, it is their initiative and drive that moves the world forward. Therefore, in the interests of operational efficiency, company directors could to some extent continue to be given a free hand to make decisions on various investments, ventures and projects, as long as they do not lead down a path that would be highly questionable or of concern for the company as a whole or for social utility. However, accountable decision-making, with proper community and citizen control, would also better distribute responsibility, while preserving decision-makers who can take effective initiative and action rather than the paralyzing bureaucracies. Thus, the advantages of both top-down and bottom-up management strategies, as mentioned before, could be brought to bear at the same time.

But from the moment someone sets up a business, it takes a lot of people's work to get it off the ground – because no matter how much money an entrepreneur invests, it can never achieve significant results and growth without the active contribution of others. It is therefore unrealistic for one or a few founders and owners to have sole control over the capital and assets, including the workforce, of a company that has grown and prospered. In practice, this should mean that they do not have complete freedom in deciding to sell the company or parts of it, the dismissal of large numbers of employees or their wages, or in rewarding managers and themselves.

Since social injustices and inequalities can only be minimized or reduced by eliminating all practices that contribute to their perpetuation and growth, there is a need to control and limit incomes, rewards and various private payments for all kinds of organizations. In the case of wages, in addition to the fact that the same amount of money is paid for the same job, the maximum pay for different positions in a given field should be set by law, while minimum amounts should also be determined. For example, the salary of a senior manager should never realistically exceed that of the lowest-ranked employee by more than a factor of ten (or even five – this is probably a matter of social consensus), while a middle manager should consequently fall somewhere in between. Where incomes exceed the established ceilings, the existing surplus should be distributed among those earning less, thus ensuring minimum and competitive... or rather, fair wages that allow a decent standard of living, worthy of civilized beings.

It is also important to regulate the maximum amount of other benefits, as all income and payments should be transparent (i.e. public), in the interests of fairness. The aim is not to increase envy but fairness and to minimize injustice: if everyone knows exactly what work or performance is worth how much money, there can be no dispute. This would also immediately highlight unjustified and illegitimate differences due to discrimination based on gender, color, origin and other grounds, which would be a significant step forward in the fight against social inequalities. But such regulation would be futile to expect from our leaders, who are interested in the world of money and therefore biased, so it must be achieved by trade unions working together at national (and even international) level, with the effective support of civil society. Instead of single-rate taxation, which is also grossly unfair to lower earners and the poorer, the practice of banded taxation, which is more onerous on higher incomes and property, could be introduced in a similar way if governments are not willing to do so themselves.

The problem with individual control over large sums of money is not only that it gives its holder too much power and influence to unilaterally impose his will on others, but also that it guarantees disproportionately high consumption potential compared to that of others. While many people – even those working for the same company – do not always have enough money to cover even their basic needs, those with much higher incomes and periodic bonuses, or who hold a considerable amount of shares can buy many more products and services, often in a way that even extends to the luxury category. It is also extremely unfair in the sense that much more private property – apartments, cars, yachts, private planes, etc. – usually comes with a much larger ecological footprint, which is accepted and generally ignored in most societies. I don't know about You, Dear Reader, but I for one think that allowing some people to live in much greater luxury than others (or in fact, the majority) is not just environmentally or socially unsustainable, but simply unacceptable in a truly civilized and progressive society.

For that reason, however much this may displease the proponents and beneficiaries of material wealth and private property without limit, we must also strictly regulate and restrict the transfer and inheritance of private property, in order to avoid the accumulation and maintenance of blatant private wealth that greatly exceeds the average. As in the case of wages, we need to establish, by social agreement and through the relevant economic calculations, the maximum that can realistically be sufficient for a comfortable living for a person (or a family) in given circumstances, but not too disproportionate to the wealth of those living at the lowest, expected minimum level. For amounts above this, and for movable and immovable property, any transfer or inheritance should be in public ownership, while ensuring maximum transparency and accountability. Thus, methods of hiding assets such as transferring property to a second cousin, a baby, a dog or a cat would no longer be very effective – although some of the taxes may become avoidable, it could successfully prevent the transfer of larger assets in one go.

Our ultimate goal could be that after a certain (preferably as little as possible) period of time, the general attitude shifts from approving or even deifying unlimited accumulation and private property to a value system that sees public service and social utility – which we might even call social profit – as a real value. By reforming the current culture of consumerism and hedonism that is focused on pleasure-seeking and individual success, we might even get at least some of those with disproportionate wealth to give up their excess possessions of their own accord. (Not just small crumbs of it, as in the case of the much-publicized aid and charity, which is part image-building and part conscience-soothing.) Especially if it becomes the example to follow in the renewed culture, while the exaggerated possession of material goods and money will be considered embarrassing, instead of being seen as a wishful dream or status symbol.

But until we get there (if we get there), we must ensure that wealth and financial conditions do not fundamentally determine our lives, preventing our economies and societies from functioning as optimally and sustainably as possible. Among other things, the aforementioned legislation would, in turn, allow that over time companies become largely publicly owned – helping to ensure that money flows to where it is needed most, rather than to the private wealth of individuals or to unsustainable practices. Depending on the size and scope of a company, this can mean a local or wider autonomous community, a region or nation-state, or even, in the case of a global company, the entire international community.

This would obviously be strongly resisted by many of the founders and owners, led to believe that everything they have achieved is purely their own doing by the current practice of taking for granted the sanctity of private property without limits. This may be true in some cases – but for the majority, what matters is the social value of the company and its usefulness to the communities concerned. If this is the case for a particular product, group of products or services, or even for the company as a whole, it should enjoy maximum protection, especially against products, services or companies that are much less useful or more harmful overall. The management of companies could continue to be entrusted to the founder or the principal owner (or their representative), with social participation and accountability, subject of course to the restriction that none of the companies' assets could be used for private purposes above a level of income and benefits that is fair and proportionate to those of others.

Within a suitable framework, premium brands could continue to exist in a certain form or function, provided they represent real value to society and a sufficiently large consumer base. One way to do this is to produce and distribute them in an environmentally friendly and sustainable way, with an affordable price for most. At present, a good-sounding, well-established brand name alone can in many cases lead to a much higher price being charged for a 'luxury product' compared to the average brand (clothing, perfume, food, etc.), which is usually only affordable to a privileged minority, and which may not be justified by the cost of production or even the content itself. And there is the case of specialized products

and services that are genuinely very costly and which, because of some real quality feature or performance, actually stand out from the rest.

The best example of the latter is perhaps offered by premium car and motorcycle brands, which, instead of mass production, are usually manufactured in very small numbers, using much more expensive parts with the help of more serious expertise. These are arguably more popular around the world than any other luxury product, yet (partly for understandable reasons) their horrendous price and limited availability mean that very few people own them. And if the huge social inequalities and the staggering number of people with private wealth could be substantially reduced, the number would approach zero, which would also mean that at some point such vehicles would be owned at most by certain organizations.

At the same time, as much as we love to admire these graceful, streamlined and often futuristic-looking vehicles, let's face it, Dear Reader: it would actually be better if Ferraris, Lamborghinis and their ilk were not to be found on the streets but on the race tracks, where they really belong. On the one hand, they have no place on the streets because in public traffic, especially with amateur drivers behind the wheel, it is impossible to take advantage of their extreme speed skills, at least without endangering the lives of others. On the other hand, the need to show off and flaunt them as status symbols may still be very high for some people today, but society as a whole has no need for this at all.

Nonetheless, I do not believe that the world of motor racing, and professional sport in general, should be buried, even if the companies and with them the current sponsorship systems were to undergo a major transformation. Sporting events are a source of recreation and social activities for many of us, and sometimes they can be an unforgettable experience – just think of the incomparable atmosphere in a stadium full of sports-loving people. Additionally, they can inspire regular exercise and a healthy lifestyle, teamwork, the love of technology and more.

Thus, among other things, the professional tennis circus that I love so much could go on, as well, albeit on a communally financed rather than a strictly profit-oriented basis, with a much more equitable remuneration system, because even professional sportsmen and women should not be allowed to be disproportionately rewarded compared to other members of society. When the winner of one of the more prestigious tournaments alone pockets around $1.5 million (or more), while the runner-up makes roughly half that amount, and the losers of the previous rounds are compensated likewise, it is again a manifestation of the distorted values of money-centric thinking on value creation and the elitism that sustains the celebrity culture. This may be a serious prestige issue for the sponsoring companies or other organizations involved, but in terms of social justice and sustainability, it would be much better to distribute much lower sums with smaller gaps (say $15,000, $13,000, $11,000, etc.), so that the total prize money would not need to be astronomical, either.

In the case of professional sportsmen and sportswomen, of course, You also have to take into account that in most cases they are not able to continue their careers until retirement age, but they still need to live on something after finishing their careers. But if the current existential opportunism is finally replaced by a nurturing society which, through its philanthropy and community institutions, does not in any way allow them to fall into misplacement and impoverishment – by providing them with different positions, job and retraining opportunities, basic benefits, etc. – they will no longer be forced to accumulate enough to support themselves for their entire lives within their relatively short careers. However, instead of corporate sponsorship, which is usually profit-driven, athletes need to be supported by their communities – especially until they are able to run and finance their own training, equipment, travel and other costs associated with their profession. (Though in motor racing and other technical sports, manufacturers could also play an active role, especially if their products are in the spotlight.) In any case, it would only benefit sports if in the future it were much less about money and the astronomical sums involved (including the Olympics and other large-scale international events), as it is slowly killing the essence and enjoyment of sporting competition.

However, this is not only true for sport, but for essentially all similar 'services', including different forms of entertainment. So, just as we can organize impressive sporting events in the future, we can also produce large-scale films, for example, without the need for private investment, if we have the public will and the right support. Moreover, the production costs could be much lower if actors did not have to be payed multi-million dollar star fees. (While at the same time, society would make sure that they do not live in insecurity even when they are out of work). If the culture of consumerism were to recede over time, the huge marketing costs could also be eliminated in a management system that is no longer or much less burdened by sales pressure.

This does not mean, of course, that there is no need to attract viewers to the music or sporting events or (internet) broadcasting, without whom no service can be economically viable. But costly marketing campaigns, which can often generate exaggerated interest (giving an unfair advantage to the more capital-intensive companies for the time being), will become less effective over time as consumers become more conscious. Therefore they shall be gradually replaced – and in some cases have already been replaced – by word-of-mouth and social networking advertising and reviews, while traditional advertising is slowly losing its role as a source of demand-boosting and revenue.

All of this consequentially leads to the fact that the now generally used sales and financing strategies will become obsolete, so they – together with supply-side economics – must be replaced by needs-based, demand-driven, but regulated and optimized management. (Assuming we can get rid of manipulative, targeted and personalized advertising and its effects through the exercise of social pressure and control.) It is a fact that nowadays the majority of businesses rely on advertising for their survival, which means that they would obviously be in a very difficult situation if it lost its function. However, this is a similar

case to that of fossil fuels: the big energy companies are obviously not happy if demand for coal, oil or natural gas falls, but sooner or later they too will have to switch to renewable energy sources. In time, companies and websites that rely on advertising will also need to change the way they operate (see subscription and other solutions), but society can give them maximum support, for example through community funding.

In parallel with the elimination of the dominance of the 'pushy culture', we must review all business activities that predominantly do not serve the interests of the majority of society, but rather gain significant financial profit by exploiting people. In this context, a thorough reform of the banking sector, which tends to have large disproportionalities compared to other sectors, is also necessary. There is therefore an even greater need for openness and transparency in banks and in the financial sector in general, and the so-called ethical or community banks are already a kind of model to follow. These institutions, which usually operate at local level, give citizens a say in their operation, and are thus able to successfully achieve a refusal to finance questionable objectives, while favoring the promotion of activities that are beneficial to society (environment, health, education, research and development, culture, etc.).

If such banking practices could become widespread, financial institutions could also serve environmental sustainability, stability and predictability rather than economic growth. The phasing out of credit cards and similar financial instruments that encourage consumption and indebtedness, and the promotion of education on responsible financing, would further contribute to reducing social inequalities. And although community banks are typically smaller, local financial institutions, in the future there could just as well be an 'ethical', common bank for a region, a sector or even the whole world, based on the principle of subsidiarity.

An even more blatant category of unilateral profiteering is gambling, which contributes to the common burden through taxation, but a significant part of the revenue is pocketed by the owners, shareholders and managers of the companies. (The issue with jobs will be discussed later.) Thus, they are not primarily in the interest of consumers or players, but of the service providers, because such systems – whether it is a casino, lottery, horse racing or anything else – invariably work in such a way that the overall revenue is always much higher than the winnings paid out, while players are constantly encouraged to keep playing. So in the case of gambling, we must also see that it is not just the game itself that causes addiction, but the system that runs it.

Gambling addiction, however, can blight or destroy the lives not only of individuals, but of entire families and communities, due to the debt, impoverishment, and the symptoms and stresses that accompany addiction, sometimes leading to violent behavior. But an even bigger problem in our societies today is that, in general, any of us can find ourselves in a similar situation, suffering from some form of addictive consumption, while, as we have already seen in the previous chapter, we are in a certain sense inherently vulnerable to

profit-oriented corporations. To counter this, we must definitely work to change legislation and limit the scope for business – but our intentions must be reflected not only in our words but also in our actions, because as long as there is sufficient demand and revenue, there will always be supply, too.

So if we ourselves sustain the system, we need to step out of its constant, self-generating and self-perpetuating cycle. We must therefore say no to 'unlimited' consumption and replace it with constructive and genuinely important habits and activities that help us meet our real needs – social, spiritual, self-actualization and others – at the higher levels of Maslow's pyramid. In the meantime, of course, we have to take care of our basic needs, but gambling or impulse buying is definitely not one of them. However, I have good news for You, Dear Reader: there are plenty of other interesting, meaningful, useful and enjoyable activities that can be just as fulfilling, while being far less damaging to Your health, Your relationships, Your wallet and the Earth itself...

Leaving bad or harmful habits behind and finding something else to replace them with is obviously not easy, especially if the addiction is more serious or the options are very limited. A common problem, especially in rural areas, is that from childhood onwards people know only one way of being, from which they cannot or do not really want to break away – so we can see examples of people clinging to their small village, their farm and their animals, even when they are given the opportunity to see the entire world. But even if they feel that they cannot identify with anything else, most of the time this is not the case.

Change, as usual, can indeed be extremely difficult. But the fact is that we all have many different gifts, talents, abilities and interests, we just have to bring them out somehow. We may need a lot of help to do this – but in a nurturing society, this is a task that, if not self-evident, is certainly achievable. The necessary financial support should be essential, but effective help with life skills should also be provided through competent professionals. Serious gambling addicts also need to be treated and rehabilitated in the same way as alcohol and drug addicts (and free of charge), just as compulsive consumers and shopaholics need to be shown the way to find pleasure in other things. Moreover, as already mentioned in relation to education, everyone should be given this opportunity from an early age, and the support to be able to find their identities and their place in society – especially as the changes in our fast-paced world mean that they are increasingly forced to adapt to new situations.

The current crisis of civilization, and the ever-increasing number of crises situations in relation to that, if you like, are creating exactly such circumstances, which we can no longer live in the irresponsible and virtually limitless way of the past in order to manage and survive them. This requires both awareness and, by its very nature, a degree of sacrifice and abstinence, not just for the wealthiest and those living above the average, but for all of us. Justice, proportionality and sustainability can only be achieved if we are able to set lim-

its for ourselves, which applies to society as a whole, but always starts at the level of the individual.

It is clear that this is often very difficult to do, because it is partly against our nature. Nonetheless, we all know from experience that our desires and interests don't always coincide – no matter how delicious chocolate is, for example, eating too much of it can eventually have a detrimental effect on our health. And if there is simply no more of something available, or if it is so destructive to the environment that it can no longer sustain it for long, then we have no choice but to 'cut our coats according to our cloth', indeed.

Although it may not seem obvious yet, we must understand that we are already in a global emergency. This is true even if it is not what is usually communicated to us, but rather that we should keep consuming, and think as little as possible. In the meantime, however, we are not only going into debt to companies and banks, but also to our environment and each other... So either we pull the reins or we fail: basically, these are the two options that we can choose from. Either we cling to extreme liberal ideas and the illusion we live in – or, on the other hand, an excessive attachment to the past and a fundamentally futile isolation from the rest –, or we ensure the sustainability of our civilization, but the two will not work together.

Even if You have not agreed with me so far, Dear Reader, perhaps You now understand that restrictions are an inevitable part of any civilized community and society, and that living together always involves compromises. (Pros and cons, something for something.) This does not necessarily mean that there should be a quota on everything – but rather that the principle itself should be applied in all areas of our lives. The greater the focus on community self-governance and the need for public participation, the greater the opportunity to define the appropriate frameworks. For things to change radically, however, the majority of people need to reach the point where they realize that we need a system or systems that control our daily lives, and that our personal freedom is also somewhat compromised.

As a matter of fact, we already have many such systems in our lives, despite many of us being reluctant to accept the sometimes overwhelming array of constraints. A plethora of written and unwritten rules influence our actions and our thinking almost every minute of every day, in almost every place, whether in public spaces, in different organizations, in social gatherings, in our relationships or even in casual conversation. Even a seemingly informal, simple and fun game like chess or tic-tac-toe is bound by rules, because if every player were to move as they please, the game itself would very quickly become chaotic and meaningless. Without rules, even the most rudimentary communities would not be able to live in a civilized way, as they are essential for almost all common activities – just think of the laws that control our behavior, the tax system for sharing the burden, or the rules for safe driving on the roads.

And in the future, as technology continues to evolve, we will most certainly need more of the same to avoid chaos and keep our societies functioning. These include restricting

and regulating the use of the growing number of drones and quadcopters, which are commercially available in a wide range of sizes and equipment, and which can sometimes be controlled from a great distance by remote control. The problem with this is that the more of them there are, the more accident-prone they become, as they can cause damage to various landmarks, wires, aircraft or even to people and animals in the vicinity in case of a collision. On the other hand, the noise they make can be quite disturbing, especially when the craft is hovering around one's home, and cannot even be silenced without damaging someone's 'sacred and inviolable' property.

But even more worryingly, with their high-resolution cameras, they can be used to invade our privacy, which is less protected by law, or even to spy on one another. This is just enough reason to not be able to use drones in all quantities, without any restrictions or regulations – just as road and air transportation have their own rules, they also needs to be controlled how, when, where and for what purpose they are used. Recognizing this, a regulation on their registration and flight in the European Union was created in 2020, which will hopefully be sufficient to minimize abuses and infringements, guarantee safety, and prevent the excessive presence of privately owned devices in the air.

But if we have recognized the need for a regulated framework for drones and other things, and there are already so many different restrictions in place in our societies, why not accept the existence of similarly strict regulation in the economy? Especially if this is the price of a civilized way of life and peaceful coexistence that is sustainable in the long term. However, because of the 'dark side' of human nature, a system based on and driven by existential opportunism, the accumulation of material wealth and unlimited consumption will never be sustainable in the long term – and certainly not for a technical civilization that is now spreading across its entire home planet and pushing its limits in every respect. That is why we need to advocate a regulated socio-economic system with far fewer environmental impacts, inequalities, injustice and insecurity, which is optimized to focus on equilibrium rather than on maximizing growth and consumption.

The Controlled (Optimized) Economy

As already mentioned, putting the economy above all else is nowadays a common practice, a rule of thumb that is usually above questioning. However, this approach is problematic if only because the economy is part of a much larger whole, within which it is closely linked to both society and our natural environment. And since, by contrast, the economy is not the sum of all living things, but is essentially an abstract concept defined by the flow of matter, energy and money, all common sense dictates that it should serve the interests of the environment and society, not the other way around. (This is why economic sustainability should be part of environmental and social sustainability, rather than those two being seen as part of economic sustainability.)

It would therefore be a great mistake to examine and interpret everything according to the rules of economics alone, on the basis of textbooks on the subject, subordinating everything to them as if they contained some kind of religious scripture. While it is true that they largely list regularities the same way as descriptions of phenomena in other disciplines, such as physics or mathematics, we must not forget that the economy is shaped not only by nature but also by people. That is why we must not ignore other aspects in our economies, taking into account the impact of our activities on the Earth's environment – and beyond – and on our societies.

In order to filter out these effects, it is best to try to determine, without any frills, what the basic purpose of the economy is, without the various human motivations and their consequences. Mere survival in itself is certainly not, as it would be sufficient to lead a similar hunter-gatherer lifestyle as in the days of the primitive community, without any particular productive activity. (Strictly based on the population then, not the much larger population of now, of course.) If we take into account today's expectations of civilized existence, a modern economy is essentially the production and distribution of the goods we need for our survival and well-being through the rational use of resources.

The purpose of the economy is therefore basically nothing more than to provide us with the goods and services we need to meet our needs. Clearly, what we consider sufficient to meet our needs is pivotal, and may even be the subject of heated debate – just as the fact that our needs may differ from individual to individual, community to community, culture to culture. But in the light of what has been discussed before, You may agree with me, Dear Reader, that we need to be cutting our coats according to our cloth, meaning that we must be aware of the limits of our possibilities. Therefore, in a modern understanding of economics, we must not forget sustainability, so our supply of goods and services must be carried out in balance with the environment and with our societies.

In fact, no civilization needs anything else (if the external conditions of life remain unchanged) to survive and to thrive and prosper (not exclusively meant on a material basis or quantitative terms), and it is no accident that there is no mention of any accumulation or permanent growth in the above definition. But if we are also thinking about economics

beyond the borders of our own immediate community or country, or about the conquest and population of other celestial bodies beyond our planet, we can do so in a way that takes maximum account of the resources available and their capacity for renewal, just as we cannot ignore the fairness of the distribution of the surplus wealth produced. However, this requires precise, well thought-out planning and implementation, with careful, continuous monitoring and appropriate intervention, which implies a tightly controlled and regulated system. So in an optimal case, the economy is not a gladiatorial arena, nor a playground or a casino – precisely because it plays a key role in providing for people's needs, as well as the harmonious coexistence of nature and our societies.

In comparison to the above, I think by now we have a pretty good idea of how the market economy is currently functioning all around the world. Since its foundation and driving force is primarily existential opportunism, it is hardly surprising that our economies are full of opportunistic actors who try to get as much money and assets as easily as possible. But even if they are fundamentally responsible participants of the economy, in this system defined by sales pressure, profit maximization is a central issue for most firms and entrepreneurs, which they are prepared to promote even at the cost of drastically minimizing costs, to the detriment of other considerations (environmental, working conditions, jobs, etc.).

With the opportunities provided by the latest information revolution, the 'pushy culture' has now reached the point where we are manipulated as consumers and potential buyers not only in shops and on the street, but also while browsing the internet. This, coupled with people's dependence on (and even addiction to) consumption, has led to a situation where it is often not real opportunities and needs, but artificially created hype, human factors that produce exaggerated reactions, that determine – or at least significantly shape – current trends. When demand for a new status symbol product (e.g. a smartphone) increases to such an extent that it is not available in sufficient numbers to meet demand at launch, it is no wonder that the price of the product or brand becomes unreasonably high.

Due to the low level of regulation, liberal market economies are characterized as much by expectation-based operations as by aggressive marketing and sales. In many cases, as seen in the world's largest stock markets, panic reactions (sometimes unrealistically optimistic or pessimistic) are dominant. It is a bit as if in the event of an impending disaster, say a flood, instead of joining forces and trying to collectively avert the threat and prevent major damage, we all run for the hills, leaving our homes and common possessions unprotected. (Even though in the meantime, we count on someone else to help us out.) Instead of constructive, coordinated problem-solving, our interconnected economies are currently subject to mostly random, often self-reinforcing, chain-reaction-like effects, which significantly increase uncertainty, and are not at all desirable in terms of predictability and stability, for the majority or for sustainability reasons.

At the same time, this is very much to the advantage of opportunists and speculators, who are trying to take advantage of the situation and line their own pockets by amassing huge private fortunes. They say, of course, that high profits are the reward for taking high risks – but this is not the hallmark of a well-organized, long-term stable economy, but of gambling. The fact that the economy is full of randomness is partly a natural phenomenon, since many factors depend on nature, or on people and various processes in our societies (extreme weather, natural disasters, epidemics, accidents, wars, cyber attacks, changes in legislation, etc.). Nevertheless, how we deal with the more or less random and unpredictable effects of these at the socio-economic level is not at all indifferent.

Instead of compensating for them, stock markets, for example, sometimes just trigger self-reinforcing cycles that can destroy people, companies or even whole sectors, or deepen crisis situations (when no one wants to buy, only sell). This is what happened after the credit crunch of 2008, when first the securities of the banks and credit institutions directly involved collapsed, and then, through the interconnectedness of the international banking system, the interests of other banks and financial institutions, the economies of many countries around the world were plunged into crisis. Fearing for their money, crowds of investors went out of business, and the impact of the lack of finance spread to industry and households. It must be seen, however, that it is precisely the lack of adequate collateral behind the sale of mortgage bonds, which had become a booming business as a result of financing without sufficient control, that led to this. This has shown perfectly that when a stock, a bank, a company or a whole sector is doing well, huge financial bubbles can be created (when everyone wants to buy a share of the expected profits), but they can burst overnight, with almost no warning, even causing a serious global crisis.

So, whatever anyone says, the risk is far from being borne only by speculators, but by virtually all participants in the economy. But if, on a global scale, speculation becomes too much of a factor, and we can talk about economies based on financial machinations and basically gambling instead of real processes, this creates a very serious dilemma, because it is rather irresponsible to leave the future of an entire economy, let alone a civilization, to chance. And without proper regulation, the movement of money, which takes place in countless different forms and is often fictitious or can be considered as such, tends to become increasingly disconnected from the real economic factors, resources, labor and other values behind them, resulting, among other things, in mounting debts.

In its current form, the financial sector and the economy it dominates is therefore particularly dangerous and unsustainable because it creates little real value, yet it is a sector that moves gigantic amounts of money and income, which does not lead to stability, but can increase social inequalities. After all, balloon or not, the money it generates can be used to buy all kinds of goods, be it consumer or luxury goods, real estate, companies, yachts, private jets, spacecraft or even an entire army... The advance and apparent isolation of the financial sector, and its elevation – with some exaggeration – above the real economy, does not seem a logical or particularly conscious move from a civilizational point

of view also because it is a sector that is in fact an integral part of the economy. As such, it cannot stand on its own feet in the long term, once the desired equilibrium has been finally broken, but it can lead to the bankruptcy of the whole system.

Don't You think it is nonsense, Dear Reader, that a modern economy should be driven by the expectations and manipulations of economic actors (including opportunists and speculators) instead of where, when, what is really needed (and possible)? Or that, for example, the indebtedness and near-bankruptcy of a single Chinese real estate development giant, the Evergrande Group, in the autumn of 2021, had a major impact on global economic events, pushing international stock market indices into a downward spiral, with negative effects on entirely different sectors? The disadvantages of such an approach are also evident in crisis situations, such as a pandemic. In 2020, COVID perfectly highlighted how vulnerable and unstable the barely regulated market economy is – all it takes is a moderate disruption, and the global economy can no longer perform its function, or can only do so with great difficulty. Especially if it is joined shortly afterwards by a protracted war conflict like the one that broke out between Russia and Ukraine in 2022... Since in the meantime, we are also facing a general crisis of civilization, and that we are likely to face more frequent and more widespread crises in the near future, I believe that common sense logic dictates that we should do everything we can to increase the resilience of our societies and economies.

But to do this, we must be able to channel money and resources where they are most needed. Isn't it absurd if, in an organized society, our basic needs remain unchanged in during a time of crisis, but there is no money for the companies responsible (?) to employ people, so that they can continue to provide their various products and services? Or that we need income as much as ever to meet our needs, but because we can't get money without work, the two things don't meet? What could be the reason for this, if not a fundamental flaw in the system itself?

So there is a lesson there to always help and intervene where there is a shortage, according to the social and environmental priorities of the situation – and not just when the crisis is so obvious that it threatens the viability of the system as a whole. It is also vital for sustainability that long-term thinking and the principle of social utility in the economy replace the consumption and profit-maximizing approach that drives people toward a lifestyle with individual benefit and continuous pleasure-seeking in its focus. The question is, which of the economic systems we know, have tried and tested to date, can be suitable for this?

In so-called modern economics, it is customary to contrast two types of systems: one is a market economy based on supply and demand, and the other is a planned economy determined by state power. (Of course, there are different variants of both, extreme and less radical, but for the sake of a simple comparison, I will now concentrate on the general characteristics of these two.) In case of the former, in principle, free trade between pro-

ducers and consumers shapes the price, quality and availability of different products, while in case of the latter, they are the direct or indirect result of government decisions. As a result, the market economy is usually described as a flexible and dynamically changing system that is best suited to the way nature works, while planned economies are usually referred to as rigid, static, unresponsive and 'unnatural'.

With regard to the latter, we now know very well from the experience of the last century that control by dictatorships is mostly as damaging to the economy as it is to the people – in the systems of planned economy that were considered communist dictatorships, shortages, deprivation and starvation, poverty, oppression, hopelessness and environmental degradation were practically constant. At the same time, we have also seen that the free market essentially gives free rein to money to rule us, which in turn limits our freedom (by increasing inequality and insecurity) and our real opportunities, while damaging our environment through unbounded growth and consumption. If the problem is the excessive lack of regulation, and out-of-touch reality operations and measures imposed on people and the environment in the case of the planned economy, then consequently there must be something in between that can provide a 'golden middle way' to overcome the shortcomings of the two, radically different systems.

China is usually cited as an example of the specific combination of the two types, which, after a harsh and uncompromising post-World War II social cleansing and dictatorship, has in recent decades opened its doors to the world economy and international trade to a virtually full extent, which is not at all typical of a similar approach to governance. The Far Eastern superpower, however, does not really represent a third, different concept from the other two, since its economy itself is largely governed by the rules of the market economy, mostly through privately owned companies, with minimal intervention (although still greater compared to the liberal version). Because the exercise of political power is still autocratic and centralized, the current Chinese system is called by some a socialist market economy, even if it has the main characteristics of a capitalist market economy in its essence and functioning. In other words, what has been created in China could at best be called a mule – part horse, part donkey –, but certainly not a zebra, which, although also an odd-toed ungulate, is a completely separate species.

At the same time, the economies of Cuba and North Korea, which are far from being liberal market economies, are not good examples because they are almost entirely based on the planned economy of communist dictatorships. (The main difference between the two is that Cuba has already started to open up to the market economy in some sectors.) While the systems of these countries are sometimes described as socialist economies, which do not in principle have as their aim the seizure of power from capitalists by the workers, nor do they prohibit the existence of privately owned enterprises, they are not very different in their basic functioning and the fact of a planned economy from the idea associated with communist systems.

However, despite the fact that we cannot really find a socialist economy in the world at the moment, the idea itself is not to be dismissed, especially if we want to ensure social sustainability in the future. As we have seen, regulating the distribution of goods and wealth and limiting their accumulation also seems inevitable in order to achieve environmental sustainability. Placing social utility above individual interests could also be an indispensable prerequisite for averting the general crisis of values and the closely related crisis of civilization. In order to prevent, or at least reduce, the impact of economic problems, natural disasters and other calamities, we need a more humane, people- and community-centered system, which does not promote greater inequalities but a fairer, more need-based distribution system. As the saying goes, it is all in the details – in this case, in who controls the system, how they control it, and how they exercise power.

With the gradual spread of self-government and the increase of people's awareness and participation, centralized power may eventually be replaced by shared power, which, in turn, by no means excludes the cooperation of individual groups at different levels. Instead of a centrally dictated, planned management, the focus of this should be on ensuring the continuous operation of the economy and the supply of goods and services, which can be realized through a controlled system that we may also refer to as an optimized economy. In essence, this constantly monitors the evolution of our needs and, as far as possible, ensures the movement, use and distribution of different resources and goods, by operating complete regulatory circuits. The concept is not simply a socialist, but a scientific approach – not, of course, economics elevated to the level of religion, but using knowledge from other, more specific sciences, such as control engineering and telecommunications.

What we are talking about is effectively a closed-loop control system, with a constant feedback between producers (plus traders) and consumers, companies and their customers. All we need to know about such a system is that it is a closed-loop control process in which the factor to be regulated is constantly monitored, and when a deviation between the actual and desired level is detected, intervention is carried out in such a way that the deviation is eliminated or reduced. A thermostat, for example, is used to keep the temperature of a system (e.g. a room) around a set value. To do this, it continuously measures the current temperature and, if it deviates from the set value, controls the switching on and off of heating or cooling devices so that it approaches the desired value. Such a regulated system may be disturbed by an external (e.g. insulation or opening of a window) or internal (e.g. heat dissipated by various equipment) factor, which must be compensated for – but there may as well be a fault in one of the components of the control system (e.g. the thermostat or the heating unit), which of course also needs to be repaired to restore proper operation.

The individual stages in a feedback control system are:

1) Detection: obtaining information about the controlled process by examining its output (temperature in the example above).

2) Ascertainment: processing the information and deciding if intervention is necessary (whether the temperature corresponds to the set value.)

3) Indication: if intervention is necessary, the actuator is provided with instructions and the necessary information needed to carry it out.

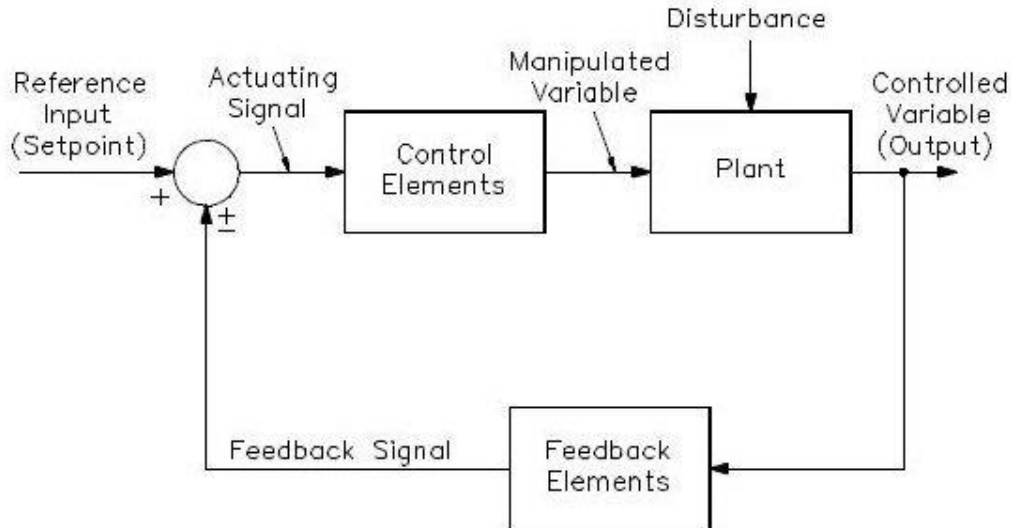4) Actuation: the intentional change of a process characteristic (temperature) in order to achieve the desired value.

Figure 11 - Feedback control system block diagram
Source: Technology Transfer Services (https://www.techtransfer.com/blog/basics-process-control-diagrams)

The illustration above depicts a somewhat simplified outline of the feedback loop, showing its steps and different elements.

If the sketched scheme is projected from temperature control to the economy and its participants, then detection should be understood as the acquisition of information about a product or service by users, i.e. buyers and consumers. They are also the ones who ascertain the quality of the product in relation to what is expected, its specific qualities or characteristics, based on their own expectations and the requirements and standards imposed by law. If the product fails to meet expectations in any respect, consumers indicate the need for intervention to traders, manufacturers and the competent authorities or supervisory bodies. The intervention itself should, of course, always be carried out by the manufacturer (as the 'actuator'), or possibly the trader or other intermediary, as soon as possible – if they fail to do so for some reason, they may be obliged by the supervisory authorities, or they may be put under pressure by various consumer organizations and associations.

Although, as consumers, we indicate our needs to manufacturers and retailers in part through our purchases, they are far from always the same as what best meets our needs. Since in today's economies, companies are primarily concerned with maximizing their own profits, their primary objective is not usually to maximize their ability to meet the needs and expectations of their customers. This often means that a particular product is not

available in sufficient quantities, while other products are so plentiful on the shelves that large quantities are not purchased and become wasted (especially perishable food products). This is not only unfavorable for the economy, it is also bad for the environment – the more energy we use in production and the more waste we create, the more we use up our environment.

It is precisely in order to avoid this that the closed-loop control system needs to be put to work in the economy (as well). To do this, however, companies should constantly monitor the needs of consumers, not just by drawing conclusions from purchase statistics (if they draw any conclusions at all, other than from the point of view of financial returns), but by actually asking them and using the information they provide to shape the various features of their products. Thus, not only the quality compliance of the individual goods can be ensured, but also the synchronization and convergence of demand and supply, and the elimination of large-scale shortages and waste can lead to a more or less optimized economy.

All this presupposes continuous communication between economic actors, which naturally requires appropriate channel(s) for the smooth flow of information, the role of which can primarily be fulfilled by the internet. Sufficient connectivity at relatively low transmission speeds is now widely available in most parts of the world, and where coverage is not yet sufficient, infrastructure can be built to suit local conditions, taking into account the issues discussed earlier. And if not a computer or laptop, then a smartphone can be found in many households today, so it is mostly only those living outside civilization or in extreme poverty who are not in the possession of a device to connect to the web. (Ensuring that the latter catch up, on the other hand, is also extremely important to finally make them part of the economic cycle.)

In the following figure, the channels of information flow between the actors of a controlled economy and their direction can be observed alongside the path of products and services.
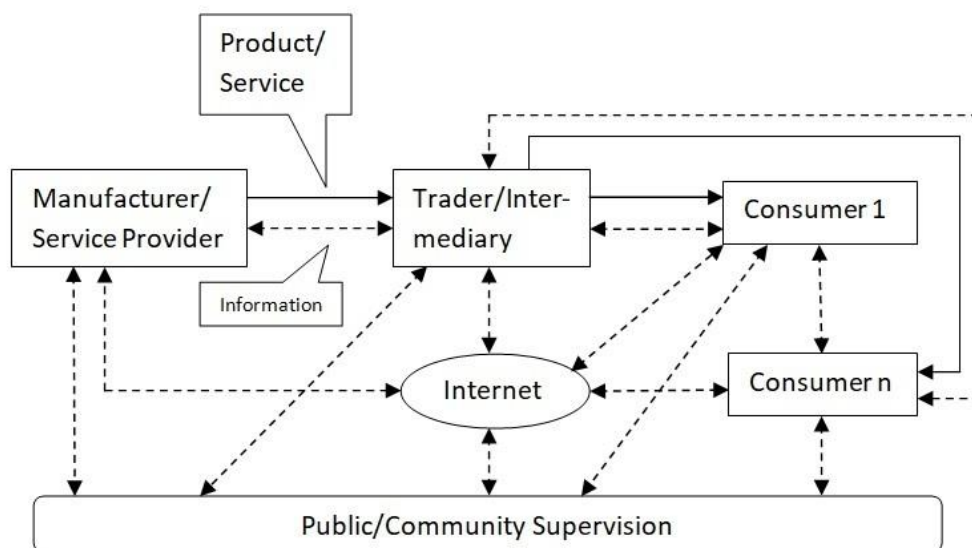

Figure 12 - The flow of goods and information in a controlled economy

An essential element of the system is the availability and transparency of formal channels so that processes can be followed by everyone, at all times.

At the same time, active participation and communication on the part of the public, as well as openness towards the other participants in the economy, are essential – but if in the future we become more aware of how we think and behave as consumers and inhabitants of the Earth, I think this could actually become a reality. The main driving force of the controlled economy is interdependence, and the collective consciousness that allows this to be recognized and taken into account – the initial manifestation of which is the 'conscious consumers society' discussed earlier –, in order to ensure that the goods and services necessary to meet our needs are always available in the right quantity and quality, at a realistic and affordable price.

In other words, if people, as discussed in relation to CCS, massively recognize that they can assert their will as consumers by joining forces, by working together, by building and using the right forums, organizations and channels, in the future they will be able to persuade companies to continue their production and service activities in their interests. Thus, the quality and availability of products will be guaranteed by our collective action as consumers against companies, should the latter fail to meet requirements that are expected and can be reasonably met. For example, if many of us think that the durability of a product (say, a piece of furniture or consumer electronics) is inadequate, or that a service is beneficial to its provider but disadvantageous to us, we could have a direct influence on the company responsible to change their practices in the way we want.

Make no mistake, Dear Reader, this would not mean that consumers can do anything within the system. No company or its employees can possibly be obliged to swallow everything – in particular, bad manners, unrealistic demands and potential harassment on the customers part. (If only because workers must be protected from unilateral dependence, misuse and exploitation in the same way as consumers.) But if communication between companies and consumers takes place through formal and public channels (preferably in a non-anonymous, identifiable way), and telephone conversations are always recorded, this part of the system could be kept under control. Especially if the materials of the communication are also available to the supervisory bodies and competent authorities... "What about personal rights?" You may ask. Well, in a civilized society, they can only ever go as far as You take responsibility for Your own words and actions. (Beside the fact that personal data must of course be protected from abuse at all times.)

Although the control loop outlined above seems rather inflexible, and the state and local governments must indeed keep the system within strict limits, this can only go so far to ensure that the regulatory framework is able to fulfill its function and remain operational. The main role of supervisors is to prevent unrealistic expectations, irregularities and unethical behavior, as well as to ensure the continuity of supply. However, while meeting social needs, environmental and social sustainability must always be the main concern. If,

for example, as consumers we want more durable furniture, there is no problem with that in itself, but if it means cutting down a lot more wood to produce it (especially if there is insufficient supply and legal sourcing), it may not be environmentally acceptable.

Consumer protection, environmental and other organizations would also keep an eye on the process, so that they could use the public to exert pressure on companies or even governments, if necessary. In the meantime, the leaders of the companies and those who belong to their sphere of interest must also recognize and accept that the economy can only work well and be stable if it is kept within a framework of continuous and active participation of all stakeholders as equals, rather than seeking to maximize profits. This includes using data on shopping habits not to impose more products or services on consumers, but to provide them with a better and more reliable service that best meets their needs.

Fundamentally, however, when a controlled economy works well, it is the feedback, demands, complaints and praise from consumers and their communities that determine the need for and the nature of the intervention. If the quality or availability of the products is unsatisfactory, the responsible company is notified, who, after due consideration and preparation, are supposed to take the required action. (For example, they reinforce the soles of mass-produced shoes if there is an objection that they are coming off quickly.) If the situation is not resolved or improved within a reasonably short period of time, the authorities may withdraw the product from the market, or the persons responsible may be questioned, and even removed from their position if necessary. Full and immediate accountability is a critical part of the system, as it allows for both rapid intervention and the effective implementation of economic regulation and optimization.

And if the system is fully transparent, pricing could also be kept under control within certain limits. By knowing the cost price, i.e. the total cost per product unit (materials, means of production, energy, research and development, wages, etc.), it is possible to establish and monitor the margins at which production is still economically viable, and to ensure a fair and equitable income for the employees (and of course the managers) of the firms. The aim should always be to make products affordable for as many consumers as possible, while more expensive goods or even luxuries (e.g. airplanes, boats, real estate, etc.) that require greater investment should be financed by community wealth (as I already mentioned in the previous chapter).

Although consumer groups and advocacy organizations can put pressure on companies if they believe that prices are unreasonably high, they cannot always be reduced or kept low to maintain economic viability if there is a change in the availability of a material or resource due to an external factor (such as a mass death of cattle due to mad cow disease). On the one hand, this must be accepted by the consumer communities, while on the other, it is the right of responsible authorities to make the final decision. Nevertheless, we can certainly join forces to fight against the unfairness of prices determined purely by the distortions of the law of supply and demand, and the arbitrary and unilateral ad hoc decisions of traders.

Abrupt, manipulative price changes, unjustified increases, promotions and discounts, although sometimes useful for one party or another, are always a source of difficulty and annoyance for someone else. If it has happened to You, Dear Reader, You probably weren't too happy when a product You bought at full price one day was half the price the next. Not to mention when a medicine that You have used for a long time and that has worked well is suddenly withdrawn from the market, and You can only buy a new one for twice as much… However, such dependency and vulnerability is not acceptable in a civilized society, either for consumers or for the livelihoods of those employed by the companies that supply them.

While trade between individuals at arbitrary prices is extremely difficult to regulate, this is not the case for commercial activities between different organizations, traders and customers. The price of something can be the subject of a tacit agreement in an entire community or society in the same way as if only two individuals were involved in the process – but since in the former case the sale takes place in public and there are many more stakeholders, it is only logical to expect that all of them should be involved in the price setting process to some extent. An agreement, which would be greatly facilitated by permanent public communication channels, would be in the interest of all parties, as without it the supply chain is blocked or inoperable.

If a consensus is not reached between sellers and buyers, the responsible authorities have the right to decide. The main concern must always be to ensure that no one in the economy is left behind or unaccounted, while at the same time, no one is getting disproportionately rich, either. But if regulation stabilizes the relationship between supply and demand, then in principle, frequent price changes will no longer be necessary. So what is needed is not centrally dictated pricing, which is often completely divorced from reality, but social consensus – just as in the case of incomes.

Or don't You think, Dear Reader, that the truly liberal solution, under the slogan of 'liberty, equality, fraternity', would be to let the totality of the people who make up society and participate in the process determine these fundamental factors of our lives, instead of the law of the jungle in supply and demand and the bias of elitism? If the economy could truly operate in a civilized and democratic way, ensuring equal opportunities, focusing on the community and the common interest, as opposed to taking advantage of each other?

The problem nowadays is that since people have settled down and mostly live together in communities of well over 100-150 people, it has become much easier to circumvent others and the system for our own individual benefit. (The term 'anonymous society', often used in literature, is particularly apt for the 21st century, defined by the general spread and use of the internet, and is therefore even more true today than before.) When our ancestors still led a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, the existence of larger groups was not justified simply because the surrounding area would not have been able to support more people, and the constant migration and search for new territories often resulted in conflicts, just as it does between packs of wolves competing for hunting grounds. But in a community of

around 150 people, life was in some ways just like in a village of the same population to-day: because everyone knew everyone else, people had few secrets from each other, so any fraud, theft or other misdeeds were usually quickly discovered and the perpetrators brought to justice. As a result, it wasn't really worth it for anyone in the community to cross anyone else.

But since a large proportion of people live in cities, and the average village has a population of several thousand, we are unfamiliar with many members of the community, while we have less insight into the issues and processes that take place in the settlement. (If we follow them at all... Not to mention an entire country, continent or the whole world.) In such circumstances, however, it is much easier to take advantage of others or to get away with offences against the community, just as it is generally much more difficult to organize cooperation. In addition to reducing the sense of insecurity that this creates, modern religions are partly a way of ensuring that if we ourselves are unable to punish the guilty, we put our faith and trust in God or some other higher power to do it for us.

Permanent settlement and the development and prosperity of agriculture and then industry have meant that the same amount of land can support many more people. On the one hand, this made the formation of larger settlements possible and more common, and on the other, it led to a surplus of production compared to our needs. At the same time, the accumulated surplus has brought with it the dilemma of distribution among the members of the community, for which there have been countless different solutions and concepts throughout history, but it is extremely difficult to find even one of the commonly accepted practices that can be considered fair. The distribution of the wealth and revenues generated by an increasingly complex and complicated economy was essentially the responsibility of those in power and politicians, be they kings, nobles, warlords, church leaders, mayors or members of parliament.

But just like the politicians who make rules and laws, the people involved in the economy in general are not perfect, so realistically they cannot be expected to act in a fair and altruistic way towards others in all circumstances. Consequently, the only way to avoid gross injustices, inequalities and unsustainable long-term trends is to build and operate a system that eliminates human imperfections. That is essentially a complete closed-loop control system, as outlined previously, with constant feedback and control to ensure that extreme deviations and anomalies are detected, filtered and corrected as soon as possible.

Here I propose to examine the main features of controlled economy in comparison with planned economy and liberal market economy, in which I hope that the summary table on the next page will be of great help. Through this, I would also like to show why and how I think the proposed model can be better than the other two, and why, in contrast, I consider it to be suitable as the basis for a truly civilized and sustainable society.

	Planned Economy	Market Economy	Controlled (Optimized) Economy
Main objective	Political	Material	Social
Main tendency	Survival	Growth	Balance
Main driving force	(Political) power	Competition (but money at least as much)	(Collective) consciousness
Main approach	Supply-oriented	Demand-oriented (in theory)	Real needs- and resource-oriented
Main question	What should we provide people with?	What can we sell on the market?	How can we meet needs with what we have?
Feedback between parties	Nonexistent or minimal	Limited in time and space	Immediate and constant feedback
Main feature	Shortage	Waste	Balance and sustainability (optimal operation)
Main impact on society	Hardship	(Existential) uncertainty	Stability, predictability

Table 1 - Comparison of economic systems

First of all, it is worth contemplating what we might consider to be the primary purpose of each economic concept. The main purpose of a centralized, command-driven planned economy is by its very nature quite obvious: based on current instructions, we can generally speak of some political motivation (increasing foreign policy influence, strengthening the army, winning the space race, etc.), but the ultimate goal is always to keep the system itself alive, while preserving the power of those at the top. These goals sometimes bear no relation to the real potential of an economy – just as when the communist leadership in the early 1950s proclaimed that Hungary shall be a 'country of iron and steel', when the raw materials were largely lacking and the country had previously based its economy on agriculture. Nonetheless, these goals are of course communicated to society as being in the interests of the nation as a whole, while in reality they are carrying out the will of the ruling elite, cementing its position. Thus, governance operating under a system of command economy is basically a game of political survival, which for the majority of society often means that they have to fight for their literal survival, even on a daily basis.

In contrast, a market economy is not content with mere survival, but instead strives for constant growth and accession. Accordingly, the main objective of production and the economy is not political but material, which is also reflected in the shift of the balance of power towards large private companies and billionaires, rather than towards individual politicians at the head of the state. Another tell-tale sign is that the main driver of our lives is now the competition for money and its favors, to which we subordinate almost every-

thing else. And while it is true that we need money for our daily livelihoods as much as for the development of our civilization, we must not forget that the material gains that can be made are also the driving force behind, among other things, the slave trade, as well as the drugs and the arms business. The time has come, then, to start to let go of extreme materialism, and to really see money as just a means rather than us being its means.

The controlled economy, which focuses on meeting people's needs, taking into account the resources available instead of maximizing political goals and material gain (profit), can be a great help in this and in the transition to quality growth. (Which essentially meets the requirements of the donut economy discussed earlier.) In this system, the overriding criterion is social utility, which means that, in addition to ensuring the needs and freedom of the individual, the main value is the extent to which what we do or create serves the sustainable growth of society as a whole. The emphasis here is therefore not on growth (maximum) or survival (minimum), but on creating and maintaining a state of equilibrium, both within our societies and in the form of harmonious coexistence with our environment. This also means that a controlled economy is truly needs- and resource-oriented, i.e. it does not promote either unlimited accumulation by individuals (or communities) or excessive use of resources.

The same is far from true of planned economies, in which leaders tend to concentrate resources on one particular sector in order to boost it, while neglecting others to the point where they may become dysfunctional in extreme cases. The intensive armament in North Korea, for example, costs the country an enormous amount of money (especially with the punitive sanctions imposed by the international community), which is missing in other areas that would serve the basic needs and daily well-being of the population. The regime is far from considering the latter as the most important aspect – refrigerators and washing machines are a rarity in households, and many people are not even guaranteed enough food –, while it expects maximum obedience from all its citizens, and even severely limits the freedom of movement for foreigners who enter the country. A command economy is therefore absolutely supply-oriented in such a way that it could even have the slogan 'it is what it is': what the country's leaders see as good, the people can have, but everything else they have to give up.

Although in theory the opposite is true in a market economy, in practice it cannot be said that demand clearly drives management decisions. Since in this system the economy is essentially driven by the continuity of the sales imperative and the drive for growth, the current demand from consumers is not always sufficient to keep it in motion. Therefore, in the so-called liberal market economies (which are in fact influenced by various interests), which from the 1970s onwards began to operate more and more along the lines of neoliberalism, the use of supply-side economics became an increasingly common tool. This basically means that the state seeks to stimulate production and the volume of turnover of goods and services by reducing or keeping low income taxes and lending rates, as well as

other incentives, in order to promote economic growth through increased sales, improving GDP, stock market indices and similar indicators often cited today.

In light of all this, one can hardly wonder at the rise of the 'pushy culture' that I have criticized before – because of the significant and constant sales pressure in the system, firms are always generating new 'needs', which often do not meet the real needs of consumers. However, effective marketing and PR, which is responsible for customer relations and corporate image, are now as important to a profit-driven organization as real value and performance, because they can help to generate revenues that would be impossible to match without them. Therefore, large and capital-intensive firms usually do not even really need incentives from the government to do their best to maximize the number of purchases and their revenues, and thus their profits.

So the main question of the market economy is "what can we sell on the market?", which it often tries to address by exerting a lot of influence on consumers. As already mentioned, those running a planned economy are more concerned with 'what to provide people with?' – which, in a more direct style, might be put as 'what do we shut people's mouths with so they don't rebel?'. Despite the seemingly striking differences between the two concepts, however, it can be said that in some respects both systems appeal to the same: while in its own way keeping us preoccupied by our dependence on consumption and money, as well as on the benevolence and unquestioning of central power, it actually succeeds in controlling and exploiting us, thus dominating us.

At the same time, a controlled economy is not about dominating people, but about controlling and optimizing the system. Accordingly, its main question is "how can we meet needs with what we have?". So on the one hand, there are the needs of the people, and on the other, there are the resources available, locally, regionally and globally, which we can use at any given moment or time. Although we need to schedule them with maximum planning, so as not to overuse our resources, we need to constantly monitor the state of the system, including the different variables, and intervene as necessary right away. For this is the only way to ensure that measures and corrections are always implemented in line with the actual situation, thus guaranteeing the equilibrium of the controlled system.

So instead of enforcing or upkeeping supply-side economics, we should definitely aim to balance supply and demand – which cannot be achieved in a rigid economy run on the basis of commands that are divorced from reality, or in an economy with free-roaming participants, but only in a regulated system that is constantly under control. Many people consider the currently dominant market economy to be self-regulating, which is perhaps true within certain limits, but in general it is debatable in several respects. To start with, in contrast to a controlled economy, there is no constant feedback, or if there is feedback, it has a limited scope in time and space. What does this mean in practice?

On the one hand, we have seen and see every day in the so-called advanced economies that companies usually try to estimate expected demand at most on the basis of sales volumes, but often still tend to adjust their stocks to the quantities they want to sell (some-

what similar to planned economies). Customer feedback is usually only taken into account for quality assurance purposes by companies, but most of them do not do this in a continuous and proactive, truly organized way. However, this attitude often leads to oversupply, which can result not only in huge surpluses of a product or group of products, but also in perishable goods (especially food) often becoming waste. For this reason, waste is extremely characteristic of market economies, while at the same time they are not able to fully eliminate shortages, either, due to faulty or insufficient needs assessment, underestimated demand and manipulative market strategies.

It is true that the number of feedbacks present in a market economy is still much higher than in a planned economy with almost no feedback – in the latter system, with some exaggeration, it only becomes clear whether a desired goal (usually set many years in advance) has been achieved when it has actually been realized or failed, while other factors are left virtually unchecked. (Because of this, plus the repression of citizens and restrictions on their freedom of speech, the main market feature of the planned economy is a shortage of goods.) But since the liberal market economy also operates under very low regulation (i.e. the degree of synchronization of actual supply and demand), and is generally not subject to government power that can 'forcefully' impose its will in all circumstances, the system is quite vulnerable to both external and internal disturbances.

And the balance between supply and demand is sometimes upset to such an extent that the various financial processes and speculations create so called-bubbles, which can lead to a general economic crisis, even a global one, or at least a recession (downturn). (The gravest of which is the Great Depression of 1929-33, which devastated the lives of hundreds of millions of people worldwide.) They occur at certain intervals, typically a few decades apart - but we should not ignore the fact that the more external factors that threaten the equilibrium of the economy (e.g. epidemics, climate change, etc.), the more likely and frequent they are to happen.

The Russian economist Nikolai Kondratiev, famous for his work on cyclicality in the market economy, has shown that a conjuncture (boom) is generally linked to a technological breakthrough, whether it is the invention of the steam engine, the rise of electricity and internal combustion engines, the spread of mass production, or the explosion of telecommunications and information technology. Seeing the virtually uninterrupted development of technology, Kondratiev believed that the market economy, which from time to time 'gets tired' and temporarily stops growing, will sooner or later 'heal' and renew itself, so that it is not doomed to failure, as the advocates of socialist systems claimed. This may be true in certain circumstances, but Kondratiev did not take into account some factors that could end this cyclical process, which in theory could last for millions of years.

Since the supposed self-regulation of the market economy is associated with a lot of environmental damage and with embarrassingly large wealth and income disparities, a few small or one big shock, some fate-turning event, may be enough to make the whole system inoperable. While environmental degradation in the form of overconsumption,

waste, pollution and global warming may be reaching a tipping point for our environment on Earth, the most pressing social question is how long a 'democracy' based on a liberal market economy can manage social inequalities, keeping them at a level that people do not rebel against.

This is especially true when our civilization, in ever greater crisis, is faced with more and more serious issues (as discussed in the first part), which, through the interdependence of interrelated systems, may each have the potential to lead to a complete, chain-reaction collapse of the world economy, and even of civilization as we know it today. In the light of this, however, it is extremely difficult to imagine that, unless radical changes occur and current trends turn, a global environmental catastrophe or ruptures along social tensions will not (in all likelihood in the near future) bring an end to the reign of the liberal market economy, or even to the reign of capitalism, which many believe to be irrefutable or unconquerable.

So it seems the currently ruling economic system is unsustainable in the long term, and it is quite certain that it is not the command system that will take its place and successfully solve the problems that are looming over our heads. Although the latter is not burdened by the need to ensure constant growth and maximize consumption, it is equally dangerous for the environment, as it is primarily concerned with its own political survival, for which it is willing to do almost anything. However, this often overshadows concerns of environmental protection and safety – as in the case of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, where the communist party's leaders and soldiers did their best to cover up the faults of irresponsible construction and operation. And because economic planning and implementation does not keep track of current possibilities and environmental conditions, resource use as well as pollution and greenhouse gas emissions can exceed the levels needed for sustainability, just as they do now in market economies. As the planned economy also pays minimal attention to meeting human needs, it is unable to satisfy the huge demands of an increased population. Therefore, in times of serious crisis, after a certain amount of time and human suffering, it is difficult to imagine that even in such an autocratic or dictatorial regime, citizens will not revolt – if they do not, most of them will die of hunger or thirst, or be taken away by other diseases and epidemics.

A controlled economy, however, can be much more resilient to crises, as the closed-loop control framework underpinning the economy has disincentives that prevent the regulated values from falling below or above a certain level. Perhaps it goes without saying why this is particularly beneficial and even necessary to maintain balance and lasting stability. If the relationship between supply and demand is equalized or brought much closer together through regulation, then both waste and shortage could be eliminated or significantly reduced. Thus, continuity of supply can be ensured on an ongoing basis, except in major crises, such as those caused by a prolonged pandemic that causes serious illness and, in many cases, death.

In order to increase resilience, we should strive to gradually mechanize and automate all critical production and service activities as much as possible. They could then become independent of most of the problems that affect people – in the case of machines, the most we have to worry about is breakdown or power failure, but we can be adequately prepared for that too. To ensure the technical conditions, scientists and engineers working on the development of automation and robotization must be provided with all the necessary resources and support for the practical application of innovations. (At the same time, because of the dangers discussed earlier, the development of AI should be carried out with the greatest possible caution, with the involvement of society and maximum transparency.)

All this must of course be done with utmost respect for environmental considerations. The biggest step towards sustainability, alongside a rapid shift to renewable energy and net-zero carbon emissions (which does not increase the overall amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere), is the uptake of circular economy. The model of maximum recycling, in which virtually all non-renewable materials and resources circulate in a closed loop, is by its very nature much more suited to a continuously controlled and optimized economy than other systems, where there is much less interaction and feedback between individual actors. With the importance of self-governance coming to the fore, the system can be implemented in more and more cities and regions at the local level and become an integral part of the economy – especially if the local population successfully fights to have at least as much say in common affairs as national governments or large corporations.

Although even with optimized management it seems inevitable that surpluses of different commodities will be generated, it can significantly reduce the waste of leftover food. Unused food must be distributed to the most deprived in due course before they spoil, or even in the form of social benefits to which everyone is entitled. Demand fluctuations for other products could be compensated in a similar way, the implementation and coordination of which should be part of an efficient circular economy. This also requires constant communication and cooperation between companies and communities, as well as individual consumers.

A well-functioning controlled economy also gives us the opportunity to take care of environmental and social sustainability at the same time. By regulating incomes and private wealth as explained earlier, extreme social disparities could gradually be leveled out, once significant steps are taken to eradicate poverty. Basic income, which will be discussed in the next chapter, can also, if introduced in the right form, ensure that unemployment does not hit the economy anywhere near as hard as it would in a major recession. But to achieve this, it is essential to minimize uncertainty for all participants of the economic system, which can only be achieved through proper regulation and organization.

For that to happen, society as a whole must act as a kind of insurer, not in a profit-driven, materially motivated way, but driven by social utility and sustainability. Although this means that risks are largely shared within society and between economic actors, it is

extremely important that everyone is responsible for their own actions. (That is, everyone should be held accountable if they act negligently or maliciously.) The assumption of risk is therefore primarily not made for money, but in exchange for cooperation, while the profits and the wealth generated are distributed in the fairest possible way. The point is equal or proportional sharing: if society is doing well, then all its members are doing well, and if it is worse off, then everyone bears the burden equally (i.e. in proportion to their possibilities and performance).

If You are a business owner and are repulsed by the idea of regulation and social control, remember this, Dear Reader: if Your company is forced to stand on its own two feet in all circumstances, You could lose it all in another crisis. (Even with possible government relief and subsidies thrown in as a lifeline.) While a controlled economy and the social safety net prioritized by a nurturing society do not allow for full self-dependence and unlimited growth, they will also protect You from major disasters that threaten Your livelihood in the event of an emergency. Universal entitlements to benefits and basic care, health insurance, education, childcare and care for the elderly, housing assistance and more can provide the kind of security, stability and predictability that we can only dream of in a liberal market economy, which is defined by permanent insecurity, or in a planned economy that is plagued by frequent deprivation and lack of opportunity.

For the concept outlined above to go beyond the level of a vain dream, however, we all need to be involved in economic and public affairs, as collective consciousness is the main driver of the controlled economy. Not political power, as in autocratic regimes that rule by command, nor money (private capital), as in the capitalist market economy that reflects it in its name. Although the latter is somewhat a matter of opinion – many believe that the market economy is driven by constant competition, which forces firms to serve markets and introduce new products and services, which in turn leads to modernization. But think about it, Dear Reader: if there is no or limited competition – for example, in the case of a multinational or even a national company in a monopoly situation or without serious competitors –, the system still has the same motivation, which is to make even more revenue and profit.

By definition, a market economy is a system in which economic decisions, including the pricing of goods and services, are determined by the interactions between citizens and businesses in a country. Accordingly, in principle, it should operate in such a way that unnecessary, useless and redundant products and services are disinvested, and only those that are in sustained demand (along with the companies that provide them) remain viable. This is nonetheless a highly idealized image, which is far from always being on par with reality. Since the market is constantly distorted by different power relations, some companies gain a lot of influence thanks to the vast amounts of money and resources they have in their hands. In other words, as it has been explained before, the events and conditions of the market are dictated more by them and by private individuals and billionaires, who also

possess considerable wealth, than by the real supply and demand conditions and people's needs. In reality, then, the pursuit of money and material gain defines unleashed economies at least as much as the competition between economic actors, which is far from a level playing field.

But if we look at competition as a driving force, despite its advantages, there are several fundamental problems that we need to discuss. In principle, the essence of competition in the economy is exactly the same as in nature: the strongest and most capable survive, and the weak fail. Just as animals constantly struggle to survive and raise their offspring, so do we humans – but while in the animal world no one usually changes and consciously shapes conditions to make things easier for them or to improve their own chances, in the human world this happens all the time. Thus, preconditions and distorted power relations often create circumstances in our societies that preserve our current state and material position, with little or no opportunity for upliftment.

In the case of our economies, the alternation of ups and downs is meant to ensure that the rewards we receive for our useful, viable ideas and activities (mainly our money) encourage us to continue, while our useless or discarded contributions motivate us to change things and 'do better'. This may partly be true – as You have probably experienced Yourself, Dear Reader, there are times when things go better, and other times when they go not so well. Nevertheless, if the able survive and the weak fail, it means that there are always many people who have 'failed', i.e. who find themselves at the bottom of the social ladder, from where it is extremely difficult to climb up. The easiest thing to make money with is money, through speculation, manipulation and exploitation of others – although that can be lost, too, but if there is little money, it is almost always eaten up by the cost of supporting oneself and one's family. And although it sometimes works for some, it cannot work for everyone, because the system is based on hierarchy, on subordination and superiority.

This is eerily similar to the food chains in nature, where every animal, plant, fungus and microbe has its own place and role, which it has essentially no power to change. And although humanity is theoretically made up of intelligent beings, with no such differences in aptitude and characteristics, there is still a constant stigmatization and pigeonholing. Unfortunately, this perception is typical of most of today's societies, in which the less regulated the economy, the more we are let loose to get by as best we can. Allowances and occasional benefits do not usually help people in need in the long term, they only offer symptomatic treatment and a way of 'patching-up' the system. And this is precisely what is incompatible with civilized coexistence, just as no form of existential opportunism can be called civilized.

However, a market economy that worships money and capital is incompatible with social sustainability not only because it is highly conducive to the perpetuation (and even growth) of social inequalities. Whether it has power relations and conditions distorted or not, competition is at least as much of a problem in its capacity as it is an integral part, along with materialism, of the basic motivational system of the economy and of our whole

life. This is because competition imposes external pressure on us and thus makes us do different things (e.g. to take on a job, save money, adapt to others, be kind, etc.) - external constraint, on the other hand, is characterized by the fact that as soon as it is removed, the motivation immediately diminishes.

This trait of human nature is exemplified by an experiment at Princeton University in the US, which tested the performance of students in an energy-saving competition. The task for each college was to produce the lowest energy consumption by the end of the set period in exchange for some kind of reward (e.g. paid study break), which immediately resulted in a steep reduction in electricity consumption for all colleges. But once the race was over, the trend reversed just as sharply, and consumption rebounded to previous levels. Similar competitions are held annually not only at Princeton, but at many higher education institutions across North America as part of the Campus Conservation Nationals initiative, which also focuses on limiting energy consumption reductions to the time of the competition.

The motivation provided by an external constraint is therefore always linked to receiving a reward (or not being punished). Its obvious disadvantage is that its effect lasts only as long as the incentive is in view for the person subject to the constraint, which is not only very unfavorable in terms of durability, but also in terms of identification with the activity performed. This is one of the reasons for the dichotomy that characterizes the general crisis of values we are experiencing today: while many people are not socialized to do things on their own, they are constantly forced to do them by the system. For example, some people have to hold on to a sales or telemarketing position without being able to identify with this kind of corporate strategy at all, while in others, it can cause a break to be patient and polite with customers just so that the image of their employer is not damaged and they can keep their job.

In contrast, under the influence of inner compulsion, our own common sense drives our decisions, actions and behavior. In such cases, we are driven by some inner conviction, which of course requires a certain level of awareness. But doing good, helping others, protecting wildlife and contributing to our collective successes usually makes us feel good, which is an additional motivation. Psychological research confirms that acting under internal compulsion is much more likely to be persistent in the long run than patterns of action under external compulsion, such as competition or pressure from our employer. However, internal compulsion can only be truly effective if it is much more deeply rooted, because if it is not, it can be as short-lived as its external counterpart.

There is no doubt that a system of strict regulation, such as a controlled economy, would initially impose on many of us a kind of coercion that would result in a series of actions that we would not have intended. After all, which of us would easily give up the extra profits, the lure of virtually unlimited consumption, the indiscriminate disposal of waste, or anything else that gives us some kind of extra or relief? Over time, though, if the model were to become widespread in practice, through the appropriate setting of exam-

ples, information, enlightenment, education and training, the selfishness and irresponsibility typical of the culture of the consumer society could gradually be pushed into the background, then there would in principle be no obstacle to external pressure being replaced in most cases by internal motivation in our lives, including in the economy and other areas.

Moreover, if we bear in mind that in the long run we need a social order that does not appeal to and strengthen the inferior selves of people, then neither planned economy nor market economy can be considered the way to go. If You think about it, Dear Reader, it is not difficult to see from what we have discussed so far that both the command economy and the liberal (unregulated) market economy are oppressive, or at least linked to a social order based on inequalities and injustices. It is a fact that authoritarian systems with planned economies are characterized by 'brainwashing', realized mainly through state propaganda from the political sphere. At the same time, we also know that in liberal market economies, manipulation of the people also flourishes, only there it is the economic actors who are spouting messages that fit the culture of consumerism, while the government is basically just covering for them. So contrary to popular belief, a society based on lies and self-deception is not unique to communist regimes, as today's neoliberal order-based societies are essentially as lying and hypocritical as communist dictatorships, only in a different, less drastic form.

The fundamental difference, however, is that while in a market economy our instincts usually determine our behavior, controlled economy puts our intellect into the forefront, which is why we should develop it as much as possible. Even more so because the greater the crisis and the scarcer the resources available, the more we need to use scientific methods in the system, a careful examination of the facts and the possibilities available to us, to determine the desired and the permissible values, the quantities that can be produced and used of the various goods and services. (And, of course, the quality and nature of the materials used, as well as the contribution of the production technologies to environmental pollution.) So, instead of randomness and expectations, in the future we should base our economies on science, complemented by consensus between social and economic actors.

The introduction of controlled economy can offer a realistic solution to avoid contingencies that affect the economy as much as possible. Eliminating uncertainties arising from people's behavior would be made possible by operating the control cycle, through constant feedback and monitoring, and through immediate intervention. At the same time, we can reduce vulnerability to the elements by using the right techniques, including afforestation, greenhouses, earthquake-resistant buildings, modern drainage systems, 'weatherproof' energy sources, automated manufacturing technologies, etc.

As has been explained, given the limited resources available to us, quantitative growth cannot be sustained indefinitely, but it can be transformed into a kind of qualitative growth. Accordingly, in the future, it is not indicators of consumption and wealth that should determine the way we think about the economy, but indicators of, for example,

sustainable development and equality in the distribution of wealth. In line with this, economic indicators such as GDP (Gross Domestic Product), GNP (Gross National Product), stock market indices and exchange rates, which are so fashionable and often quoted today, should be replaced by other measures. Examples include NEW (Net Economic Welfare, ISEW (Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare), GPI (Genuine Progress Indicator), HDI (Human Development Index), and other indicators which, besides productivity, inform about waste, pollution, the efficiency of meeting needs and the like. The point is that the various indicators should not only reflect purely financial and especially growth aspects, but along with the efficiency of the economy itself, they should also highlight the impact on society and the environment, i.e. the characteristics linked to sustainability. Such an approach is also more in line with collective consciousness and real needs-driven economics, which is fundamentally at odds with the free competition aimed at surpassing and extruding each other that characterizes market economies.

In relation to the lack of competition and the introduction of a high degree of regulation, three major problems are generally raised in economics, as per the following:

1) It can lead to a proliferation of government bureaucracy, which slows down the economy and hinders growth.

2) In the absence of (sufficient) competition, monopolies can be created, allowing the dominant companies to keep consumer prices high. Moreover, in the absence of external constraints in the economy, companies have no interest in operating in a cost-efficient way – which in turn can consume a lot of resources and money in an unjustified way, as it tends to happen in planned economies.

3) Excessive regulation discourages the testing of new ideas and experimentation, which holds back innovation and progress.

I suggest we look at these a little more closely to see how big an issue they are, and what kind of problems they present for a controlled economy.

Although the premise of the model I have outlined is not constant economic growth but to achieve and maintain a near-equilibrium state, a slowdown of the economy or a decline in its performance, a permanent shortfall in relation to real needs could cause serious problems. At the same time, the active participation of citizens in the economy and its control process, both as consumers and as employees, is a prerequisite for the system to work. Should this become a reality, there will be no need for an overly large and costly government apparatus, either. In addition, much of the communication would take place through web-based channels and applications (even supported by AI), so it would be unnecessary to maintain such a slow, cumbersome and costly bureaucratic structure. While it is true that this will require a high degree of collective consciousness and participation on the part of the majority of citizens, but it would also be a way to truly democratize the economy. (Which, in a liberal market economy, is the case only nominally at most.)

This in turn would also provide an answer to the second problem, since citizen participation and cooperation, the active pressure and intervention of interest organizations,

which emerge from the concept of a conscious consumer society, can prevent the emergence of market-ruling monopolies. Nonetheless, by ensuring transparency and accountability, even companies in monopolistic positions could be forced to manage fairly and cooperate closely with other economic actors. If this were the case, there would at most be a risk that prices would go sky high in the absence of competition, or that costs would rise too much, i.e. the way of 'doing business' would not be cost-effective.

Let's not forget, however, that an optimized economy, if it is truly transparent, shows the costs of a company, plant, office, project, product, etc. at any given moment, so that they can be kept under control. But if it is discovered afterwards that something has cost an unjustifiable amount of money, accountability means that those responsible can be held to account, while of course the problem itself must be corrected, otherwise the error will continue to be present in the system. Depending on the specific activity, product or service, there are many ways to reduce the costs themselves, but it makes a lot of difference what a company saves on.

Safety and protection of workers, for example, should never be compromised, nor should the salaries of the lowest earners (which is why they should rather be raised). At the same time, a lot could be saved on the disproportionately high income and extra benefits of managers and high-ranking employees, especially in the case of medium-sized and larger companies. Purchases made on a company's account must also be transparent, and only approved if they are actually used by the company for its specific activities. Furthermore, all other 'leaks' need to be plugged where money gets lost, thereby adding unduly to costs.

The only problem that may remain to be solved in a controlled economy is the lack of innovation, its slowing down and becoming more difficult due to tight regulation. However, it is by no means certain that modernization would be seriously compromised in such a system, since it can be promoted by conscious consumers and their communities in part as much as the higher quality of products. Through open channels of communication with companies, anyone could raise needs, ideas and suggestions for improving, modifying or adding to products and services, which could be discussed, for example in a forum. If the suggested changes can be implemented in an economical and environmentally sound way, they could be introduced on a pilot basis, even at low volume, so that changes and innovations that prove useless in practice will be phased out over time.

Obviously, companies or independent developers, researchers and inventors could continue to initiate various innovations, in which they must be given maximum support. However, as far as possible, this should not be done in the future within the framework of existential opportunism – if only because human creativity is generally much better influenced by freedom, playfulness or challenge than by a sense of constraint and pressure on our livelihood or security. So it is important that competition is not closely linked to our very existence, and that our well-being does not depend on it in such a way that we can be vulnerable to others.

Looking back at what was discussed in the second part of the book, the desirable form of competition can be formulated as one that should preferably be determined by factors at the top, rather than the bottom, of Maslow's need-motivation pyramid. In the context of our deficiency needs, we have seen that as they become more and more satisfied, our motivation decreases – that is, through our physiological, safety, belonging and self-esteem needs, we can only be driven to perform better by being reduced or denied the satisfaction of those needs. (For example by delaying pay, threatening to cut wages, not giving us food and drink, not letting us go home, criticizing and berating us, etc.) But those are either rude and cruel, incompatible with civilized coexistence, humanity and human freedoms, or are a negative motivation that does not make us to improve our performance in the long run, especially when creative solutions are needed.

Conversely, as our growth needs are met, our motivation increases, pushing us to work harder and achieve more. Learning and understanding, creating and problem-solving, developing and exploiting our abilities often comes with a sense of satisfaction and usefulness, a bit like a drug: the more of it (or the state it causes), the more we want. In such circumstances, it is really worthwhile and useful to set goals, which, along with (not impossibly close) deadlines, can increase the drive to achieve them. And while they can put pressure on us in ways that increase our stress and frustration, to some extent, if we don't overdo it, our motivations coming from our scarcity needs can also be motivating.

This partially includes performance-related rewards in addition to basic benefits, as money can also be used to meet, among other things, our deficit needs. (Such incentives can be problematic, however, if they make livelihoods too precarious, or provide disproportionate income and benefits relative to others.) The key is the functioning of a positive motivation system, which can include many different incentives, because in principle even criticism can be positive or constructive. Anyway, we must keep in mind that the biggest motivator is always the stimulation of our growth needs, so it is crucial that this is always present wherever possible. Therefore, as far as competition is concerned, instead of motivations linked to existential opportunism, primarily related to our deficiency needs, it would be desirable to give priority to professional recognition, prestige, and the possibility of gradual professional development and progress.

This is where the concept of cooperative competition comes in, which is already at work in some form in scientific fields. The idea is that while research teams and scientific institutes from all over the planet compete with each other to find new discoveries, technical and scientific solutions, theories and breakthroughs, they share their results with each other and the world through open forums, websites and specialized press platforms. Researchers often come up with solutions and ideas that build on each other's results, complement or contradict, criticize or even support each other, creating an environment that is conducive to new theories and innovations. Moreover, under ideal circumstances, there is regular communication and cooperation between representatives of different sectors and disci-

plines (biology and geology, epidemiology and mathematics, etc.), who complement each other's knowledge, and often arrive at results that they would not have been able to achieve separately.

This particular but all the more effective combination of epistemic, i.e. knowledge-based, competition and cooperation is therefore an excellent way of providing a permanent driving force for the development of science and technology. In recognition of this, more progressive governments are increasingly promoting the concept of 'open science', whereby they seek to encourage research based on sharing results, involving non-governmental organizations and civil society as a whole. The European Commission's Horizon Europe program, for example, calls for 'Findable, Accessible, Interoperable and Reusable' (FAIR) data sharing, the creation of an open cloud database (European Open Science Cloud – EOSC), the definition of new indicators to classify uploaded material, the protection of intellectual property, appropriate rewards for researchers, and the development of skills and competences for scientific collaboration.

At the same time, we must also see that in our economies dominated by material gain, there is currently an absolute predominance of competition forced on researchers, which creates a particularly unfavorable, stressful and often counterproductive working environment. Scientific and technological progress typically requires substantial amounts of money and resources, but with governments falling into debt, the resources available for science have dwindled in many countries. As a result, in the field of research today, we are just as likely to encounter the effects of the law of the jungle that govern our existential opportunism-driven economies. Here are some of the problems caused by the issue:

  - publication pressure, deterioration in the quality of published results and papers;
  - questionable research practices;
  - biased peer reviews of scientific publications;
  - lack of information sharing and cooperation, secrecy, hostility;
  - unfair competition for funding;
  - hierarchy resembling a food chain.

It is clear from the above that the competition for resources, due to the dominance of materialism in the economy and in our lives, imposes an external constraint that can generate a deadly struggle between parties working for the same goal, even in the most noble of areas. The main lesson to be drawn from all this is that if the dominance of money imposes too much of a stigma on science and innovation, it can end up in the same situation as professional sport and the Olympics, where the dominance of material considerations and the constant struggle for money now almost completely undermine the meaning and original purpose of the whole thing. The phenomenon has also been likened to the concept of the military-industrial complex that has been mentioned before, suggesting that there is a close nexus of interests between the armed forces, the military-industrial complex and the government. (The military is under the influence of the industry, while the arms manufacturers depend on subsidies from the state and its 'benevolence'.)

But the problem affects many key sectors, and extreme materialization and 'industrialization' can lead to similar problems in the health sector, for example. The system that has been similarly named the medical-industrial complex, also involves many actors: hospitals, medical practices and service providers, research institutes, government, pharmaceutical companies and pharmacies, medical device manufacturers and distributors, insurance companies, property management and construction companies, banks, etc. However, as in other sectors, the stakeholders in the health sector include a number of profit-oriented organizations (with varying degrees of economic regulation depending on the country), which operate primarily in the hope of maximizing financial gain. When some of the firms involved grow too big, or when one or a few of the actors become too powerful and influential, they can distort market relations in their favor, so that the sector in question increasingly serves their interests rather than those of the communities concerned or society itself. In health care, this often means that patients have very little say in the functioning of the system that greatly affects their health and therefore their lives, which is tantamount to vulnerability.

That is exactly why the communities concerned – consumers, patients, sportsmen and sportswomen, as well as local governments – must stand up for their own interests and ensure that the sectors operate and develop in accordance with their original function, through joint action and community funding. The point is to regulate companies driven by money and power and to get more independent of the central governments that have close links with them. This can only be achieved through enough awareness and well-organized cooperation, preferably with as much civil, or social, support as possible. Thus, competition based on the principle of existential opportunism and external constraints can be marginalized, tipping the scales in favor of cooperation. That, in the long term, with proper regulation and optimization, can be much more beneficial for ensuring both a sustainable economy and scientific and technological progress.

Steven B. Johnson, a renowned advocate of an interdisciplinary and collaborative approach to innovation, has examined 135 breakthrough innovations in science and technology from the 19th and 20th centuries. I don't know, Dear Reader, how surprising the results are to You, but I myself am not surprised at all that 40% of the discoveries were made by researchers collaborating in a network, but not in a market, that is, in a competitive environment. This compares to 26% of innovations by groups working together in market conditions and individuals working in non-market conditions, and only 8% of innovations by individual researchers in competitive conditions. Among the results of networks operating under non-market conditions were such ground-breaking achievements and discoveries as aspirin, penicillin, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), plate tectonics of the Earth's crust, nuclear reactors and quantum mechanics.

In addition to collaboration, of course, these breakthroughs have also required considerable money and resources, so it remains crucial that we do not spare the investment and the larger sums for research, development and discovery – but it is also important where

we draw them from. Instead of the welfare of the common people, we can make significant cuts at the expense of disproportionately high private wealth and corporate and public waste, which in a transparent and optimized economy is certainly more promising than in a planned or a liberal market economy. With a much better and fairer distribution of money between economic actors than at present, communities will be able to support various science and innovation projects much more effectively.

However, we should not only support the research and development that is most promising and most likely to yield positive results, as it is usually the type of research and development that is least likely to advance science and progress. Projects with more uncertainties and less obvious potential for concrete results have sometimes, if not often, led to discoveries, breakthroughs or revolutionary innovations without which it would be hard to imagine our lives today. The microwave oven, the X-ray machine, the pacemaker, vulcanized rubber, Teflon coating, and many other inventions were born purely by chance, as their inventors were working on something completely different when they stumbled upon them. Those examples teach us the lesson that research, development and productive innovation in general need a stimulating and information-rich environment to inspire new ideas. At the same time, failure should not be too much of a barrier, as it is also essential to making real progress and achieving breakthrough results.

Of course, in no economy can money be poured into science and experimentation like a bottomless well, so we need to take care of its allocation and use in some rational way. Therefore, the communities concerned (managers and employees of companies, researchers, developers, consumers, municipalities, etc.) and their responsible representatives should decide together on funding, and exercise a certain degree of control over individual work programs (without interfering too much in the work of professionals). However, rather than funding specific projects, it may be more efficient to fund people (researchers, developers) or groups in general, as past results can provide a more reliable guide to future productivity than evaluations of current projects. Well-designed mentoring schemes and scholarships can help newcomers to the profession to kick-start their careers, but they should also be given some freedom and, as with their more experienced colleagues, it is sometimes better to rely on researchers' own initiatives rather than targeted projects. Nevertheless, a stable income and benefit system is necessary, complemented at most by performance-related and commensurate rewards.

So instead of the cut-throat competition for resources, higher profits for companies and the need to innovate for long-term survival, innovation and development can be encouraged in other ways, by directly motivating and rewarding the professionals, engineers, scientists and doctors themselves. An integral part of this concept could be the competition between innovators or 'think tanks' as mentioned earlier, motivated more by prestige. And there may also be a demand from society for something new, which could generate developments that should also be clearly supported, as long as they do not violate the principles of efficiency and sustainability.

In my opinion, the system outlined above can be a good starting point for sustainable progress, but there are also those who see innovation in the future shifting more and more towards the open source solutions discussed before. As we have seen, the best known examples of this so far are open source software and applications, perhaps most notably the free Linux operating system and the Wikipedia online database, used by millions of people around the world. But what if technological and intellectual innovation were also completely open, and virtually anyone could join in the development process at any time – either as an outsider or as an independent researcher or developer? Would it be possible to create an (information) society in which the mutual sharing and further development of knowledge is the natural practice to follow, rather than its concealment and appropriation?

If there is a common goal that many people are interested in achieving, we can see that it is actually already at work today. It is enough to think about the mass of amateur astronomers involved in analyzing data from various space probes, telescopes and other research observatories, which both speeds up the analysis process and makes the results more accessible to the general public. It is partly thanks to this that we have been able to observe and access asteroids that may threaten our planet, comets that may hold the remains of the solar system and perhaps the origin of life, never-before-seen phenomena, surfaces and formations of other planets, and many other fascinating sights in space. Each participant spends as much time and energy as he or she is able and willing to devote to this joint work, whereby it is purely the similar interest and the acquisition and sharing of knowledge, i.e. the social and psychological motivation (which can be largely categorized as part of the Maslow-pyramid's growth needs) that keeps the system going.

Such and similar solutions provide the opportunity for individual and mass 'generation' of information, knowledge and culture, as well as their widespread sharing, since the majority of the necessary technical means (computers, mobile phones, Internet access, routers, etc.) are now it is owned by the population performing various tasks and sub-activities. For this reason, even the active contribution of those with the means is not always necessary to keep a project going in the long term, as the SETI@Home program, which was running for more than two decades, has shown. With the help of an installed application, it used the computing power of computers connected to the internet anywhere in the world to search for and identify radio signals from possible alien civilizations – but we should also see that the same method can in principle be used for countless other purposes. In fact, the millions of personal computers and other devices collectively outstrip the power of the world's most advanced, fastest supercomputer, so the cost of funding the resources is also widely shared among the participants (the more participants, the lower the unit cost).

And if You look at it that way, Dear Reader, it is nothing less than a modern-day solution for individual people to take back the economic power appropriated by others. Indeed,

the widespread internet, the web of IT tools and networks that now spans much of the globe, allows for the mass creation of value by a multitude of people in a cumulative way, which can be referred to as 'social production'. Yochai Benkler, Professor of Entrepreneurial Legal Studies at Harvard Law School, introduced the concept to the professional community, contrasting it with incumbency, the industrial production that has already spread – and dominates – in the economy. According to Benkler, the future could be fundamentally shaped by the so-called open-source economics, of which we are already seeing many signs.

In that respect, open source and free software used by many people around the world, such as the Linux operating system, the Mozilla Firefox browser, the LibreOffice office suite or the WordPress web content management software, are just a small slice of free sharing and use, in contrast to, among others, profit-oriented companies such as Microsoft, a company of considerable size and influence. At the same time, internet communications programs such as Skype, Zoom and others, which are also free to download and use, are also posing serious competition to traditional telecoms companies with telephone networks, just as the rise of email has drastically reduced the use of postal mail.

However, peer-to-peer (P2P for short) file-sharing services, which operate between end-users on the internet without the use of a dedicated node or server, have sparked off an effective war between their developers and operators, and between record labels and major film studios, by allowing the download and distribution of various types of royalty-bearing content (mainly music and films) without compensation. Although P2P applications and networks based on the exchange of data stored on users' computers are far from being used only for the theft of intellectual property (IP), since any kind of information organized in files (personal photos, videos, drawings, designs, texts, etc.) can be transmitted through them, solutions based on this principle (see BitTorrent) have been the subject of much debate. It is no coincidence that following the demise of the infamous Napster and its ilk, web service companies prefer sharing on closed online platforms such as YouTube, Dropbox or Google Drive, which they are much better able to control…

Part of the reason why more and more companies are now recognizing the benefits of crowdsourcing, yet many are still reluctant to use it, may be the protection of data and innovation. The essence of crowdsourcing is that an organization entrusts a large group of independent people to carry out certain tasks, instead of traditionally having its own employees carry them out or outsourcing them to other organizations. In this case, a larger task is usually broken down into numerous small sub-tasks, which can be worked on independently by many. The main advantage of crowdsourcing, apart from reducing costs, is that it allows rapid communication via the internet with the people working on each task, who, because they can work from virtually anywhere in the world, can bring a wide range of knowledge, skills and information to carrying out the given work.

Although this is somewhat similar to open source, the main difference is that with crowdsourcing, tasks are performed under centralized management. Furthermore, the

data provided by the firm commissioning the service may not necessarily be shared – at least legally – with third parties, which is clearly intended to protect the intellectual property rights of companies and the revenue they generate from the masses. However, crowdsourcing has the advantage that it can be used not only by companies, but also in the context of social work – or, if You like, social production. Thus, in the future, the practice of non-profit organizations or, for example, certain communities or municipalities, assigning various tasks in this way, which can be carried out by anyone who is able and willing to do so, may become more and more common.

So it is abundantly clear now that the freedom of information exchange and the possibility of social production pose an existential threat to profit-oriented organizations and the market economy as a whole. Even though the power of capital and surveillance capitalism has succeeded in temporarily slowing down the trend, they are unlikely to be able to resist it in the long run. For as long as the web connects people who need something with people who can meet those needs, it provides a viable alternative to a direct match between supply and demand. For the time being, this may be limited mainly by the issues of quantity and price, as mass production and the production of resource-intensive goods and services are the prerogative of (larger) companies.

The ongoing struggle over the freedom and control of Internet channels is clearly visible, which essentially includes the operation, legal and technical regulation of the World Wide Web and its associated infrastructure (servers, networks, websites, applications, etc.). On the one hand, there are the multinational service providers, who are trying to exert as much control as possible for their own benefit, but they are already facing some resistance from users and political organizations such as the US federal government and the European Union, which try to protect privacy rights. Nonetheless, despite the occasional fines and legislative changes, these giant companies still have dominant power over us, and we are under massive amounts of pressure from the consumer society and the companies behind internet commerce, who are driven to profit and survive.

The situation is therefore very complex, but it is clear that the threat is reciprocal between the new information society that is backed by social production representing the ideal of an open-source economy and the current industrial model – while one fights for a free web, the other does its best to control it. One, if you like, is an effort to globalize knowledge and culture across borders, companies and governments, while the other is the globalization of capital and consumption, which foresees the emergence of a kind of 'global consumer information society'. (Regarding their basics, both already exist – it only depends on us, the people, in which direction we move forward.) Governments and political forces are positioned somewhere between the two sides, albeit in an dual role: on the one hand, they seek to protect the rights and interests of their constituents (which includes freedom), but at the same time they remain highly committed and biased toward private capital, which seeks to maintain the economy in the spirit of existential opportunism indefinitely.

Which way the scales tip in the end will fundamentally determine our future. But the free sharing of information cannot be stopped – unless it is through drastic regulation and censorship of the web, or its eventual elimination (which is clearly not in the interests of profit-making organizations). Today, the majority of the developed world is so used to the speed and freedom of the internet and information exchange that it is hard to imagine them being prepared to give it up – especially as it would be in contradiction to liberal principles. Therefore, it is very unlikely that neoliberal politicians, business leaders and owners will support drastic restrictions of the internet, while we can very well expect them to seek to maintain and even increase control through their influence and manipulation of content and communication. So, if we want radical change (which we desperately need), we must not give in to them, and we must be organized and collectively conscious enough to actively stand up for the freedom of the web.

But make no mistake, Dear Reader: the way we communicate on the internet and the authenticity of the information must be constantly monitored, otherwise sooner or later it can become a cesspool of human culture, and in extreme cases, social order can collapse into anarchy. Fake news, misinformation, anti-vaccinationism, conspiracy theories, hate-mongering - all undermine the pursuit of civilization. Supervision should not, however, be exercised by any means by profit-oriented companies, but by designated public authorities on the one hand, and by any organization (and in some respects any individual) who shares or uses information on the web. If the controlled economy model could be put into practice, transparency in management could go hand in hand with transparency in information exchange, which could be achieved, among other things, by reducing anonymous communication.

As for the opposition between industrial and social production, why couldn't they get along with each other in the future? Industrial production may never be indispensable – especially not for a global species that may even go on to inhabit other planets – but we can still resolve the disparity of interests by reforming the economy. The controlled economy could also bring supply and demand closely together at the macroeconomic level, making the system sustainable in the long term. Some products can continue to be provided by industrial production, especially those that require the volume and economy of scale guaranteed by mass production, while more unique goods requiring more creativity or manual labor can be created and sold at the level of the individual.

At the same time, it is clear that another major obstacle to the mainstreaming of open source economy is the lack of legal regulation and the problem of recognition, reward and remuneration. The authenticity and quality of certain products, especially if they come from a manufacturer or trader unknown to us, can never be guaranteed in a completely free system, and in some cases can even be dangerous to our health or our lives. User reviews and ratings themselves are not always authoritative or reliable, either, so it is essential to set up a credible certification scheme at both national and international level, which will provide a uniform set of criteria for rating as many of the goods as possible on the

web. Although it is obviously not possible to monitor every single product, those who want to do good for themselves and others should buy from reliable sources, and report poor quality or dangerous products to consumer protection.

As for the means of distribution, whether it is any tangible object or information in the form of words, numbers and phrases, in principle everyone should be guaranteed the right of free choice. Thus, every company or individual has the right to decide whether to share the fruits, knowledge and results of their labor with others for free and without pay, or to charge money for it. To put it in a fashionable, if not very catchy, way: do You want to make IP and expropriate the knowledge (or product or service) and its benefits, or give it to the public even anonymously? To allow that, legislation must guarantee the right conditions for the protection of intellectual products and innovations (see Creative Commons), but it is just as important that this is done without disproportionate profiteering. This cannot happen, however, as long as a thorough review and reform of the current general practice on licensing and royalties do not take place.

Whatever the future holds, if I had to make a prediction, I would say with great certainty that it will not be one of appropriation, but of sharing. For example, if You ask Yourself what drives You to share information and knowledge, in many cases it is probably existential pressure, i.e. the need to make a living – but apart from that, You could mostly think little about material aspects, the money You can earn and the goods and services You can buy with it. Just as I am not motivated by them in writing and distributing this book, but rather by the satisfaction, joy and fulfillment it brings, the sense of usefulness that can be a means of self-actualization – and even collective self-actualization, in some form or another. In other words, such an activity is essentially nothing less than investing in the future, without needing a big pile of money or the promise of it.

As the nurturing society becomes more commonplace and its members have more and more free capacity, online information sharing and collaboration can reach unprecedented heights, contributing much more to the development of our global culture, knowledge and tools than ever before. When basic livelihoods are no longer a daily hassle and struggle, even if our motivation not so much, but our willingness to share can increase significantly. Eventually, perhaps in the not too distant future, we may reach a point where knowledge, information and culture can flow without boundaries, forging a united front and setting us on the path to lasting peace, to living in harmony with nature, to exploring and conquering (in a good sense) the universe, unlocking its greatest, most beautiful and unexpected secrets.

But in the meantime, our most important task is to ensure that human civilization can successfully survive the current century. As we are facing what appears to be the biggest and most complex crisis ever to threaten humanity since the dawn of civilization, the only way to avert it, to solve today's increasingly critical problems, is for people to reach a high degree of cooperation. In line with this fact, it would be a perfectly logical step to introduce

a consensus-based economic system – even more so because if we cannot work closely together in the economy, there is a good chance that we will not be able to overcome the difficulties we face and tackle the huge challenges ahead.

For this to happen, however, we need a truly democratic economic system, which we could call economic democracy, or even a participatory economy, along the lines of participatory democracy. A system where people share the resources available to them on the basis of the principle of equality and jointly decide on their use. Where social contribution is rewarded in a proportionate and fair way, free from the severe distortions of a free market in supply and demand, so that no one can make huge fortunes, but no one has to go without, either. And where our opportunities do not depend on our origin, gender, skin color, or any other characteristic given to us from the moment of our conception and birth, and where we all have equal chances for a useful and happy life of continuous development, fulfillment and self-actualization.

I don't know about You, Dear Reader, but I firmly believe that we can expect nothing less from a truly civilized society. But instead of the cut-throat competition characteristic of the breathtakingly beautiful, extraordinary and complex, but equally cruel nature, it is cooperation and the active, collectively conscious participation of all actors that can make the economy work in an efficient and just, truly democratic way. On the other hand, for a system to be truly democratic, it must be constantly regulated – unless its participants are perfect or perfectly rule-following, which obviously cannot be the foundation of any society made up of fallible, flesh-and-blood beings. At the same time, it is also true that competition and external coercion are only necessary in a system where democratic cooperation is not feasible or does not materialize. (In that case, however, equality and equilibrium will remain a distant dream, and long-term sustainability will not be ensured, either.)

What must be clearly seen is that the unrestricted flow of capital and the capitalism that puts it on a pedestal does not create a democratic environment at all, but rather relies on our instincts, our lower needs and motivations. As we have already seen, there are unmistakable similarities between this system known for its free-ranging and constant striving for growth and expansion, and the locust walk: like the destructive natural phenomenon, human activity, driven by existential opportunism, also takes over one territory, region or celestial body after another, sacking and exploiting them – and then, when it has ceased to benefit from them, simply moves on. The process is in fact inevitable, since pure capitalism by its very nature expropriates and commodifies everything, including natural resources – minerals, energy carriers, plants, animals, even drinking water – but even man himself in the form of consumable labor, and uses these 'articles' until they are completely exhausted or destroyed.

Looking at it from a wider perspective, though, we may also see that capitalism and market competition are just one of the many forms of existential opportunism that have accompanied the history of human civilization. After systems based on privileges and social class systems, slavery, military, religious or political repression, and partly still based

on them, it offered an extremely materialistic alternative, in which the focus is no longer on man, but on material things – money and securities, real estate, objects, vehicles, various machines and equipment –, and the possession of these things. All this has served the purpose of boosting development, industrialization, technical and intellectual innovation after the 'Dark Ages', which in many ways can be described as a backward step, or at least a civilizational dead end – but capitalism has its own limits, and time has now passed it by, as well.

While there are better and worse degrees of both capitalism and the market economy, each of them has its fundamental flaws and shortcomings. In general, however, the main problem seems to be that, as the name suggests, money is at the heart of it – not people and humanity, not the Earth and the environment, or indeed any other value that really matters in life. Capitalism is therefore by its very nature too materialistic, and makes man so – even if many of us are not even aware of it. Nor of the fact that, despite the post-medieval boom, it is not capitalism itself that has brought prosperity to human civilization, but the labor, ingenuity and cooperation of people and the social safety net they have built and maintained. (And of course we cannot forget the contribution of machines and even animals.)

So it is not fundamentally competition, but the existence and proper functioning of welfare institutions, a well-developed and well-organized social safety net that promotes public safety, housing, health, education and so on, that ensures security of existence and a standard of living worthy of civilized beings, whatever socio-economic-political system we are talking about. And as far as money is concerned, it is just a tool that is worth nothing on its own if it is not backed up by the necessary work, knowledge and cooperation. An object (real or virtual) that can give its possessor a certain (and in fact quite a lot) of freedom and power, but does not make us happy and functional on an individual or social level.

Since capitalism and the market economy based on it are merely a new manifestation of socioeconomic systems based on the principle of existential opportunism, they are no more suited to operating a global, truly modern and sustainable civilization than any of their predecessors have been. A key difference is that the others have never had to face the global challenges we are facing today. The explosion of development triggered by industrialization and the Enlightenment has led us to proliferate, consume and pollute our environment, and to acquire technological tools so dangerous that they threaten the very balance and peace of our societies.

While some are hoping that technological progress will get us out of this mess, as it has many times, there is no guarantee that it will. Furthermore, as we have seen, the problem is much more complex than simply tackling climate change and pollution, food and other technical issues. There is, for example, the dilemma of the mechanization of jobs, which is good and desirable in some respects, but can also fundamentally shake up the whole economy. Social inequalities and tensions may also continue to grow as a result of other effects,

which we should expect in particular in times of crisis, and which are likely to increase over the next few decades. But even if we somehow survive the various crises, when there is nowhere to turn for new resources, we may be forced to make radical changes and re-think our current way of life, which is based on the illusion of unlimited consumption and constant growth...

And since we cannot ensure social and environmental sustainability in the long term in a capitalist economy, it is only logical that we must as soon as possible replace this unsustainable concept, which, if we consider it, has fulfilled its historical role. It needs to give way to something far better suited to running our civilization, which must now adapt to current circumstances on a global scale. Adaptation, as we know, is the most important factor to survival in nature – which is also true for a global civilization, but not sufficient in itself. The three pillars of survival for an intelligent species are:

1) adaptation,
2) cooperation,
3) balance.

And the form of governance that can ensure these is a genuinely democratic, egalitarian system that can keep the economy under control by matching our needs and opportunities.

The introduction of an economic system that also operates as a closed control loop in global terms would be both logical and desirable, if only because the Earth itself is a closed system limited in space and time, material resources and the capacity to renew itself. While our planet can regulate itself without our assistance, to ensure that it remains a livable place for us in the long term, we need to help restore and maintain the balance of environmental processes. In essence, this will not change even if we terraform Mars (i.e. make it habitable for terrestrial life) or perhaps other celestial bodies in the Solar System, since even then we will not have an infinite supply of resources at our disposal.

Like all good things, of course, this concept also has its pitfalls. For it to happen, it is essential that the vast majority of economic actors are aware of how the system, and the world in general, works, and change their attitudes accordingly. And while there are encouraging signs that our awareness is gradually increasing, there are still many factors at work in our world that are holding back, or at least seriously hampering, this process.

In this context, too, with regard to the controlled economy, it is certain to occur to many – probably including You, Dear Reader – that the objective of its implementation is not realistic, because that is not how humans work, i.e. human nature does not allow it. Nevertheless, there are two other very important aspects for You to consider:

1) What we consider to be accepted, guiding or to be followed depends largely on the culture around us.
2) The claim that human nature does not change is simply not true.

No matter how slowly, everything in the world is always changing – except perhaps the fundamental forces and laws of nature that govern the way the universe works. Among the

latter, however, is that a form of life that fails to evolve and adapt will sooner or later disappear down the drain.

That is why we humans must also adapt and meet the challenges of the times, otherwise there will be little hope left for our civilization as soon as in the near future.

The Basic Income and the Nurturing Society

The issue of unconditional basic income – more commonly called universal basic income (UBI for short) – has been the subject of debate among economists, politicians, social scientists and ordinary people alike for several decades. But what exactly does this more and more frequently mentioned phrase mean?

Although, as with so many complex concepts, there are lots of different definitions of UBI, most agree that it is a regular payment that is unconditionally provided to everyone, on an individual basis, regardless of one's current employment or any other circumstances. Why is this necessary, and why have many people come up with such an idea? Bertrand Russell, the famous English philosopher and sociologist, came up with the following framing as early as 1918: "A certain small income, sufficient for necessities, should be secured for all, whether they work or not, and that a larger income should be given to those who are willing to engage in some work which the community recognizes as useful. On this basis we may build further."

So the main objective is to ensure the satisfaction of basic needs, which enables everyone in a society to live in conditions worthy of a human being. By basic needs we usually mean food and drinking water to satisfy our hunger and thirst, and adequate clothing and shelter, even if this does not cover the deficiency needs we have already examined, or the needs at the bottom two levels of Maslow's pyramid. There is usually general agreement among UBI advocates that the basic benefits should cover roughly the needs mentioned above – although housing is a much more complex issue than the others, and is often treated separately (if at all). There is also a consensus on public security, which must be guaranteed by the state or the competent government through the organizations it operates (police, military, civil guard, etc.). At the same time, positions on the provision of health services and other topics that also belong to basic needs tend to be very diverse and often contradictory.

The central question, however, is obviously whether the institution of a basic income is needed at all, or whether it would be more harmful than beneficial to the economy and society. Undoubtedly, there are some arguments in favor of UBI that might make it tempting to apply it in practice in some way:

- It can provide an opportunity to reduce poverty and social inequalities.
- Government spending and the size of the necessary bureaucratic apparatus could be partly reduced by cutting back or completely eliminating various benefits and allowances (unemployment benefits, food vouchers, housing loan subsidies, etc.).
- The system of support for citizens would be much simpler if it were not subject to different conditions that are sometimes difficult to justify. This would also help minimize the bureaucratic burden.
- Low salaries could be eliminated by having a better bargaining position in the labor market, as workers would be less in need of a certain job.

- Starting from a less favorable financial situation, studying, looking for a job and finding a suitable workplace would also become easier, which could help to climb the social ladder.
- It would make it easier for young couples to start a family.
- With greater financial independence, one would be less forced to live in dysfunctional relationships and families with others.
- People caring for relatives at home could leave their jobs to be with the person who needs help.
- It would be a great help for those who become unemployed due to the mechanization of their job.
- In times of crisis, the stability of the economy would be less at risk, as purchasing power and the propensity to buy would not fall dramatically.

Nevertheless, the concept of UBI is attacked by many people from various points of view, or even considered to be fundamentally flawed, with the most common arguments against its introduction being:

- With a basic income, one would be less motivated to take a job and less likely to keep it. In this case, on the one hand, tax revenues from labor would be reduced and, on the other, there could be labor shortages in many sectors.
- A basic income for all would impose too high a burden on the economy and government (it could consume in the order of 15-20% of annual GDP), which would jeopardize fiscal balance.
- It could increase undeclared work and tax evasion.
- It may adversely affect the mental health of society. Studies show that regions with lower employment and activity rates have higher rates of addiction and suicide, as more people are unable to 'make themselves useful'.
- Financial activity would decline, the economy would slow, growth would stall or reverse. This would also reduce the competitiveness of the economy.
- The rich and well-off do not need basic income, so to provide it unconditionally would be grossly unfair and wasteful.
- Meanwhile, the lack of targeted benefits and support would seriously affect those who really need them. (For example, money would go from the disabled to the healthy.)
- It demands too much autonomy (financial and otherwise) from people who already have serious problems organizing their own lives. For those with low levels of education, it would be of dubious value.
- Instead of encouraging self-reliance, it would increase dependence on government.
- According to the capitalist view, money is something that we have to earn, therefore it is not something that anyone is entitled to by birthright.

While each of the above points may indeed be a reason to be sceptical about UBI, the last objection is something that can be refuted right away. What about those, for example,

who inherit wealth simply because they were born into the right family? What merit or choice did they have in this respect compared to others? And can mere chance or luck determine a person's wealth and social status, hence their opportunities and quality of life? I don't know about You, Dear Reader, but I think that in a truly civilized society, it definitely can't.

Some argue that the concept of UBI is supported by Silicon Valley companies and other technological and multinational corporations because it would ensure and even increase the benefits of maintaining and strengthening consumer society. Indeed, the greater purchasing power and sense of security of income can lead to an increase in demand for various goods and services, which could even ensure that economic growth is uninterrupted. But if we think of the decreasing number of jobs due to increasing automation, people could still have enough money to keep the system from becoming dysfunctional, thus perpetuating a consumer society that benefits profit-driven organizations and individuals. (Insofar as environmental and, to some extent, social sustainability considerations are disregarded.)

Although the concern is by no means unfounded, the matter is far from being so clearcut – for one thing, because the increase in demand could easily be a temporary phenomenon. And some argue that rising consumption would also lead to higher prices, as higher demand means higher inflation (especially if supply cannot keep up.) But higher prices mean that living standards would not rise in the long run, so we would essentially be back where we began, meaning that the introduction of UBI would not bring about any significant changes. While this would undoubtedly be a problem in a liberal market economy, in a controlled economy, for example, where supply and demand can be much more in tune due to optimization and where consumer prices are set by a kind of consensus between economic actors, it would theoretically not really matter.

While the practical implementation of this has yet to be realized, the lesson is already clear: basic income, in whatever form it is applied, is of no value in itself if we do not regulate companies and consumer society itself. As long as we live in a state of dependency on material things and consumption, in a way it doesn't matter whether we get the money as a subject right or whether we get it through work or any other means – so we basically have to change our way of life at an individual and social level. The problem therefore exists irrespective of the basic income, and in the absence of reforms to the economy, we cannot really expect to be able to reap the benefits of the positive effects and advantages listed above.

The same is strikingly borne out if we consider the classical capitalist approach, according to which an unconditional basic income contradicts the basic formula of economic development. After all, a market economy is essentially based on constant growth, which is the result of a combination of labor, capital invested and technology to make efficient use of it. Accordingly, economic development and high employment rates go hand in hand, and

the direction between them points from employment to development, not vice versa. So the more people work, keeping the system of constant expansion of consumption in operation, the higher the GDP will be, which in the capitalist conception is the non plus ultra of the performance of the economy and society, the ultimate measure of its performance in material form.

Looking at the economy in a somewhat more holistic way, however, we have already seen that the sustainable goal is actually not constant growth, but rather to ensure environmental and social balance, where both waste and scarcity are bad and to be avoided. While there is no doubt that the world's more backward economies have room to grow, this does not mean that once they reach an average standard of living typical of more developed countries, they should continue to focus on growth. For the aim of a modern economy, which does not exist for its own sake or worship money, is to satisfy needs, not to maximize consumption and the material benefits it can generate indefinitely.

The relationship between employment and economic development is also unlikely to hold for much longer, since the more jobs become mechanized (due to industrial and other robots on the one hand, and the increasing use of AI on the other), the less economic performance will depend on the employment rate, as we need less and less labor to ensure the continuity of production and services. And the accelerating development of technology is a perfectly natural phenomenon in the evolution of an intelligent species and the civilization it builds, so the gradual replacement of human labor is also a natural, even if not in itself a necessary, process. But if the will to innovate is there, and we make sure that resources are properly concentrated in this area, instead of the excessive consumer and government waste and unbridled growth of private wealth, I believe that in a few decades we can achieve radical changes in mechanization and automation, which is crucial to the resilience of the economy to crises.

As discussed earlier, the loss of jobs through automation could be a very serious problem, both by increasing poverty and social inequalities, and by threatening the functioning of the economy as a whole through a drastic fall in purchasing power. This is one of the most compelling arguments in favor of the introduction of UBI, as it would guarantee everyone a certain source of income. Nevertheless, if the amount of regular payments is too low, it would not be enough to provide even a basic living for the masses of those who are left without a job. And if the allowance is too high, it is easy for the replacement of human labor to fail to keep pace, meaning that employers would still need more employees than they can replace through automation. Thus, a basic income that is introduced too high too soon could lead to a general labor shortage, as it discourages rather than enhances people's propensity to work.

The results of the local-scale and periodic attempts to introduce UBI to date confirm this, although due to their limitations, they have so far provided very little real data and experience to draw far-reaching conclusions. In any case, it is clear that even if we were to introduce a basic income across the board in an economy, we would have to be very care-

ful to determine the optimal level, and that alone would not be sufficient given the changing circumstances over time and the number of jobs available. Previous experiments have mostly involved relatively modest payments to groups living below the poverty line, such as the recent programs by UNICEF and the charity GiveDirectly in Kenya and India, which have made a real difference to the livelihoods and health of beneficiaries, increasing school enrolment and reducing violence and crime.

However, these experiments have not really shed any light on the long-term viability of the concept, or on how and how effectively it could be extended to the entire population of a country. Moreover, this is a case once again where it is absolutely true, as is often experienced in the field of science, that a survey in which we observe people's behavior continuously can produce a completely different result from one in which we do not – in other words, we are in essence influencing a factor in the process under study by the observation itself. I'm guessing You wouldn't throw part of the money you received for free into a slot machine, either, Dear Reader, if You knew that Your evaluated for 'performance' was being evaluated...

Similar attempts to introduce a basic income have been made in Canada, Finland, Iran, Alaska, Scotland, Germany and the Netherlands. Although the results are encouraging in part, they also suggest – together with research and experience on human nature and behavior – that those with adequate knowledge, information and awareness can benefit from basic income, while it may not necessarily offer a long-term solution for those with less education, awareness, and an inherently less favorable social position. Family disadvantages, addictions, mental and psychological problems, as well as the persistence of stereotypes and prejudices in our societies (see racism, sexism and others) can all be barriers to any guaranteed income from having its positive effects. Even though the situation of people living in poverty is usually made easier in the short term, if they cannot or do not want to work, or are unable to cope with the economic and social grind, it will not bring them lasting change or social advancement.

For poverty is fundamentally a condition that does not necessarily depend on the personality, mindset and behavior of the individual who suffers from it, and often not even on their attitude to work, but primarily on the circumstances. And deprivation inevitably narrows one's horizons: as the focus is on managing scarce money and surviving the constant lack and insecurity – survival, as it were –, consuming most of our attention, time and energy, in this mindset we are usually unable to grasp the processes and opportunities beyond our own little 'bubble', our immediate environment. Thus, it is no wonder that many people are unable to break out of the poverty trap – especially in a win-lose society, which some economists simply call 'winner takes all'.

So, on the one hand, the general aversion to UBI stems from the fact that it leads to unquestionable results, and on the other, it offends many people's sense of justice. "Without work, by what right can someone who would otherwise be able to work get money?" You may ask Yourself, Dear Reader. And Your concern is perfectly understandable in the sense

that when someone does not bear the risk of their own behavior, it is instead borne by others, which may include Yourself. Because if some people do not spend the money they receive on their basic needs, but on something else that is useless or even harmful to society, such as alcohol, tobacco or gambling, then You, as an honest tax- and contributor payer, are partially financing it. This is what is called moral hazard in economics, because someone else benefits and someone else bears the damage.

As a general rule, low incomes are less likely to be spent on unnecessary or harmful things by poorer people, who are generally better able to appreciate what little they have. (Although there are of course a fair number of exceptions in this regard, too.) But since other factors also play a major role in the extent to which they are able to succeed in a society, there is a risk that many people would not be able to overcome their disadvantage, in spite of the help provided by basic income. And for those who, because of their more favorable situation, are not forced to face deprivation (young people starting their careers, those with well-paid parents or partners, etc.), the unconditional income they receive may indeed – at least in part – motivate them to stay at home or to have fun rather than to work or engage in socially useful activities. The idea of disbursing unearned and therefore often easily wasted money as a matter of right was so repulsive to the Swiss people, for example, that in a referendum in 2016, more than three quarters of voters rejected the introduction of UBI in the country.

However, in 2020, after the outbreak and rampage of the coronavirus pandemic, when many people's livelihoods as workers or entrepreneurs were threatened and the resulting lack of demand pushed economies towards a crisis, the need for a basic income was again raised. Although many governments tried to help and keep the economy moving through various relief measures (wage subsidies, tax breaks, debt freezes, etc.), some went even further.

In Hong Kong, for instance, a one-off grant of HK$ 10,000 (about US$ 1,300) was paid to each resident over 18 years of age. Spain's left-wing government made a regular monthly income available to 850,000 of the poorest families to help alleviate the effects of the pandemic, and plans to extend it to the rest of the population in the future if it works. A similar policy initiative was born in Scotland, where £5,200 (around US$ 6,150) for adults and £2,600 (around US$ 3,070) for children was proposed on an annual basis, with no strings attached. In fact, a motion was also tabled for the whole of the European Union to help citizens in member states hit hard by the pandemic. The head of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis, also called for the introduction of a universal basic income in his book Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future, so that we can all preserve our human dignity, and stop many people living in the poverty trap.

So it appears there is a growing will in the world to tackle extreme social inequalities and injustices, and the crisis situation that hit us on a global level in 2020 has (among other things) highlighted the need for some kind of basic income and more secure benefits in

today's societies. The high level of existential insecurity is accompanied by increasing economic instability, which has become particularly evident in the light of the prolonged and sometimes severe quarantine measures that affected many countries. And if you add to this the number of different factors that can cause a crisis these days (see part one), it seems clear that we need some kind of minimum provision all the time – even when we can't go to work or earn money through other (legal) means.

In addition to the growing number of crises and the mechanization of jobs, our economies are threatened by the ageing of society – especially in (more) developed countries, where pensions must be provided for more and more people, while the active labor force is shrinking. As the declining birth rate in these societies leads to a dramatic increase in the proportion of people of retirement age over time, current public pension systems will no longer be able to provide the level of benefits previously granted, and self-care will be a serious or even insurmountable problem for many. And the process will soon reach, or has already reached, rapidly developing countries: the UN estimates that by 2050, the proportion of people over 60 will rise in virtually every country on Earth. Between 1952 and 2018, for example, average (median) life expectancy rose from 26 to 46 years in Japan and from 24 to 37 years in China, which accounts for almost a quarter of the world's current population, while it is predicted to reach 48 years by 2050.

As a result, raising the retirement age is becoming common practice, which is already well above 60 in many countries, but is expected to rise further in the future (up to 70 or more). Where average life expectancy is very high and a significant proportion of the older population is in such good health that they are able to work at least part-time at this age, this is less of a problem. In such countries, no or only partial old-age pensions are needed for a part of the elderly population, so the overall pension burden on the budget will increase only slightly or not at all, which may even be sustainable under the current economic framework conditions. In the rapidly ageing societies of less developed countries, however, this is not an option, as a significant proportion of older people are no longer able to work, and slowing down the ageing process presents a major challenge. At the same time, the growth of their economies can be fundamentally hindered by those who emigrate in the hope of better opportunities and a higher standard of living.

So, in addition to the obvious social problem, ageing can also present a serious issue to the economy in terms of the need to find a way to replace the labor force. The other side of the coin is represented by some developed countries that see the solution in migration, which can be helpful in avoiding a drastic increase in the retirement age. But as we have seen, excessive immigration can cause serious cultural tensions, and second- or third-generation immigrants often expect the same treatment from the state as natives. And then add to all this the effects of the burgeoning crises and the inevitable increase in automation, and it is imperative that we fundamentally reassess our current understanding of the labor market and the economy.

I think, Dear Reader, that by now the tendency is clear to You, too, that as technology and our economies develop, the general expectation in society is that we should spend as little of our time and energy as possible on activities aimed at self-preservation – or, if we look at it from the other side, depend on human labor as little as possible. But this is a perfectly natural process in the sense that, in the evolution of an intelligent species, the provision of basic goods and the everyday activities of people tend to become as divorced over time as procreation and sexuality. Not so long ago, in the absence of modern family planning and effective sexual protection, our ancestors had to seriously reckon with the possibility of having a child if they had an intimate relationship, even if they had no such plans. Today, however, in the vast majority of cases – at least in more developed cultures – the purpose of sexual intercourse is clearly not the preservation of the species, but the shared pursuit of pleasure, and thus the satisfaction of our sexual instincts and emotional needs.

These are just as much a part of our basic human deficiency needs, and the motivations that drive us, such as hunger, thirst or sleepiness, even if their lack does not appear so quickly and spectacularly. In order to live in a healthy and truly civilized way, we need the conditions, environment and infrastructure that enable us to meet these needs, regardless of current circumstances and how they change. Food, water, housing, clothes, medicines, health care and more are always needed by society, including in times of crisis and high unemployment. In essence, this means that basic goods and services must be provided to all, preferably in all circumstances, if we are to truly see everyone as equal in society. This is entirely consistent with the definition of the economy in the previous chapter, that its primary purpose is the production of goods and services in order to meet our needs – which does not necessarily mean that all of this provides someone with profits or even just livelihood.

At the same time, completely regardless of this, it is equally true that people's livelihoods and their participation and inclusion in society must be addressed under all circumstances, otherwise society itself will not be 'healthy'. Following the previous analogy, one could say: we must provide individuals with opportunities for social participation and to perform activities beneficial to their communities not necessarily to ensure that our basic and other needs are met, but primarily to ensure that their needs for self-esteem and self-actualization, higher up the Maslow pyramid, are not compromised.

If there is a persistent shortage on either side, affecting a significant proportion of the population, the stability and sustainability of society could be seriously threatened. If we cannot find our identities and our place in society, if we do not have the opportunity for development, self-fulfillment and integration, or if we follow false values, this can lead to lasting mental health issues or even disorders and, overall, to collective social decay. And if the continuous satisfaction of basic needs is not ensured, then people will eventually start rioting and looting, which threatens with social disorder, anarchy and widespread violence.

The long-term solution is to ensure that both basic and higher needs are met – but rather than trying to solve them all together, we need to give them maximum attention separately (though not independently). This is a fundamental principle of the nurturing society, which I believe will play a key role in creating and running a sustainable global civilization. An integral part of this concept is the introduction of some form of basic income to ensure that our basic needs are indeed met on an ongoing basis, preferably for all of us.

In the light of the above, it is very likely that the same criticisms of the nurturing society will arise as for UBI: the disconnection between income and work. But You must see, Dear Reader, that just because in the future more and more tasks and jobs directly related to self-preservation, or even other tasks, will be done by machines for us, it does not mean that all our tasks and activities that we can do to fill our days will be completely done away with. On the one hand, we can spend more time on (real) human relationships, our families and social life, our household, the maintenance of our own body and soul, education, sports (even at a professional level) – which, even if they do not generate financial benefits for anyone, are useful activities for the individual, and therefore for society as a whole.

Furthermore, freeing our time from activities related to self-preservation offers an excellent opportunity to orientate ourselves towards more intellectual, creative and social pursuits. As intelligent beings with highly developed brains, we all have the capacity to be creative, to create (something new), whether for the practical use of the fruits of our labor (e.g. a house or a fence), or for its aesthetic or intellectual enjoyment (e.g. a painting or a play). Even activities that originally became widespread because of the need for self-preservation may not be practiced today for this purpose alone – after all, those who garden regularly do not necessarily do it because they want to produce food or profit, but because they do enjoy the process of creating, tidying and caring for the garden, and because they find pleasure in the beauty of the garden that blooms from their work.

This function of creativity in our lives is essentially nothing other than the search for happiness and meaning in our lives, which is essential to live a full and balanced life. The process of creation reduces stress by producing endorphins, colloquially known as a 'happy hormone', making us calmer, more tolerant, cooperative and engaged, and even helping us develop skills we might not have thought we had before. Performing creative activities are thus the perfect way to help us overcome our personal crises and find a way forward that is both beneficial and desirable for us and for society. Thereby creativity, as many have already discovered, is often a way out of the crime trap for people serving prison sentences currently or in the past, or being kept in correctional institutions. Therefore, in the future, we should make it a clear objective in such and similar institutions to support convicts and those in treatment to develop their creativity in various ways.

In addition, our innate creativity can show us a way out not only of sin but also of the trap of consumerism. If we focus on the creativity of our spirit rather than on the accumulation of materials and objects, we can find useful pastime(s) and occupation(s) that dis-

tract us from constant consumption, unnecessary products and services, alleviating or eliminating addictions that impair our psychological state, including our dependence on social networking and other websites. In doing so, we could also partly free the economy from the (material and environmental) burden of producing countless unnecessary consumer goods and junk. To achieve this, it would be useful to help everyone in all walks of life to maximize their creativity, which for many may hold the key to self-actualization that previously seemed unattainable.

Given the chance, our creativity can be tried and tested in many different fields, be it science, engineering and design, the myriad forms of art, gastronomy, the aforementioned gardening, or any other area of culture. All this is made possible by the fact that creativity in some form (or even thousands of them) is dormant in all of us, even if we are not all born creative geniuses like Einstein or Michelangelo. But most of our skills are very developable – especially in childhood, so we need to take extra care to discover and practice them. So it would be useful to inspire children to be creative and teach them in creative ways from the beginning of their schooling, instead of the usually uninspiring conning, as well as the rigid and mainly factual teaching methods. (Nonetheless, if You are able, Dear Reader, You would do well to try out some of the creative activities that the web is a great help in mastering these days.)

At the same time, promoting the fields of the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) sectors among young people is also crucial to ensure the continuity of innovation and the transmission of knowledge. Even if they are not among everyone's personal favorites, we should remember: virtually all the achievements of our civilization today are the result of human creativity in the various sciences. (And those who don't feel any resentment towards all the unnecessary junk that consumer society produces and puts on the market, what right would they have to claim that we spend too much on science?) However, to ensure that science and its achievements are not appropriated by a narrow group of people, it is important that as many of us as possible are familiar with its diverse fields. Its popularization is also important so that these occupations that promote technological progress and automation come to the fore, instead of and alongside the currently fashionable and overcrowded professions (economist, lawyer, etc.).

Meanwhile, of course, we must not forget about social progress and the general well-being of people, so all possible support should be given to the mastering, practicing and promotion of socially-oriented professions and activities. Education, training and development, psychology, healthcare and similar fields will continue to require human presence, empathy and contact – i.e. human labor –, despite the proliferation of machines and AI. Not to mention that, to avoid burnout, it is good to have the opportunity to change careers (even more than once) later in life, as adults or older people, which may require significant educational, counseling and other support – but that's exactly what a nurturing society should be about. While helping us in every possible way to achieve self-fulfillment

and integration into society, it seeks to encourage us by arousing our inner motivations, while setting the right framework and using as few external constraints as possible.

Although there are many arguments in favor of the concept of a nurturing society, the necessity of its application is fundamental in a rapidly evolving global civilization. Why? Well, it is mainly because of the breakneck pace of development that most people's psyches can only process properly if they are constantly receiving external help and guidance. No matter how much today's children are born into a certain environment and learn to use its tools (such as computers, smartphones and the internet) in a seemingly self-evident way, if technology and other external factors change so quickly around them that they are as likely to be gasping at the many new things as their parents in old age. Just as today's elderly people, who have grown up in very different circumstances, often have problems with the internet, credit cards and electronic bills, or even with understanding the new and unfamiliar terms used in the language, many of us may have problems in a decade or two with the acceptance and use of the latest technological advances, as well as the habits and practices that will dominate our world.

As already mentioned in connection with the dangers of technology, our social-spiritual-moral development today is not able to keep up with the explosive development of technology, lagging ever behind by some margin. This is particularly noticeable in the case of sudden changes that occur over a short period of time, which, however, appear more and more frequently and in greater numbers over time. A significant part of this process has been the development of our tools and methods of working – as we have seen, one of the most significant milestones was the settlement and cultivation of the land, which led to an increase in our free time and spare capacity. As this used to happen rather slowly, we had a lot of time to process the new situation, but this is becoming less and less the case today, and, barring some drastic event, progress is unlikely to stop or slow down in the future.

A natural consequence of this process is the phenomenon already mentioned, that we have to deal less and less with activities and work related to self-preservation. But in this case it will be inevitable, and crucial for the survival and sustainability of our civilization, that we will be able to give meaning to our lives even when we seem to be completely useless or unnecessary. While this may seem trivial to some, for many people who have been socialized in an environment with few real opportunities, or who have been used to a certain way of life for decades, it is not an easy task at all. We will therefore need maximum social care to teach and help everyone to know themselves and to find their place in the world – especially if this is needed in adulthood or old age. In addition, we all need to overcome our physical and mental indulgence so that we can remain emotionally balanced and content. This will certainly not be easy, but it is not impossible, either – it just requires the right awareness, support, organization and expertise.

Although changing our way of thinking and our outlook on life involves quite a bit of difficulty and effort, it also promises us many advantages: with less materialism, less con-

sumption and much less waste, a much healthier, more balanced and happier lifestyle, and the uninterrupted development and flourishing of our knowledge, culture and civilization. But if we are honest with ourselves, we have to admit that there is a lot of room for improvement, as current labor market trends are unsustainable. In so-called developed, growth-based economies, competing companies striving for profit maximization and cost minimization want to squeeze as much as possible out of as few employees as possible, which has already led to a significant increase in the demand for psychotherapy and therapists for burnout sufferers.

Burnout is the result of chronic stress at work, with symptoms such as fatigue, anxiety and frequent feelings of tension, reduced work efficiency, negative feelings or indifference to one's work – yet in extreme cases, and after a longer period of time, it can also lead to depression and various psychosomatic illnesses (which affect our body through mental processes), alcoholism and other addictions. In essence, the problem can affect anyone who is often forced to multi-task, has a job with increased attention, responsibility or demands, or regularly works more than the standard hours. For the latter, it is no longer only the time spent physically at work that counts, as we are often constantly available by phone and email, which keeps our stress levels high even outside working hours. In addition to the mental strain, experiences that directly affect the psyche put even more burden on us, making us more prone to burnout, for example when working with sick or even dying people in the health sector.

The phenomenon of burnout is not limited to certain levels within a company, as it can affect everyone from highly paid managers and executives to lower-level employees – with the only difference being that people in the latter category are often forced to take on more than one job to make a living, leaving them little time for family, children, friends and themselves, which is hardly enough for anything. Not only does this deny one the opportunity for a quality life, but it often destroys the family and social life of those affected, and can even mean the end of their lives. Just as in the case of the Amnesty International researcher who committed suicide in 2018, successfully drawing attention to the problem with his actions, however – as in the case of similar tragedies in general – this time too, the effect faded away very quickly and did not bring about any fundamental changes.

The situation is aggravated by the fact that many people define their identity solely based on their job – according to a survey conducted in the US state of Illinois, almost 70% Millennials think this way. But if You do so, and things do not go well at work for an extended period of time, or You are unexpectedly dismissed, sooner or later You are likely to ask Yourself: "Who am I, after all?" For this reason alone, it seems to be wrong to identify with a single job or company as a life strategy – but add to this the gradual spread of automation and mechanization, and it likely becomes entirely obvious why we will increasingly need to be able to give real meaning to our lives. Man, being an intelligent creature, with a very considerable brain and intellectual capacity and an extremely complex psyche, cannot by nature help himself if he is left without a goal and is forced to be bored for a

long time. When he feels useless, he tends to invent and commit all sorts of things that may not be at all useful to society and may even be self-destructive (see alcohol, drugs, gambling, online venting and their ilk) – but, as we have seen many times before, even violence or warfare may also be an option to release tension...

Perhaps to some extent for this reason, but at least as much for the sake of maintaining the current socio-economic system, both companies and politicians prefer us not to think too much about such things, and to use our intelligence characteristic of Homo sapiens only when it is in the interests of our employer and the growth of the economy. And while some people are being exploited to the limit at work, others don't even have a job or any kind of permanent source of income. Here we need to think not just in terms of one country, but also on a global scale, because the world's economies are now very interdependent, which can set off chain reactions. (If, for example, factories are not operating as usual in China, markets in other countries can also be affected rather negatively.) The social problems caused by inadequate economic and political conditions also have an impact on the populations of the more developed countries, in the form of excessive immigration, migration waves, cultural tensions or even spill-over crises.

While a secure income is essential for the stability and sustainability of our economies and societies, too little attention is paid to its absence. In spite of the general criticism of the basic income that it eliminates the connection between work and income, we should see that today a smaller and smaller share of income is derived from earnings and benefits directly linked to work. The statistics clearly show that between the 1980s and 2014, the share of labor income in (more) developed countries fell from 54% of the GDP to 50.5%. (To a lesser, but still demonstrable extent, the same thing happened in less developed economies.) The question is: what could be behind this?

Advances in technology and the increasing mechanization are only one root component of the causes, and not even the most serious of them - the free flow and promotion of capital, the weakening of workers' representation and the decline in real earnings, rising commodity prices and greater investment demand (especially in the energy and mining industries, as well as in construction and real estate), the rise of multi-billion IPPs (intellectual property products), and the rising share prices and capital of tech giants, all contribute to a gradual decline in the share and relative rewards of labor. One could also say that human labor is increasingly just one of the necessary components of profit generation – like other means of production, raw materials, energy or technological knowledge –, for as long as it is needed at all. However, the time may soon come when many investors, entrepreneurs, owners and business leaders will think that the more they remove the often capricious, unpredictable, fastidious and expensive human element from the process, the easier it will be for them. This kind of thinking also foreshadows an increasing separation between work and the satisfaction of our basic needs, which is practically self-preservation.

The gradual decoupling of income from work is therefore already well underway, and will become even more so in the future if current trends continue. Just as it is no coincidence that the top ten percent globally own a significant share of total wealth, as their incomes tend to continue to swell in comparison to real earnings. As we know, earnings from work accounts for a smaller and smaller share of our total income as our wealth grows, while income from capital can grow exponentially (i.e. at an accelerating rate). While this generally carries the risk of higher losses, too, for those who spread their assets sufficiently and invest them in different fields, the risk of total bankruptcy and impoverishment is minimal. (That is, of course, until there is a general crisis affecting all the players in the economy.)

I guess You have heard the common example, Dear Reader, that if You were to take home a major lottery win, You could easily 'live off' the interest from the money You have tied up for the rest of Your life. (This can be called pure moneyspinning without further ado.) In fact, you would need roughly $250,000 of capital today, which may seem like a lot at first, but it is not even close to the millions that can sometimes be won in the lottery or the wealth of the richest citizens. But the more they own the means of production, machinery, real estate, IPPs and so on, the more they own the benefits generated, as well. And whatever proportion of that is reinvested or used to secure their own well-being, that alone will not put bread on our table, have our bills paid, provide You or me with a home or clothing – or even a table to begin with.

Yet in many countries of the world today, labor is taxed more heavily than capital, in line with supply-side economics, so that only a small part of the wealth from profits can be used to finance areas of importance to society as a whole. In addition, tax havens such as the Cayman Islands, the British Virgin Islands, Panama, Luxembourg, Switzerland or the Netherlands offer particularly favorable tax conditions for companies – even if they do not do any business in the country, but are only registered there because of the low tax rates. (Meanwhile, countries where they make a lot of profit benefit at most from tax revenues on the sales of their products.) According to the US National Bureau of Economic Research, in 2017, money held in so-called offshore accounts accounted for around 10% (!) of the world's total wealth and GDP, a proportion that is unlikely to have decreased in the few years since.

The value-distorting effect of the supply-demand market is also a source of significant income and wealth inequalities, as already noted in relation to celebrity culture and elitism. As a result of this, some individuals do not receive an income in proportion to what they deserve in terms of their real utility to society as a whole, but in proportion to what they are worth in the eyes of a particular group that employs or benefits from them, based on the material gains they make. But it is true not only for them, but also for many of us in more developed economies that we are stuck in 'bullshit jobs', doing superfluous activities, creating unnecessary things, or providing the financial, logistical and other backing for such processes. (The term 'bullshit job' comes from anthropologist David Graeber, who in

his book Bullshit Jobs explains in detail his otherwise very instructive observations on the subject.)

In practice, this means, among other things, that many of the best minds are now working in banks, financial and legal services or PR consultancies, rather than as doctors, teachers, engineers or scientists. How is that possible? Obviously because nowadays, it is in the former areas that you can potentially 'strike it rich' and earn the most money for the same or less investment of time and energy, while the traditional professions are gradually losing recognition. Many of us, for similar reasons, take jobs at reputable and successful manufacturing companies that churn out all sorts of tangible products, regardless of how much people and society really need them. In his book Utopia for Realists, which has become famous in professional and certain civil circles, Rutger Bregman puts it roughly as follows: instead of using high productivity to spend less time, money and energy to produce what we need, we in the consumer society produce more of what will soon become unnecessary waste.

This completes the vicious circle of the strictly materialist economic concept. While the people who work in it, often struggling with burnout, sometimes don't even know whether they work to eat or eat to work, on the other hand, those who control the money and properties needed to produce it sometimes don't even understand whether they are producing more goods and services to make more money, or they are making more money to produce more goods and services. The focus is always on the process itself, on the running of the commodity- and money-producing machine, partially or totally independently of the actors and factors involved and affected by it.

Meanwhile, the creation of real value is increasingly taking a back seat to moneyspinning activities. While the economy and society would do very well without the contribution of a large number of bankers, marketers, corporate lawyers, PR consultants and brokers, the (often underpaid) work of teachers, nurses, plumbers and technicians, police officers, firefighters and even garbagemen is essential to our daily lives. So the difference between earning and making money, while not always spectacular, can actually be quite significant.

Lawyers, for example, play an important role in making laws and administering justice, but when they represent companies in significant numbers that profit from and sustain the consumer society, they benefit them rather than society as a whole. Or there are the banks, which can do a lot for the community to support an excellent idea, but their actions can be all the more damaging when they give out unsecured loans or engage in risky transactions to maximize their own profits. But even for a financial adviser, there is a world of difference between giving a family good advice on how to manage and save their money, and trying to push the services of the companies they represent on the people.

But whether it is financial speculation or any other area of the economy that is about spinning money, it remains primarily the preserve of the rich, be it corporations or individuals. After all, as we know, to make money, You basically need one thing: as much

money as possible – which, if You are clever enough, can generate a very significant demand for almost any product or service.

However, by their very nature, such activities and pursuits are often not only meaningless, but are either completely useless and unnecessary, or downright harmful to society. It seems as if, to compensate for the gradual mechanization of productive and service work processes and jobs, we have created a lot of pretend work and positions, essentially to have a job and an income, and to continue to have some excuse to make money. So while it is true that many jobs have disappeared as a result of the automation made possible by technological progress, they have been replaced in many cases by such meaningless ones.

Nevertheless, the trend towards mechanization is unlikely to stop in the near future, which means that we can expect more jobs that are in some way socially useful to be lost. Of course, there will still be a fair number of jobs that we wouldn't trust machines to do – for example, for some time to come, only humans will be suitable for jobs such as teachers and educators, nurses and social workers –, but they continue to be paid much less than people in the current fashion professions. Unless there is a fundamental change in attitudes, the gap between income from (useful) work and income from other activities may widen even further in the future, rather than closing. And if the proportion of people living near or below the poverty line increases as real incomes and jobs fall, the need for various types of benefits and targeted support will also increase, otherwise both the viability of the economy and social stability could be threatened.

The biggest problem with benefits, however, is that they almost preserve people in their current situation, because they encourage them to get money by maintaining them. As a condition for receiving a benefit is the existence of a problem, the beneficiary has the greatest immediate interest in proving and thereby maintaining it. Moreover, benefits are usually insufficient to start any change, proven by the fact that that poverty has not been eradicated even in the most developed economies that use them. In his book, Bregman summarizes the dilemma briefly but to the point: "The pension system and employment protection rules are still keyed to those fortunate enough to have a steady job, public assistance is rooted in the misconception that we can rely on the economy to generate enough jobs, and welfare benefits are often not a trampoline, but a trap".

So it is clear that the problem of lifting up the poorer classes and eradicating poverty cannot be solved by our current systems, either. (And the more crises we have to face, the more this will be true.) But if they cannot eradicate poverty, or at least reduce it in a tangible way, while they ensure the survival of consumer society, then whose real interests do they serve outside the top ten percent?

No matter how we look at it, the problem of social justice and sustainability always comes back to the question of how earnings from work and incomes from other means are being earned. If You, Dear Reader, are one of those who believe that without a job, no one deserves any benefits or income, consider the following: those who earn many times more

than the average income and amass vast fortunes compared to others, how much do they deserve it, how much do they actually work for it? Especially if they come from 'bullshit jobs' that are not useful for society, but only in terms of GDP, or from simple moneyspinning? While at the same time, women in the household, parents raising their children, people caring for their relatives or tending their own homes and gardens are not rewarded at all?

In this context, we also need to think about the cardinal question of whether anyone can be entitled to anything as a matter of birthright. If we assume that in a civilized society everyone has the right to have their basic needs met, then the answer is absolutely yes. (Because a birthright means not only to have the possibility to do something, but also to ensure that everyone can actually exercise their right.) This cannot, of course, be enforced in any way or circumstance – for example, by taking from others illegally – but must be guaranteed by the social system that society operates. And not just in childhood, but also in adulthood and old age, as our basic needs continue throughout our lives.

But another basic principle of a nurturing society is precisely that it makes a difference whether we punish someone for their mere existence, or whether we reward, encourage and support them. If a person does nothing, just lives and breathes (or perhaps occasionally makes mistakes and does some bad things), do we punish him for it, or help him to rise and prosper? There is a fundamental difference between the two approaches: while the latter is positive and constructive, the former is negative, restrictive, exclusionary and dominating. I believe that a civilized society should certainly not start disciplining its members in the area of their basic livelihood, as this is not justified either by humanistic or sustainability considerations.

This is particularly important and inevitable in a modern society and economy in which the conditions are fully in place for the universal provision of the most basic needs. Thanks to the modernization of the economy and technology and the use of increasingly advanced methods and machinery, industrial and agricultural productivity has increased significantly, especially in the more developed countries, compared to the Industrial Revolution or even the post-World War II boom. Increased efficiency, combined with the population explosion, has meant that masses of people no longer need to work in sectors directly related to self-preservation to meet our most basic needs (agriculture, the processing, textile and clothing industries, public utilities, etc.), allowing a single worker to meet the needs of many more consumers than before.

Although industrialization and mass production undoubtedly raise the issue of sustainability, by constantly improving our tools and methods, changing our lifestyles and controlling our population, we have a chance to preserve our natural environment. From the point of view of social sustainability, however, the problem is that the benefits of increased productivity are largely accruing to the already swelling wallets of the ruling class. Despite the fact that productivity has risen steadily (in almost all countries in the more developed part of the world), wages have barely increased in recent decades, often only enough to

keep pace with inflation – yet vulnerable workers have been forced to take jobs or work on lower incomes. Moreover, due to the extremely materialistic and profit-driven nature of the economy, many people have found their way (or have simply been forced into) 'bullshit jobs' and positions in moneyspinning fields instead of the socially useful or creative jobs that are often not rewarded as such, but which create real value.

For the sake of the moral state and stability of our societies, it is vital that we put an end to these tendencies as soon as possible. As You have seen so far, Dear Reader, the two main aspects of the issue are mental health, i.e. the preservation of our spiritual wellbeing, and the problem of social inequalities. To succeed in both, we will definitely need the solutions and institutions of a nurturing society – if only because an unchained economy driven by existential opportunism and a faulty system patched up with benefits will hardly be able to do so on its own.

So in order to equalize social conditions, a radical rethinking and reform of the redistribution of goods will be essential. As I mentioned earlier, money and resources need to be (re)directed to where they are most needed in society – but this cannot be done by patching up holes, only by comprehensive regulation. However, if we allow the financial sector and large profit-oriented corporations in general to play at least as big a role in the distribution of wealth as governments, we should not be surprised if much of it is not accumulated where it was created, let alone where it would be of most use to society as a whole. After all, the question is not what the economy needs to sustain a consumer society driven by profit maximization and growth, but what the society of humans needs – what we, the people, want for the future.

But in order to reallocate resources appropriately, it is essential to carry out a comprehensive optimization, which is essentially a rationalization and democratization of the economy, under the social control outlined previously. And a capitalist democracy as such does not really exist, because the power in the hands of those with much more money and resources distorts equality (of opportunity) to a significant extent – especially as laws and legislation can often be circumvented or (with the help of politics) shaped to their own liking. True democracy in the economy begins with the fact that no one can decide on their own rewards, but that they must be the subject of a consensus between society and all the economic actors concerned.

However, if marked inequalities are already present due to previous conditions, we must do everything possible to reduce them by maximizing incomes and wealth and guaranteeing a certain minimum for everyone. While the former has already been discussed in detail in the chapter 'Cutting Our Clothes According to Our Cloth', the latter can clearly be addressed by some kind of basic income – yet it is crucial in what way and in what environment it is implemented. If the economic system itself is not changed, but the concept of a basic income is simply inserted into the existing 'framework' without further ado, then we cannot be surprised if it will be unfundable and unsuccessful, or at least of dubious outcome, especially in the longer term.

The essence of a basic income is therefore precisely that it constitutes a lower bound on private income and wealth, made possible by the redistribution of the wealth produced by the modern economy. If we make sure that no one in a society can have more than a certain level – and if it is technically possible to set a certain minimum, why not a maximum? –, then the necessary coverage would in fact already be provided. Of course, it may well be that the environment in which You grew up, Dear Reader, did not convey this to You, but thinking it through with common sense I can only tell You: in a truly civilized, human-centered and sustainable society, the undemocratic thing is to allow the accumulation of as much wealth as one can, not the opposite. Thus, the emphasis should be on reducing glaring inequalities and leveling out the fields of opportunity and overall quality of life.

As discussed earlier, it all starts with a conscious civil society and continues with the mainstreaming of the controlled economy. If the latter is successfully achieved in a society, thus allowing the gradual elimination of disproportionately high incomes and wealth, then all that is needed is to catch up those at the lower end of the social spectrum, to improve their financial situation, their bargaining power and thus their quality of life. Thereby it also becomes possible to dispense with the possibility of making the basic income conditional on wealth or other earnings. While it is true that it offends many people's sense of justice if the wealthy get anything for free from the commons, it is inevitable if we want others to benefit, and they are the ones who really need the help. At the same time, under a controlled economy, social pressure would allow essentially everyone to participate in the process of limiting wealth and thus radically reducing inequalities.

If the controlled economy driven by collective consciousness were to take over the role of the current market economy, it could basically remove all obstacles to financing. After the fall of the dictatorship of money, it would be possible, among other things, to impose taxes on corporations above a certain size or income, to introduce a carbon tax to punish increased greenhouse gas emissions, to tax and limit excessive private wealth and income, to transfer the surplus of wealth into public ownership (see the limiting of inheritances). By eliminating the majority of benefits, a significant part of government spending could also be saved or redeployed. And if there are no conditions attached to the payment of the basic income, bureaucracy would become much less of an issue, and there would be no errors, mistakes, fraud or related extra costs in establishing entitlement.

Nevertheless, the unconditional distribution of free money may still be a serious problem for many people who cannot accept, or at least find fundamentally unfair, the concept of a regular income without work. Reality shows that unless you can win majority support for such a radical measure, it has virtually no chance of being implemented. In a very difficult, lengthy and uncertain process, it may be possible to convince the doubters, but the change we need now to ensure a minimum quality of life is crucial in the fight to reduce social inequalities and achieve sustainability. (It would therefore not be a good idea to wait for crises like the financial crisis of 2008 or the economic hardship that began after the

COVID-19 outbreak to convince us, which are expected to increase in number the near future.) Additionally, as we know, feelings of aimlessness and misplacement due to a lack of employment or a sense of uselessness also poses serious social problems.

The solution, in my view, would be to try to replace basic income – at least initially – with universal basic services (UBS), in line with the fundamental human rights laid down by the United Nations. Accordingly, the generic term 'universal basic services' essentially covers the benefits and services necessary to meet our basic needs, which are considered to be an indispensable or fundamental part of our lives in modern and highly civilized societies of today and even tomorrow. In 2017, experts at the Institute for Global Prosperity, run by University College London, laid the foundations for this in their study Social prosperity for the future: a proposal for Universal Basic Services.

According to this, universal basic services include:

1) Food
2) Shelter
3) Health Care
4) Education
5) Transportation
6) Information
7) Legal & Democracy

Of these, basic health care and education are now free for all in the United Kingdom, and the institutions of law and democracy are also functioning (if not necessarily optimally), providing a useful starting point. The authors have added four more basic services, in line with the modern concept of the welfare state, with the extension of free solutions for the most deprived in food and housing, and free bus travel for all ages, with the prospect of free public transportation for all. And by information services, they mean basic access to telephone, internet and television, in order to level the playing field in terms of job opportunities and chances to participate in democracy as an informed citizen.

While it can be seen that the concept is essentially more of a modest groping towards full universal basic services, it more or less covers the necessary fundamentals. For my part, I would add to the above general social care (care for the elderly and the needy, etc.) and a full range of social, financial, psychological and other types of expert advice and guidance – their availability is as important to human dignity and the health of society as any other factor that may arise in relation to collective care. However, making all forms of public transport free of charge would be an important step from the point of view of environmental protection alone, just as it is in our vital interest that no one should be left without adequate shelter that meets basic standards of hygiene and other basic requirements.

And as far as food is concerned, access to it in sufficient quantity and quality must be seen as a basic requirement in a modern society, otherwise one of the most fundamental conditions for a dignified life is compromised. If we want to rightly see ourselves as mem-

bers of a civilized society, we cannot for one minute longer allow some of our fellow human beings to go hungry, for whatever reason, while many throw away the food they have left, or some stuff themselves with delicacies imported from distant countries. However, we cannot avoid opportunism-based food insecurity through occasional benefits and donations, but only through a continuous supply system.

We must therefore aim to ensure that everyone, regardless of their employment status, has access to a certain basic level of food and drinking water, which means at least 2,000 kcal and 2 liters of water per day for adults and proportionally less for children. This could be distributed on a monthly basis in the form of non-transferable vouchers in order to avoid black marketeering. (Although it may seem rather odd that the rich should receive food vouchers in the same way, social pressure could be extended to them without further ado, either directly or through foundations, to hand over the basic food they are entitled to those who really need it.) The vouchers would be redeemable only for products necessary for a sufficiently varied diet, which would not include alcoholic beverages, unhealthy soft drinks, fast food and snacks, let alone various expensive luxury items (caviar, lobster, truffles, etc.), but could be supplemented by vouchers for a minimum amount of cleaning products.

Unconditional provision is also important because experience with job-linked subsidies shows that they significantly reduce the participation rate of the most deprived, while employment is only marginally increased at best. As the 2019 US study Work Requirements Don't Work showed, tightening rules make claimants less able to qualify, and therefore fewer people are able to access assistance, including food vouchers. The authors found that the employment and reporting burdens associated with programs that contribute to meeting basic needs tend to violate three principles: accessibility, generosity and empowerment. Accessibility refers to ensuring that accessing support is not too difficult and complicated, i.e. that it does not cost unnecessary time and effort because of the many obstacles the person in need has to overcome. Generosity or indulgence is necessary because people in financial difficulties are usually more prone to make mistakes, due to the increased mental and emotional strain. And empowerment means that to rise out of poverty, a person must actually believe that they can change their life, and to do so, they must be treated with confidence and dignity.

The provision of the basic services listed above would pretty much achieve all that can be expected from a nurturing society that truly cares for all its members to the maximum, with almost no people starving, homeless, begging, suffering and dying from curable illnesses, illiterate, uninformed and constantly being mistreated. From a society in which the risk of unnecessary suffering and death, contrary to a civilized way of life, and the insecurity of existence, can be reduced as much as possible for everyone. And while it is true that some benefits and basic services are extremely expensive to provide, they would also allow us to save a significant amount of money and resources compared to not helping the mass-

es in need. (That is because of additional spending – see benefits, homelessness issues, crime, health care costs, etc.)

But if You think about it, Dear Reader, it makes perfect sense that everyone should have their basic needs met as a basic right, but that they should only have money to spend freely if they do something useful for society. This was also Bertrand Russell's original idea at the beginning of the 20th century – although he was talking specifically about income as a fundamental right in the form of a cash benefit, its purpose was clearly to meet the basic needs of the people. It is the basics that everyone in a developed society deserves, while for everything else we want, we have to put something on the table that is (truly) useful to the community or society.

The ideal case would obviously be for everyone who does anything useful, such as housework or childcare, to receive some kind of reward for doing so – but how much someone cooks, plumbs, tinkers, cleans or does the washing up at home, or how good and conscientious a parent they are, is obviously not something that can be measured or controlled. However, children should also receive the same basic benefits, albeit at a proportionately lower rate, but with priority given to their education and upbringing needs. It is also essential that the elderly receive the same basic services as adults – on top of a work-based old-age pension, of course. Thus, should there be more pensioners in the future, it will not be an insurmountable problem for them if there is less pension per person. (If, on the other hand, the productivity or efficiency of the economy continues to increase, and the redistribution of wealth becomes more controlled and equitable, or even if healthier people in old age stay active longer, this need not necessarily be the case.)

At the same time, the universal basic service scheme does not totally exclude the introduction of other benefits, including cash benefits and subsidies, which are subject to conditions or are provided on a subjective basis. If required, they can continue to be experimented with at state or local level – but always taking into account who really needs them, and ensuring that such help is matched with appropriate professional support and advice where needed. The time may come in the future, after a few generations, when there will no longer be extreme differences in wealth between people, and when the benefits of the goods produced (to a large extent by machines) will be freely available to all, beyond basic services.

Nevertheless, when introducing a basic income or any kind of basic benefit, it is extremely important to apply the principle of gradualism and to create the right social, cultural and economic background. As we have already seen, this means, on the one hand, that an unsustainable consumer society based on a liberal market economy needs to be replaced by a strictly regulated, constantly controlled economy. On the other hand, in order for this to happen at all, it is crucial to raise public awareness and knowledge as soon as possible, as many people today cannot even get their own finances in order, let alone navigate through the intertwining labyrinths of the economy and politics. That is why people – young people and adults alike – need to be taught in due course how to manage

their money, how to be frugal, responsible and disciplined in their spendings and lifestyles, and how to think in a creative, (self-)critical and collectively conscious way.

A nurturing society should also aim to ensure that each individual finds his or her place and becomes a useful member of society – even if it does not necessarily make work itself compulsory. The main dilemma, however, is that self-actualization and work in maintaining and running the economy and society often do not coincide. A 2017 Gallup poll found that 85% of employees globally are not engaged with their employer or their job – which is not necessarily the same as hating Your employer or what You do, but not feeling that it is a vocation or something that You enjoy doing and can fulfill You as a person. So, for most of us, work is largely about earning money, while – if our time, energy and wallet allow – we try to find something else to do that gives us satisfaction and happiness.

So, if You happen to have a job, Dear Reader, and You feel good about Your position, remember that there are many people who are not so lucky – either because they are forced into a job that is not really suitable for them, or because they are not given (enough) variety and opportunity to develop, or in many cases they are simply overworked. But when they do complain, the answer is often that there are many people in the world who have no jobs at all, so "You should be happy just to have a job, anyway". Moreover, even today, there is a widespread perception that only those activities that we do not enjoy in the slightest are considered real work, but that we give in and 'sacrifice ourselves' in exchange for money and a living. However, this is by no means a good or desirable approach, as our daily activities, our motivation, our sense of satisfaction and usefulness largely determine our general well-being, our mental state, our physical and mental health, and not least our productivity.

Therefore, in the long term, it is clearly in the interest of our economies and societies to pay maximum attention to making jobs and the positions provided by companies as bearable and attractive as possible, as well as to improving working conditions. One way of doing this is to democratize companies, effectively combining the traditional top-bottom corporate governance strategy with bottom-up management, so that every employee can actively participate in the running of the company as much as possible, feeling it as their own. In addition, replacing directors and managers that are often governed by a system of directives, and who mostly seek the favor of owners and investors, with managers who understand people and care about employees can make a significant difference. (Which, for example, is perfectly suited to the training of coaches with expertise in the psychological field of personal skills development.)

While there are skills we can develop and professional knowledge we can constantly improve through learning and experience, our basic personality and attitudes, our innate gifts, talents and abilities do not usually change throughout our lives. This should also be taken into account as much as possible when filling vacancies and allocating jobs and

tasks, but in this is often not the case today, or is done only occasionally. (Especially when we are looking at a wider community, or even a whole society.)

On the one hand, it is true that during various tests and interviews, applicants are indeed screened on the basis of their different qualities, as is the basic approach of recruitment agencies, which take into account professional knowledge and experience. On the other hand, incompetent workforce is eventually (or even very quickly) eliminated – yet the problem is often not the employees themselves, but the jobs and the system that produces them, which is too much based on the needs of (money-driven) companies. So, unfortunately, it is not enough for companies to recruit through the HR people and the headhunters they pay. In a nurturing society, every individual's career needs to be paved, not just with specific job offers, but with full support and advice, including a thorough assessment of personality traits and aptitudes.

It makes a big difference, for example, how patient You are, how long You can concentrate on one thing, how well You tolerate monotony, etc. Because of these differences, some of us can do a particular type of work more easily or for longer, while others are completely psyched out by it. Our goals, desires and thus our expectations can be very different, which greatly influences which levels of Maslow's pyramid of needs we stay on the most. Some people are happy in a less varied job, and the light chatting and socializing with colleagues, allowed at intervals, is enough to recharge their batteries for their next task. For some, family and friends, and a social life in general, are everything, while others have a strong need for challenges or higher goals at the top of the pyramid, which is in essence personal fulfillment. In other words, who is really suited to what is highly dependent on their character and attitude, so this should also be taken into account as much as possible in the social division of labor. (It is not at all fortunate or humane, however, if selection or reward depends not only on personality and aptitude, but also on, for example, whether someone is male or female, black or white, immigrant or not – and so on.)

As far as I'm concerned, I have done a variety of jobs in my life, as well: I worked in an office for a multinational for a number of years, but I have also cleaned the premises of a waste management company. And while I have never considered either of these to be my life's goals, what I could not bear in the long term is to be a puppet of consumer society or any arbitrary power, or to slave away in the same soulless job, devoid of thought and creativity, for the rest of my life. Nevertheless, I do not believe it would ultimately be beneficial for society to force me or anyone else into a job where they cannot use their strengths and talents, which could be put to much better use in another position or role. If they do so, it is once again nothing more than pigeonholing, which is not at all good for the satisfaction and development of the individual, nor for the healthy functioning of society and the economy.

At the same time, as already mentioned, it is also true that most of us show talent in many different things, even if we are often unaware of it. Therefore, on the one hand, it is indeed necessary to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to try different things and

change jobs from time to time, in order to achieve the necessary variety and avoid lack of motivation and burnout – first and foremost for those who specifically need it due to their personality. On the other hand, everyone needs to be empowered to achieve self-actualization – which, in my case, includes sharing my thoughts with others as an essential. The ultimate goal should be for all of us to be able to do work that really suits us, our skills and our individuality, while companies contribute to the economy by doing what is useful and necessary for society.

Of course, there are many jobs that are particularly strenuous, unhealthy, dangerous or boring, and therefore almost no one likes or wants to do them, but is forced to do so because of circumstances, lack of other opportunities or the need of money. Although in many cases these tasks are now done for us by machines, this is mostly the case in more developed countries. But even there it depends heavily on the ability and willingness of the employer companies to invest, or even on discrimination against employees - especially when it comes to vulnerable ones, those living close to the breadline, immigrants, people of color, etc. That is why it is important that money flows to where it is needed most, both to catch up with the salaries of those in similar situations and ensure that their basic needs are met, and to automate jobs that are harmful and dangerous to our physical and mental health as soon as possible.

In the long term, the goal of a technical civilization made up of intelligent beings can clearly be to leave all the work and activities that are physiologically impossible, too difficult, dangerous, monotonous and undesirable for humans to those who are best suited for them: soulless, emotionless machines with just enough intelligence to perform their tasks efficiently and safely. It is no coincidence that in the 20th century, machines developed for this purpose were called robots, a name that was coined by the Czech writer Karel Capek in his 1920 play R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots). Accordingly, the term can be traced back to the word *robota*, used in Czech and other Slavic languages, which basically refers to work, and in many languages specifically to unconditional servitude and forced labor. As per the Oxford English Dictionary, a robot is "a machine capable of carrying out a complex series of actions automatically" – this covers a large part of what we use them for, and will use them for in the future. (While we will hopefully exercise the utmost care in developing and dealing with human-like and especially intelligent machines – see earlier.)

Although we are not yet at the point of relying entirely on robots, automatons and machines with some form of artificial intelligence, it doesn't take much foresight to see that the future will be one of increasing mechanization. (As long as we are able to achieve this in harmony with our environment, or if the apocalypse that humanity would rather avoid, the collapse of our civilization, does not come sooner). In the meantime, however, we will still have to employ human labor in many areas and jobs that nobody (or at least most people) would not want to do – just as You probably don't dream of being a miner, a cleaner, a dustman or a sewage inspector Yourself, Dear Reader. Since someone has to

perform these tasks as well, those who are willing to do so should, on the one hand, be rewarded proportionally more than for other jobs, and on the other, we must ensure that they have to spend as little time as possible on this type of work.

Nonetheless, our economies should also operate in a much more efficient and fairer way in general in the division and organization of labor than is currently the case. In a developed society that sees itself as civilized, it is no longer acceptable for some people to toil for eight hours a day or more, while others have no work at all or are forced to support themselves and their families through casual and black jobs. Even the temporary job opportunities provided by public employment programs offer no permanent solution, which can only be achieved by increasing and optimizing the social division of labor. The latter, while sharing the burden more efficiently and equitably, would also allow many more people to enjoy the wealth and goods we produce, while spending less time, money and energy overall on producing all the things we (really) need.

Optimizing the division of labor should therefore ultimately be about getting more people to work less – rather than fewer people earning more. And if as many of us as possible (ideally close to 100%) take our share of the social division of labor, over time it will be enough for one person to work 6 or even 4 hours a day, and the number of working days could be gradually reduced, as well. (Many would argue that the eight-hour workday is already outdated, at least as far as more advanced economies are concerned.)

This is made possible in large part by the rapid expansion of modern production tools and automation, which in some areas can be several times more productive than human labor. At the same time, we must also take into account that the productivity of the human workforce is not decreasing, but rather increasing with a lower workload. The results of research in this field show that working longer hours does not necessarily mean that we get more done – if only because we tend to expand the amount of work to fill the time available for its completion. (This is the so-called Parkinson's Law, formulated by British historian and author C. N. Parkinson back in 1955.) However, frequent overtimes and overwork can not only lead to health and mental health issues, exhaustion and burnout, but is often associated with an increase in errors and a decrease in the rate of effective work (while the share of meaningless or sham work usually increases).

On the other hand, the reduction in working hours is accompanied by a trend towards a reduction in errors made by workers and accidents at work, as already proven by the statistics on the switch from a 10- to an 8-hour working day. All this is, naturally, makes perfect sense in the light of the fact that we now know very well, not only from appearance but also thanks to science: humans are not machines and therefore need to recharge, have variety, social relationships and some time to do other things. Accordingly, by reducing the number of hours we work, our motivation tends to increase, our stress levels decrease, and our ability to work more efficiently is enhanced by maintaining our concentration.

And the efficiency of work is as important as the time spent on it, as the business leaders and managers of our day are increasingly experiencing. For labor productivity has been

growing at a much lower rate in developed economies for decades than in the past, despite our more modern tools and technologies. Although experts in various fields are only speculating about the possible reasons for this, one thing seems certain: employers pay too little attention to ensuring the efficiency of their workforce, as well as the motivation and satisfaction of their employees. Instead, they try to squeeze everything they can out of them, with rather counterproductive results.

This is of course hardly surprising, Dear Reader, since in today's sales-driven market economy it is common practice (in fact, it is expected in most companies) to maximize profits and minimize costs, including labor-related expenses. While increasing the efficiency of work and optimizing the division of labor seems crucial from both a social and an economic point of view, it is much cheaper for companies to employ one person for more hours than to hire more employees and pay their taxes and contributions one by one. But company managers and policymakers, as we see all too often unfortunately, are rarely able to really think long term...

It is true that there has been some improvement in this area, with some leaders making a conscious effort to improve terms and working conditions. The problem is that as long as the economy itself operates along the same principles as it does now, they are basically swimming against the tide, and only the biggest, most capital-rich companies can afford to properly value and reward their workforce. In order for the situation to change, a high degree of cooperation and regulation is needed, instead of companies and businesses being let at each other's throats on a win-lose basis in a free (predatory) economic environment.

However, an optimized economic system implemented in this spirit would allow us to move away from a focus on maximizing profits and cutting costs whatever it takes, and thus to a much greater and more efficient division of labor. Especially if we mechanize every job we can, because then we could use the freed-up capacity to spread the workload across a much larger workforce, which would result in less working time for each person. While it might lead to slightly lower wages (though not necessarily, if productivity increases in the meantime), but on top of the basic benefits everyone gets, it would still be worth taking a job.

In such a system, undeclared work could also be reduced to a minimum – especially if fair wages are achieved through strengthened worker representation supported by civil society. If income tax rates are reduced, it would also be helpful. While a cap on earnings could in theory encourage the use of undeclared benefits, if the market is no longer governed by cut-throat competition, companies will no longer have to bid on each other on wages to acquire workforce with talent and expertise.

Where there is demand, it should also be made possible for people of retirement age to work for income. This too can only be achieved in an economy with a fundamentally different approach from today's, where older people are welcomed and valued in non-mechanized jobs where they can still contribute, rather than being almost completely ex-

cluded. (This may also be possible in a needs-driven, controlled economy, as opposed to a sales-driven one.)

Another means of freeing up and optimizing the use of labor is to eliminate the aforementioned 'fake' or 'bullshit' jobs. Because if we gradually get rid of unnecessary jobs, we will have more people available to do real work that benefits society as a whole, with a better distribution of tasks and working times. For this, on the one hand, we need to ensure that activities that are useful to society are adequately rewarded, while on the other, we need to eliminate positions that are useless or serve the interests of a minority or certain groups that are unsustainable in the long run.

In our economies today, there are also countless superfluous for-profit organizations, which have a collective utility at most in that they provide jobs and thus livelihoods for many of us, but what they do in fact belongs to the absolutely dispensable category. As already mentioned, these partly operate in the manufacturing sector, where there are many companies producing redundant or substitutable goods, or junk that is mostly good only for polluting the environment. But once we finally understand the meaning and importance of collective consciousness, it should become clear why we should encourage and promote the provision of socially useful goods and services rather than activities that profit from maximizing consumption.

Speaking of services: the need to support and channel resources to viable (i.e. sustainable) and socially useful industries and companies is equally true for the service sector, which is taking an ever larger slice of the economy and, at the same time, blowing up into ever bigger balloons. The worlds of gambling, casinos and sports betting, for example, are typical areas where there is a huge amount moneyspinning going on, while they are more socially harmful than beneficial. Financial speculation also contributes to widening inequalities through the often unfair – and especially highly disproportionate – redistribution of wealth, as is the case in many banking, insurance, securities and other transactions.

Therefore, as soon as a system of universal basic services is established in the economy, in order to minimize the power of money, people's vulnerability and social inequalities, the implementation of the following measures is inevitable:
 - the closing of stock exchanges;
 - reviewing lending practices, phasing out and eliminating mortgages;
 - the abolition of commission percentages and commissions in general;
 - a thorough re-evaluation of royalty systems and their dismantling in their current form;
 - the prohibition of gambling in money or any material stakes;
 - other measures aimed at preventing unfairly large and easy income generation.

I am well aware, Dear Reader, that these are very radical steps, but I am also absolutely certain that if they are not taken, our lives will continue to be largely defined by existential opportunism and the existential insecurity that goes with it. "But if we are setting mini-

mums and maximums to reduce income and wealth inequalities, what difference does it make?" You may ask. One problem is that they are not at all easy to enforce (especially the maximums) or to introduce in a short time, so they would probably not be sufficient on their own. On the other hand, it is as important to eliminate jobs, activities and businesses that are unnecessary or harmful to society, to achieve and optimize the social division of labor, and to ensure fairness in rewards as much as possible.

Nevertheless, it is also clear that it can make a lot of difference how and under what conditions the listed measures are taken. For example, the prior implementation of the basic service system is crucial, as it would at least ensure that the basic needs and livelihoods of those who are temporarily without income due to job loss and their families are not compromised, but are taken care of until they find another job with the help of the nurturing society. As for the freezing and reviewing, then phasing out of mortgages, it is necessary so that no one can lose their shelters overnight and become homeless while banks auction off properties to people who don't really need them.

The biggest issue with commission percentages is that the amount of reward acquired in this way often bears no relation to the work done and effort involved. Just think about it, Dear Reader: for example, if a real estate agent charges a 5% commission on sold properties, he can make $5,000 on a $100,000 sale, but $30,000 on a $600,000 deal, while the sale of latter property almost certainly does not cost him six times as much work and expenses. Or in the case of a bank transfer, if we calculate a transaction fee of 0.3%, we are charged 30 cents for a $100 transfer and $30 for a $10,000 one, even though the execution of both operations involves exactly the same expenditure. For similar reasons, the much higher interest rates charged on loans compared to bank deposits cannot necessarily be considered fair, either, although the increased risk associated with taking out larger loans for longer periods of time may serve as a slight 'mitigating factor'.

In essence, they are all the product of our distorted value system, imposed on us by the rule of money, and which we embrace while greatly exaggerating the value that is actually being added. Stock exchanges are also problematic because they are not directly involved in value creation. Thus, the profit taken for the transactions is essentially nothing more than moneyspinning, and in terms of risk, the whole activity is basically gambling with little actual work behind it. So in this respect, speculation has many similarities with gambling, since essentially neither of them does much else than make rapid and sometimes large-scale transfers of money for non-existent or highly questionable social utility – and nowhere near with as much predictability as, say, unconditional basic income or basic services.

The very idea of eliminating stock exchanges is likely to raise serious questions in the minds of many, and not just in one respect. One of them is currency trading on stock exchanges, which involves a huge number of people around the world, and far from being just those who want to make money on transactions and therefore buy and sell the currencies of different countries. The profitability (or even the solvency) of companies involved

in exports and imports, for example, can be significantly affected by current exchange rates, but the purchasing power of wages can also be affected by the way the currency of a country is bought and sold on the financial markets. If the exchange rate of the domestic currency weakens significantly, the purchase and consumption prices of goods imported from abroad usually also rise. On the other hand, if You are paid in a foreign currency, You may be adversely affected by the appreciation of the domestic currency, as Your earnings may be worth much less overnight. So, while the value of Your work depends on the standings and fluctuations in the exchange rates of currencies in relation to each other, which is basically forced upon You, speculators voluntarily take the risk in order to increase their wealth without having to work for the benefit of society.

It is therefore the task of any society that cares for people, alongside the introduction and use of common currencies wherever possible, to make exchange rates as predictable and stable as possible, while not allowing them to fall prey to speculative activities. Should currencies cease to be traded on the stock exchange, their exchange rates could still be public and perfectly traceable (as well as they should be, in order to ensure transparency.) The point is that exchange rates are determined by consensus among all economic actors instead of the often unpredictable or even artificially stimulated oversupply or overdemand, and by the regulation exercised in a controlled environment instead of the pursuit of profit. Following the same principle, it can be argued that any speculative commercial activity carried out purely for financial gain should be restricted or prohibited. This is the only way to replace a profit-oriented economy driven by expectations and speculation with one determined by (actual) needs and opportunities.

The argument repeatedly put forward in defence of stock markets is that, from the 20th century onwards – and in some countries long before – they have enabled the rise to strength and prosperity of what are now called developed economies. Stock exchanges, which are pivotal in this respect, are in fact public markets that provide a regulated framework for the issuance and trading of various securities and shares, which essentially represent a stake in a public company. By selling shares, the issuers can very quickly raise substantial capital, which they can use to finance or develop the company. At the same time, shares allow their holders to benefit from the company's profits in the form of dividends (when provided), while their sale on the stock exchange at a favorable price can be a very attractive source of income. (Of course, if business goes badly, the value of the shares could plummet significantly from the value at the time of purchase, potentially bringing a loss to the kitchen – this is the gambling-like aspect of the story.)

And while, for the mentioned reasons, the vast majority of economists see efficiently functioning stock markets as crucial to economic development and growth, they are just as much a perpetuator of the dictatorship of money and social inequality. If You look at them closely, publicly traded, open joint-stock companies suffer from precisely what the entire liberal market economy suffers from: a drastic inequality of opportunity for effective participation. Are these companies really in public ownership? Not even by chance... They are

owned by a certain stratum or strata of society, while many people are living on the bread-line, toiling or even unemployed. Can shareholders really influence the operation of companies they partly own? Well, in theory, they can vote in the board of directors, but they need to own at least a few percent of the shares, which requires a lot of investment in the business. The more shares a person or organization owns in a company, the more influence they have – but this also means that those who own more than 50% of the shares can veto any decision they don't like thanks to their majority vote. So ultimately, once again, the will of the rich and powerful prevails...

As for the fact that a company is listed on the stock exchange, it does not necessarily mean that it is engaged in socially beneficial or sustainable activities. A growth-based, supply- and sales-oriented economy makes a lot of things possible, as long as the masses don't take any action against it... And as in the liberal market economy in general, in the stock markets it is not certain that money flows to where it is most needed, but where its holders see the greatest and safest return, motivated primarily by the search for their own material gain, in accordance with the law of existential opportunism. But even so, the stock market listing of a company does not always reflect its true financial situation or value (due to various manipulations), so it may not be a reliable investment at all. In a modern and sustainable economy, however, money should not be invested in a company to make it as profitable as possible, but to enable it to carry out an activity that is beneficial to society as efficiently as possible. (Apart from providing jobs.)

But while stock markets play a major role in distorting social values and economic relations, they are fortunately not even irreplaceable when it comes to the public financing of companies. In order to free this from speculation and individual interests as much as possible, we must strive for companies to be owned by real human communities: municipalities, trade unions, scientific, professional and residential communities, etc.

By minimizing social inequalities and leveling the financial situation of individuals and families, the goal should be to be able to participate as equally as possible in financing the life of our own communities. If more people have money to spend, thanks to basic services and the nurturing society, they will be able to invest more in the community, as well. And the benefits should not appear primarily in monetary terms, but in the goods and services produced, which we can access through basic services and wages earned through work (that is indeed useful to society).

So, a universal basic income or basic services would enable the part of our societies that is still excluded by high inequalities to play a much more active role in the economy – not only by being able to buy more, but also, for example, by being able to participate more easily in community financing. And with the end of bogus jobs and companies, we would finally be able to use money coming from real work, turning it back into companies that provide jobs and activities that benefit society.

At the same time, we also need to recognize that the usefulness of the various commercial activities is a rather slippery slope, which can often fall under the subjective judgement of people. In addition to its massively financial nature, the institution of gambling – including sports betting, which has occasionally been the subject of international scandals – is a popular pastime for many people, with traditions that go back hundreds of years in some cultures (see horse racing in England). Nevertheless, as already mentioned, betting and gambling is more of an addiction than a useful activity regarding our lifestyle. And it is also extremely important to see that there are thousands of other ways to have fun and recharge one's batteries, in a way that doesn't have to involve major cash flow or spending at all.

Of course, with the disappearance of an entire sector and the loss of countless companies and jobs, it is not only the possibility of relaxation and recharging that would be called into question for many. After all, what will happen to those who have had one of these jobs or activities at the center of their lives? Although You probably won't like this, Dear Reader, the only straight answer to this question can only be: whether we like it or not, sooner or later we all have to face the biggest dilemma of our existence, and find real meaning in our lives. Something that is not just about self-preservation, as in nature, but goes far beyond that, and does not include simple escapism to overcome our daily toils and boredom. And that time seems to be right now, as we are on the brink of the greatest intellectual revolution humanity has ever known – thanks to advances in technology and the pressure of the global civilizational crisis.

As we have seen, the range of activities that can give meaning to our lives can vary from person to person because of the differences between our personalities. Yet we can generally say that while creating, discovering and learning, developing oneself, helping, supporting and teaching others, and caring for others are for most of us suitable for a happy life and self-fulfillment, unnecessary consumption and accumulation of materials, mindlessly serving the consumerist machine and doing meaningless, unnecessary work, constantly spinning and hoarding money or exploiting our fellow human beings (or their situation) are usually not. We must therefore strive to live our lives with as little opportunism and materialism at the expense of others as possible, while at the same time we are making ourselves useful in ways that are satisfying for ourselves and society and nurturing our human relationships.

But the purpose of a nurturing society is exactly to actively help us to do all of that. (In addition, with the advance of such a social system, its tasks will provide more and more work, so we will have to redeploy labor to them from pointless, harmful and redundant areas.) And while the meaning of life is something that each of us can only find for ourselves, it must be made possible to the maximum extent for everyone – because we all have the same right to self-actualization. Instead of forcing people into certain positions and situations, we need to keep giving them opportunities, as well as continuous support in the form of guidance and advice. This is what makes equality and freedom truly guaran-

teed, which, in essence, is what makes a society truly civilized. In contrast to societies based on existential opportunism and outdated hierarchies, which, for all their achievements, can never be called fully civilized…

Since, like it or not, we now live in a globalized, interdependent world, our goal must be to ensure that universal basic services are available in every country on Earth – if not otherwise feasible, then through international cooperation, with the help of programs funded and coordinated by the more developed (read: wealthier) economies. As we face more and more crises around the world today, it is now clear that what happens on one side of the planet often has a major impact on the other. The nurturing society therefore needs to become a global concept as soon as possible, but this can only happen if civil society everywhere, in both developed and less developed economies, stands up for it.

This will be much needed if only because, although it is one of the fundamental rights declared by the UN that everyone has the right to leave their own country, in practice it cannot be guaranteed to everyone unconditionally and simultaneously. The main reason why we cannot change our place of residence at will, or let the masses of millions, tens of millions or hundreds of millions move to wherever they want, is because no economy or society can currently bear such a burden – neither materially, nor culturally or otherwise. Therefore, at the beginning, however global the concept, it seems inevitable to link the provision of basic services to citizenship.

At the same time, we must try as much as possible to improve the living conditions and opportunities of communities and societies around the planet that are less fortunate or advantaged, but are ready to work with others. For in a developed, modern and sustainable world, globalization is not the same as exporting consumerism, expanding economic empires and exploitation. Instead, the sharing of goods, resources and knowledge should be the general practice, i.e. cooperation in a spirit of fairness and equal opportunities. If only because if we expect everyone to limit and phase out fossil fuel use to protect our environment, as well as the conservation of forests and wildlife, then we have to give something in return.

In fact, for quite some time now, there have been various non-profit and international organizations trying to help people in less developed and slowly developing countries in some way, whether it is respect for human rights, the legality and freedom of trade, environmental protection and sustainable practices, mitigating the effects of natural disasters, educating children of poor families, or ensuring hygienic living conditions, basic health services, medicines, vaccines and food. The problem with this kind of support is, however, that it is usually too little and often ad hoc, so it tends to fail in making a lasting difference to the vulnerability of those in need, and fails to reach everyone who needs it. As we have already seen in the analysis of aid from richer countries, the beneficiaries of such initiatives and organizations are often in fact their owners and the individuals and organiza-

tions behind them, as well as local, autocratic governments and officials who have only their own interests at heart, rather than those of the population.

In order to increase efficiency and avoid abuses, such activities should be carried out in a uniform, internationally coordinated framework with maximum transparency and accountability. Coordination could take place under the supervision of the UN through its appropriate branches, or perhaps via a completely separate organization made up of representatives of the participating nations. And instead of ad-hoc aid, we need a permanent system and a global network that contributes directly to poverty reduction on a daily basis.

For this to happen, however, it seems inevitable that basic needs must be ensured at global level, for which one possible instrument could the Unified Supply System (US2). This would provide a standardized framework for the continuous provision of basic necessities such as food, clothing, medicines, hygiene products, utensils and equipment to people living in a country or a wider area. (Or even for building residential buildings or neighborhoods and the utilities that serve them.) As well as enabling all participating nations and regions to provide universal basic services, or at least satisfy the most basic human needs, the system would also provide jobs for local people. This would give a new meaning to the nowadays increasingly voiced principle of 'think globally, act locally', which should not only apply to local self-government or waste processing, but to the whole economy, in order to achieve environmental and social sustainability at the same time.

In regions that are not able to build and operate the necessary factories, plants, warehouses and infrastructure on their own, they could be financed by funds from more developed countries. And the availability of goods and services in the right quality and quantity – according to strict standards and requirements – must be continuously monitored and ensured in every part of the world where the system is implemented, just as it should be in any controlled and optimized economy. Furthermore, it is not enough to make them available, it is necessary to ensure that the various goods and services always reach those who need them the most.

At the same time, the production of different foodstuffs, industrial products and services must take maximum account of regional and cultural differences and differences in available resources (flora and fauna depending on the local climate, natural resources, minerals, etc.) – so the goal definitely cannot be to ship the same goods in large quantities everywhere from the farthest corners of the world. (Which does not simply mean that in Asia locally grown rice is the main source of food, while in Canada or Northern Europe bamboo carpets are not mass-produced, but that not just one or a few countries are engaged in the production of various everyday consumer goods just because labor is cheap there.) The point is to primarily manage locally with what we have, and only transport from many thousands or tens of thousands of kilometers when a given product (e.g. grain) or raw material (e.g. non-ferrous metals) is really essential and not unavailable locally.

Reducing the need to transport goods would reduce pollution and pressure on the environment, while it would also allow us to minimize dependencies on global supply chains.

The high degree of globalization of supply chains has meant that if there is a problem in a distant country – be it a natural disaster, political, economic or other crisis –, or if for whatever reason there are difficulties in the continuity of the flow of goods, supply can be disrupted or cut off almost anywhere in the world, causing serious problems in the longer term. (Just look at the supply issues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.) Even the world's most developed economies can be severely affected by such disruptions, and therefore may also be strongly considered for the application of US2 – despite the fact that they generally have far fewer difficulties providing basic goods and services.

Even though these countries are more resilient thanks to their more abundant reserves and more advanced technologies and institutions, they cannot escape the effects of global trends, including climate change. Increasingly frequent droughts and other extreme weather events can lead to a reduction in agricultural yields, which in turn could lead to higher food prices worldwide. Periodic examples of this kind of global food price disruption were seen in the second half of 2010 and in the summer of 2012, when severe droughts in several major producing regions at the same time were the primary causes of a 40 and 20 percent increase in the price of staple foodstuffs. But since similar weather events may become much more frequent in the future than before, their effects can also be expected to add up and accumulate on top of each other. This, according to economists, could lead to major supply problems and downturns in more advanced economies, especially if they rely heavily on imports for basic foodstuffs.

However, the US2 scheme, if introduced alongside universal basic services, could have the potential to increase the resilience of the economy and drastically reduce poverty and deprivation anywhere, while providing jobs for people in regions where unemployment is otherwise high. Thus, it can also provide a chance for advancement and catching-up for communities and societies that are currently not really connected to the economy in an organic way. And if we look at the coverage of factories, plants and other production units, we could also achieve a much more even playing field in this respect, which would also work against the competition between regions for the favor of companies seeking to maximize profits. If we also put more emphasis (and money) on improving and catching up education systems, the skills of the workforce would become less of a barrier.

Nonetheless, it is equally crucial to raise the general awareness and knowledge of the populations of the less developed countries and regions. If that does not happen, it can be feared that people will not be able to take advantage of the opportunities provided to them – and that they may be dragged back into the mire of poverty by politicians, leaders, corporations and other opportunists who often prey on them. Therefore, the institutions set up for this purpose, and the non-profit organizations that work in a coordinated way with them, should seek to reach out directly to those in need wherever possible and work with them to improve their situation.

Thereby we must try to make every country and region as livable as possible – that is, with much more effort and resources, and much closer international cooperation, than has

been the case so far. This is particularly important because we should first try to help everyone where they come from and where they live. Mass immigration, driven by economic considerations, is not a long-term solution to problems anyway. But just think about it, Dear Reader: what good is it for humanity if some places are almost deserted, while others are overwhelmed – in the longer or shorter term – by the huge mass of people? Unfortunately, this trend is already too prevalent today, and common sense would suggest that it should be slowed down or reversed if any way possible...

The only situation where mass, simultaneous migration can really be justified is when refugees are fleeing from various disasters – war, persecution, environmental disasters, etc. – i.e. when it becomes life-threatening for them to remain in their former place of residence or country. We must also be prepared for this, because even if we do our best to prevent and eliminate conflict, terrorism, nationalism, religious and ethnic cleansing and the like, a significant increase in the number of people made homeless by climate change seems inevitable in the (near) future due to global warming. Nonetheless, the victims must be guaranteed the same livelihoods and integration into society as indigenous people.

But if a nurturing society takes care of both groups equally, from basic food and housing to education and counseling, employment and successful self-actualization, the tensions between them are unlikely to be as intense. To ensure that the potential influx of refugees does not place an unmanageable burden on individual countries or local governments, they must work together in an organized way to tackle the issue. While common funds can help cover the costs, direct support to people can involve an international pool of professionals and volunteers. In fact, we will need much more cooperation in this area in the future than we have had ever before – and, when the humane aspects are finally put at least on a par with the capitalist, nationalist and other aspects, then perhaps the time will soon come when refugees all over the world will equally find homes and care, and will not have to fear or suffer any negative discrimination.

In a modern, civilized and sustainable world, caring for all is in fact a fundamental right that we should all have. Therefore a nurturing society will never allow anyone to be permanently hungry or cold, homeless, to be needlessly sick and suffering, or to be forced to live in inhumane conditions in general, while some people are roistering and don't even know what to do with their good fortunes. In contrast to the currently prevailing socioeconomic conditions and ideas (such as the American Dream mentioned earlier), a nurturing society provides its members with real opportunities, not just the promise of them. As one of the main instruments of this, universal basic income or basic services can guarantee a certain degree of freedom for all of us, simply by not letting us be at the mercy of the constant struggle for our daily bread and the law of the jungle upheld by existential opportunism. This can not only help us stay healthy, but also give us the time and energy to live a quality life.

Hopefully it is also obvious by now, however, that a quality life does not necessarily equate to unlimited material accumulation, as money is only a means to that end. The sad fact is that in today's world, only those who have a lot of money can be truly free – as they face far fewer constraints when making their decisions –, and are therefore much less dependent on others than the majority of people. But in a highly developed society, with all its constraints, the greatest freedom can be found in the maximum support of each other, both in basic subsistence and in the provision of our various needs, as well as in our physical-mental-spiritual fulfillment. With the joint introduction of the controlled economy and basic benefits, we can achieve a far less materialistic, truly civilized and sustainable society, without poverty, without extreme inequalities, and without destroying our environment as drastically and at the pace we are doing today.

Do You think, Dear Reader, that all this is too good to be true? On the one hand, my answer is: not necessarily. All the achievements of human civilization, such as the abolition of slavery, the introduction of democracy or women's suffrage, which in many countries of the world are now taken for (almost) granted, were, a few hundred years or even a few decades ago, at best utopian fantasies in the eyes of the majority. So why couldn't a nurturing society and basic benefits, which most people still consider only the wishful thinking of a few idealistic dreamers, become an integral part of our lives in the very near future?

It is also true, however, that anyone who has had enough experience of life and has not yet completely lost their sense of reality knows that, in general, nothing is 'free' – that is, You always need to give up something in order to get something really good and valuable. And this, in a highly developed and civilized society – as mentioned at the beginning of this book and later –, is none other than a part of Your personal freedom. In other words, everyone who wants to live in a civilized society must accept and respect the universal rules of civilized coexistence. What this means in practice is that, whether You like it or not, You must always consider others and the possible consequences when You act or manifest Yourself in any way, in exchange for the trust and goodwill of Your fellow human beings and the benefits, safety and care that civilization provides.

It is true that, in this interpretation, universal basic services or any benefit, which is in principle a subject right, cannot actually be considered unconditional. But why not impose conditions, when civilized coexistence itself has different conditions and requirements, which apply equally to all (adult and mentally healthy) members of a society or community? An illustrative example in this respect can be found in various housing communities (condominiums, neighborhoods, hotels, holiday homes, communal spaces, etc.), where all residents are expected not to litter, not to disturb others, not to make excessive noise, pay rent or common charges regularly, and so on.

In light of this, however, even a nurturing society cannot be overly lenient or inconsequent, no matter how much its job is to support its members in every possible way and guarantee their basic liberties. Thus, for example, helping someone into a new home does

not mean that we can never take them away if they abuse our trust and goodwill, and persistently disregard the rules of civilized coexistence in the community. Accordingly, if there are people who engage in activities that are dangerous to others in a condominium or are a constant nuisance to other residents, and they refuse to adapt to the community after repeated warnings, then the community should have every right to be remove them from the apartment and the condominium. (Enforcement itself is of course the responsibility of the competent authority.)

Nevertheless, if the community leaves deviant, rule-breaking behavior for a long time without consequences, it can easily take its toll: irresponsible behavior can result in accidents or even death, while disrespect, indifference, hostility or aggression towards others can lead to serious tensions and, in the longer term, even unlivable conditions for the entire community. Therefore, covering up problems and sweeping them under the rug is not a solution at all, as they accumulate over time and threaten to become much more confrontational and serious than conflict situations that arise in the attempt to find an immediate solution. That is also why any community that considers itself civilized would do better to make a conscious effort to control what happens within its circles while it still can...

In principle, the same can be said of not only a residential or other community, but of society as a whole. At the same time, according to the principle of reciprocity, we can only have such high expectations if we ourselves keep our side of the 'bargain'. And that means that at the community level, we must also do what we can for every single person. But as long as society does not really care about how people make a living, or satisfy their higher needs – including finding meaning in their lives and potential self-fulfillment –, how can we wonder if, as individuals, we often do not choose the best possible path or solutions while trying to somehow get along in life? That if we go off the straight and narrow legal path, we will be punished, but if all we want is to live a normal life and have real opportunities – which is unfortunately the privilege of the more fortunate for the moment –, we will receive minimal or superficial support at best?

I'm not sure, Dear Reader, if it's just my sense of justice, but I believe that until the basic conditions necessary for a decent life are provided for everyone, it is rather unfair to demand order and full compliance from all members of society (but especially the neglected ones). While this in itself is no excuse for breaking rules and laws, compliance with them by everyone can be rightly expected only if all members of society can count on a minimum level of due care. But until society does all it can for each and every one of its members, how could they be expected to do and sacrifice all they can for society? Until then, society cannot unilaterally hold them responsible or blame them for their actions or even their way of thinking.

That is also why I believe that everyone should be provided with the goods they need to meet their basic needs, and should be given maximum support and help to find themselves and their place in society. (Instead of the government basically telling us, "Don't do this and don't do that, but otherwise get what you need in whatever way you can.") As soon as

that happens, then it will be absolutely legitimate to hold everyone accountable to the law and to the rules of social coexistence, and if someone breaks them, they should be dealt with in a strict and consistent manner. However, we should remember that instead of negative means (punishment), the focus should be on positive motivation, encouragement and education, as these are usually the means to achieve real and lasting change.

As we are all fallible human beings who are never perfect, we can make mistakes from time to time and we may need help to correct them. The point is that if we have the will and ability to adapt, we have a good chance of fitting into society. But if someone lacks these, it can pose a lasting threat to the community that should not be left unchecked. When the application of sanctions becomes unavoidable, we must always bear in mind the principles of gradualism and proportionality. However, those who, despite all the help and support, are unable or unwilling to adapt to the requirements of a civilized society, should not be kept in the community, as this could easily backfire later. And as far as cultural differences between people are concerned, we must respect them as far as is reasonable and possible, while at the same time insisting on universal rules of civilized coexistence and respect for our private sphere at all times.

Although it undoubtedly involves some sacrifice, and currently faces many obstacles to its implementation, a nurturing society is, in my view, the only way to live together in a truly civilized way – especially in a world as crowded and fast-changing as the one we live in. But if we, humans do things with enough awareness, ingenuity and organization, the moment may come in the not too distant future when economics and money will no longer be at the center of our lives, but will serve us as a means, rather than humanity serving them. Then we will be able to devote our attention and energy to more humane, exciting and interesting things, more suited to the capacities of an intelligent being: to improve ourselves and to explore and learn about the mysteries of the universe.

For the time being, however, if we want to do well for ourselves, we need to see clearly: the economy can only work in a sustainable and truly civilized way that minimizes pollution, environmental degradation, social inequalities and poverty if as many of us as possible keep an eye on it and actively participate in shaping it. A shift to a controlled and optimized, truly democratic economy would allow, alongside increasing automation, a much fairer distribution of labor and wealth than at present. Yet, if the masses do not fight for it through social pressure and control, politics will hardly achieve it on its own, nor the abolition of speculation and bogus jobs and companies, nor even the introduction of universal basic services (or, for that matter, basic income). Unless we wish to entrust our future to the benevolence of a narrow minority of leaders and the rich – and at the most critical time of human civilization –, we must stand up for the ideal of the nurturing society and put it into practice.

A Change of Political Attitude

"But why don't politicians do what is best for the majority?" You may in some ways be absolutely right to ask, Dear Reader. Especially in (so-called) developed and long-established democratic countries, where the people elect their own leaders, one might think that the politicians put in power by the majority are indeed always seeking to represent the interests of the majority. But those who have had more experience of politics and human society in general will probably know that it is not at all that simple or straightforward.

Before we get to the reasons, I suggest first of all looking at what politicians, and politics in general, do. Unsurprisingly, there is no precise definition of the term 'politics', which is again a very complex subject. It derives from the Greek word 'polis', which was the name given in ancient Greece to the city-states that governed themselves. So from a grammatical point of view, politics roughly means: managing 'the affairs of the cities'. According to a rather general formulation, politics is the set of activities that are related to group decision-making and other power relations between individuals, such as the distribution of resources or the designation of ranks and positions.

In a narrower, but perhaps the most common interpretation these days, politics is essentially everything that concerns the state, i.e. the organization, management and governance of society in a given country. These include the economy, public security, education, health, defence, as well as foreign relations with other countries, which are carried out through the various state institutions (ministries, offices, embassies, police, schools, hospitals, etc.). The framework within which each sector or society operates – at least in a democratic system – is determined by the laws and regulations made and enforced by the parliament of representatives and the reigning government. The management of human and other resources is an essential part of organized operations, which is usually also carried out in the manner determined by legal regulations.

This makes state governance, or politics in general, essentially nothing less than the exercise of power over a group, community, people or society. Although in democratic (or at least partially democratic) countries, the state is far from owning all the resources, it nevertheless concentrates them to a significant extent. It also has the right to control society as a whole to a certain degree through legislation and enforcement, and therefore, by definition, has considerable power. At the same time, in liberal market economies, a similarly large share of resources is controlled by the profit-seeking private sector, which means that a relatively small number of giant corporations can also control a significant share of the country's total wealth. This also comes with quite a lot of power, while the third sector, civil society, which is made up of citizens who are not engaged in for-profit commercial activities, can only rely on the power of cooperation and the various community-based and representative organizations (beyond the goodwill of the politicians who represent them, as well as the private billionaires).
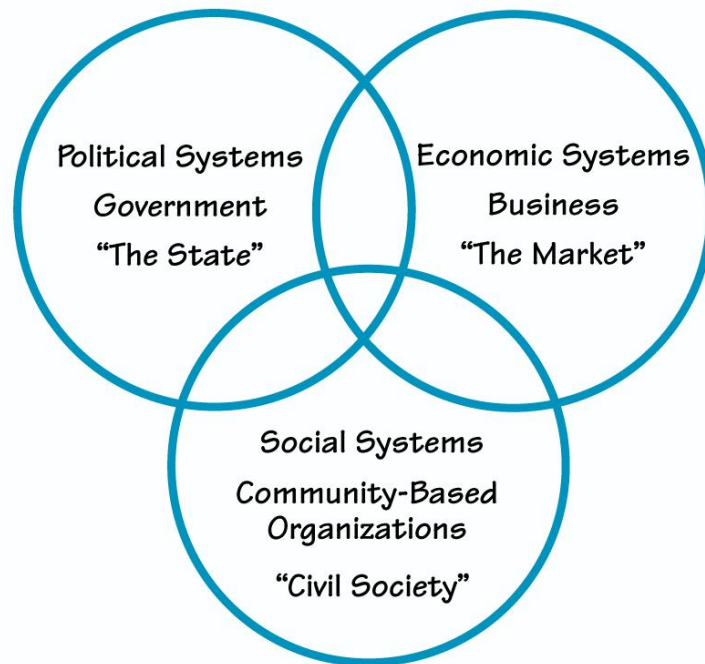
Figure 13 - The three sectors of society
Source: Systems Thinker (https://thesystemsthinker.com/societal-learning-creating-big-systems-change)

Thus, in a democratic system, the state or the government in office in principle always shares power with the other two sectors, with an obvious overlap with the other two. After all, in civil life, politicians can act as members of civil society, for example by volunteering for a non-profit organization, but they can also own property in a company just like any other citizen who is part of civil society. And that is not even mentioning the other actors... These include, among others, the various media, which can be privately owned (commercial TV, radio, etc.), government-owned (e.g. state TV channels), or even somewhere in between, in a blurred area (such as, say, media organs run by private companies that are clearly sympathetic to the current government). But we could also mention the churches, which are theoretically part of the civil sphere in a democracy, but in practice in many places still share power and public funds with the state, as they did in the Middle Ages. (Sometimes even if the values of that religion are fundamentally at odds with so-called capitalist values, which are partially or fully represented by the state.)

As already mentioned, even in a market economy, the point would be to achieve a lasting balance between the three different groups, which in most countries today is non-existent or rather unstable. It is no coincidence that the scales have now tipped globally towards the private sector, which also includes its common set with politics – for the neoliberal system and the materialistic economy easily corrupts our leaders, or at least encourages them to politicize money above all other considerations.

However, despite the fact that today the economy is the other main holder of power alongside the state, the situation is far from simple. The exercise of power over others has, in

fact, always been a factor in the history of humanity which, prior to the industrial revolution and the age of capitalism, has essentially operated according to the same rules since prehistoric times.

Believe it or not, Dear Reader, even Louis XIV, who is considered the record holder of absolute monarchs and was nicknamed the Sun King, did not rule the French people alone in the 72 (!) years between 1643 and 1715. Albeit a constitutional monarchy literally means autocracy, Louis, who came to the throne at the age of 23, did not have many supporters, and he had to take over the treasury in a state of bankruptcy. In this difficult situation, the young king sought to centralize his power and bring everything under his control. First, he introduced radical economic reforms and made the benefits of the aristocracy, who were high up the social ladder, largely dependent on their loyalty. At the same time, he expanded the opportunities available to the emerging aristocracy, essentially creating a new nobility, and created a modern army promising a quick career, which gave birth to an equally loyal military aristocracy. The well-being of these influential groups also indirectly ensured the well-being of the king, and as together they held a significant share of the country's resources, they essentially exercised power over the French people.

So without allies, neither Louis XIV nor other rulers and leaders would have been able to remain in power for any length of time, including the most feared and respected dictators (Hitler, Stalin, Mao Zedong, etc.). This is mainly because without sufficient support – especially in the presence of strong resistance – no one can assert or impose their will on others for a long time. And the key to securing allies is loyalty, which can be bought with money or various convincing perks and favors. (While it can also be achieved and kept up by intimidation for some time, it is usually much riskier.) As strange or painful as this may seem, it is basically the same for democratic governmental systems, except that the composition and distribution of power is slightly different.

The previously referenced The Dictator's Handbook – Why Bad Behavior is Almost Always Good Politics discusses the phenomenon in a very illustrative way. The authors, who are skilled and experienced in the science of politics, basically divide the political arena into three different groups: the nominal selectorate, the real selectorate and the winning coalition. For a leader or government, it is essentially the nominal selectorate who are the potential supporters, while the real selectorate are those with more influence, and the winning coalition is made up of only those few whose support is vital to the leader(ship). These groups therefore form a hierarchical system of superior-subordinate relationships, with a member of each group holding a greater share of the total power the higher up in the hierarchy they are. Accordingly, the members of the three groups can also be referred to as *interchangeables*, *influentials* and *essentials*.

As explained in the book, the absolute and relative size of these groups determines the nature of a government system, and how autocratic or democratic it can be considered. At one end of the spectrum, dictators, autocrats and military junta leaders usually secure and exercise power with the help of a small number of henchmen, meaning that in their case

the size of the coalition of the essentials is very small. This category includes, among others, the court of the aforementioned Louis XIV, since the civil and military aristocracy gathered around him was relatively small in number, both in itself and in relation to the size of the peasantry and bourgeoisie, which made up the bulk of the population. Compared to the latter, 'interchangeable' group, the number of wealthy citizens, common nobles and priests with greater influence was not really significant, but even they were far more numerous than the highest ranked military officers, noblemen and senior civil servants who were essential to the king's rule.

In such a system, the most effective way for leaders to guarantee the loyalty of their allies is to spend a significant proportion of their revenues on providing them with private benefits, even if these benefits come at the expense of the much more populous taxpaying population or the millions of small shareholders. Thus, small coalitions are conducive to the emergence of stable, corrupt regimes oriented towards private goods. The more the composition and policies of a country's government are determined by free elections and the masses of conscious citizens (which means that the size of the coalition is very large), the more leaders need to focus on measures to increase general welfare by promoting public goods.

However, this does not mean that democrats give everything to the people, simply because they are not forced to so. While in democracies following the general rule, voters can peek in the door of politics, they can hardly reach beyond the doorstep. As a result, the voters of the United States, Britain or France can all be classed as interchangeable, as none of them actually have much more power than their 'fellow voters' in the old Soviet Union. Although all adult citizens had the right to vote under the Soviet system, too, their options were limited to marking 'Yes' or 'No' next to the names of the Communist Party candidates. Nonetheless, all citizens of the Soviet Union, which made voting compulsory, were part of the nominal selectorate, while the Party's winning coalition and influential members of the state bureaucracy dictated to them the terms of their daily lives virtually unchallenged.

In a democracy with far greater freedom of speech and other liberties, of course, there is much more danger than in a dictatorship that the masses of the nominal selectorate will express their discontent or even revolt, so the government in office must always give them more – at least enough to appease or at least partially satisfy them. This may involve the introduction of a few new subsidies, a major rebate (e.g. a reduction in utility bills) or a larger benefit (e.g. a pension bonus), but it is not uncommon for measures to be announced shortly before parliamentary or other local elections, either. But even in a democratic system, the satisfaction and loyalty of their immediate supporters must be constantly guaranteed by the leadership. For them, this proves more difficult than for their autocratic counterparts precisely because they have to spend the vast majority of their income for the benefit of the people.

Yet, this does not in any way prevent our leaders from using legislation and other methods to find ways to favor their main allies. For politicians and their parties in capitalist 'democracies', these are corporations and various non-profit organizations, but sympathetic billionaires, media moguls and celebrities certainly have a great deal of influence, as well – both because of their huge wealth and their considerable influence on public opinion. (And since they support politicians not only with their votes, but also with their money and influence, they can be considered to be the real selectorate.)

Democratic politicians and governments are in many ways constantly maneuvering between the private sector and civil society: they seek to ensure conditions favorable enough for at least some businesses to make a profit, while providing acceptable living conditions for the majority of citizens through tolerable levels of taxation and a level of public services that is (perceived as) sufficient. At the same time, they typically have no intention of preventing some organizations and individuals from taking a disproportionate slice of the cake compared to others. For the greater the degree of regulation, the harder it is to cheat or 'make it big', which in any market economy is not usually to the liking and approval of the most important supporters of politicians.

In addition to excessive regulation, naturally, true transparency and accountability are also taboo and should be avoided, even for the leaders of the systems considered to be the most democratic. And in such an economic-political environment, the chances of politicians being caught acting in a biased manner are quite low – especially if they do so with due care and caution. That is why it can be a common phenomenon that, in one way or another, the companies close to the government are the best performers, even if the contracts concluded in the framework of the public procurement procedure are in principle always carried out by putting the bidders out to tender, and then awarding the contract to the company with the most favorable offer overall. As such frauds are not always discovered (and are even less often reported), the detected cases are most likely only the 'tip of the iceberg', meaning that the number of abuses may be much higher in reality.

Politicians in the parliament and the government are effectively insiders, so in many cases they have advance knowledge of expected economic trends, regulations and so on, putting them in an excellent position to make winning picks for people and companies they consider worthy. The placement of relatives, friends and acquaintances in key positions has been a common practice in politics since ancient times, and to a large extent it is still the basis on which almost all societies operate. Whether it is a more autocratic or a more liberal system, it is always true for point of view of leaders that it never hurts to have people who can always be counted on in the most important official and other positions. On the one hand, they ensure that the will of the leaders is carried out, and on the other, allies in good positions – who are practically essential – usually also benefit very well financially.

Corruption is therefore generally as present in (more) democratic countries as it is elsewhere, if only to a slightly lesser extent, or in a much less obvious way. While the latter

tends to be more typical of those forms of corruption that fall into the illegal and strictly punishable category, we can experience the manifestations of non-criminal corruption all around us. However, nepotism (giving relatives or friends an advantage, public office or other benefits), clientelism (giving public office or a mandate to members of a clientele in return for political support) or favoritism (appointing or assigning members of one's own party) can not only be annoying, but can also undermine the social system itself, increasing inequalities of opportunity and wealth. At the same time, we tend to not even dwell anymore on the wire-pulling of intercession by an influential person, the assertion of relationship capital, lobbying, gratuity, tipping, and even prostitution, because we have come to regard them – quite regrettably – as only natural.

In reality, therefore, the boundaries between the functioning of democracies and authoritarian regimes are far from as sharp as one might think. But, according to the authors of The Dictator's Handbook, this is not at all surprising when You consider that essentially both tyrants and the leaders of (more) democratic states follow the same five basic rules:

1) Keep your winning coalition as small as possible.
2) Keep your nominal selectorate as large as possible.
3) Control the flow of revenue.
4) Pay your key supporters just enough to keep them loyal.
5) Don't take money out of your supporter's pockets to make the people's lives better.

And the uniform application of all these rules is possible because, whether we are talking about autocrats or a group of elected rulers of a society or any larger community, leaders have always needed powerful allies to gain power and then keep it as long as possible.

It is as important for a politician or leader as it is for any employee in general not to be fired from his job – with the important difference that the former, because of their power, usually have privileges that are not at all easy to give up. (There is a reason why they say that power intoxicates, after all.) That is why even Democrats generally do not resign until circumstances force them to do so. The biggest problem for them is that they are more constrained, and therefore have to be more creative than their autocratic counterparts. It is no coincidence that the majority of democratic leaders are less successful, so despite usually providing a higher standard of living for their citizens compared to tyrants, these politicians almost always have a shorter time in office.

Nevertheless, the aim is always political survival in order to retain power, for which the proper management and manipulation of all political actors, i.e. the interchangeables, the influentials and the essentials, is inevitable. According to the authors of the Dictator's Handbook, this is basically the essence, science and, at the same time, art of governance, regardless of the actual political system. Which, if You think about it, corresponds to the laws of the jungle that lead to the emergence of existential opportunism and Darwinism, which are also the governing principles in nature – only with the difference that man also uses his higher intellectual abilities to build his own existence and career.

Of course, it is somewhat understandable if You still have doubts, Dear Reader, about how this is possible in a modern democracy, considered by many to be the pinnacle of political evolution. So you might ask, for example, why there is a need for specific supporters if a government, politician or any elected leader is doing a good job. Because then the majority will re-elect him, and he will still have an important position after the end of his mandate, right? This may again raise the question of why our leaders do not always serve the good of the majority. Well, this is where human nature comes into play again, including our relationship to power and to others...

Beyond the fact that power intoxicates, and that the rules of politics dictate that leaders must always seek the favor of their main supporters to maintain their position, representing the interests of those under their control is not even next in line. They also tend to put the well-being of themselves and their immediate sphere of interest before the well-being of others, and if they have the power and opportunity to do so, they tend to use it, providing a much higher standard of living for themselves and their company. Just as it is no coincidence that the first thing elected representatives usually vote on in a newly-constituted parliament is their own salary... For bias and corruption go hand in hand with existential opportunism.

And while democrats have to deliver enough for a wide range of citizens to get elected or re-elected, even from their point of view it is not about solving all of society's problems. (This would involve too many difficulties and conflicts, anyway.) Success often depends on maintaining a certain appearance, which is an essential part of a politician's repertoire – as the huge sums spent on campaigns show, building and maintaining their image is perhaps the most important thing for them. So what a politician or a party says or promises is one thing, but what they do or don't do is often quite another. Because our leaders usually know what people want to hear, they try to meet it on the surface whenever possible, while behind the scenes they often weave the threads in a completely different way.

But we must see that, in general, they behave in this way not because they are worse than other people, but because it is the direct consequence of a combination of human nature and the power that comes with their position. Trust me, Dear Reader: there are very few people in the world who never abuse their power unless they are constantly forced to do otherwise. If You give someone power and entrust them to look after Your well-being, You can be almost certain that they will instead put their own well-being and interests first – especially if You do not exercise constant and strict control over them. By nature, we are all prone to bias, and when there is little or no risk of being punished for it, we are usually unable to resist the temptation, however empathetic we may be towards others.

In other words, politicians in general are no worse than average, and are as far from perfect as any of us – but in their case, we also have to reckon with the constant effect of power on their psyche. So it is in vain to expect them, Dear Reader, not to be corrupt, because they are only human, too. And it is very easy for power to corrupt, i.e. makes us tend to abuse, which is especially true in a society where we see this very example from others

(every man kindles the fire below his own pot, after all), whether in government, the economy, the judiciary, the churches, education, health care, or any other field. Those who have a thick enough skin (meaning they do not feel too much regret or inner conflict) to make their own fortune while some are living from day to day or starving, with some prudence they can secure their position for many years to come. But the way power works for most people is that, over time, they do in fact 'grow a thicker skin' (in essence, they adapt to the system or the situation), and those who can't do that usually give up and fall away quickly.

Despite or alongside all this, of course, different ideologies and worldviews also play a role in politics (e.g. when choosing allies), but they are no more prominent than power games. The reason why 'Bad behavior' can be good politics is precisely that one needs it to maintain power – especially if he has no intent to share it. However, we know from the rich examples of history that politics has always been about gaining, retaining and increasing power, as well as about alliances, oppression and dividing people. And, as we have seen, since almost the same rules of thumb apply to both, there is in fact little difference between the operation of democratic and autocratic or totalitarian (outright dictatorial) regimes.

Adherence to the basic rules of power also explains why, whatever the form of government, a minority has always ruled over the majority. And this fact essentially answers the question of why civil society is almost always at a disadvantage. Because it is made up of so many different people and groups, most of whom are extremely difficult to get to cooperate, it tends to be very divided, which leaders exploit and even exacerbate whenever they can. And for the most part this is the case, since the individuals and groups that make up civil society individually hold a negligible share of resources and money – and thus of real power – compared to the state and the other groups in power, the latter being dominated by the private sector (or its more privileged part) at present.

Whether it is the church, the military, the nobility, or any other social actor, the government in office essentially always shares power with others in its acquisition, exercise and maintenance. Likewise, in today's liberal market economies, politicians are much closer to the private sector than to civil society in terms of their individual interests. One direct reason for this is that they usually have ownership and personal interests in many companies. On the other hand, despite their key role in the use of public money, their campaigns are largely financed by their wealthy supporters. And as religious, military and privilege-based dictates are less and less acceptable in today's more democratic societies, economics and money have become the main instruments and allies of power.

In such a system, most people might even take it for granted that there are more and more politicians around the world with private fortunes running into millions, or even billions, of dollars. In Your opinion, Dear Reader, whose interests do all those rich representatives represent first and foremost? While there are always exceptions and more enlightened philanthropists than other, the richest, most influential citizens – be they politi-

cians or 'ordinary' private individuals – are generally opposed to high taxes and increased public spending on social and welfare issues. In the meantime, the majority of the 'commoners' wishes to oppose them in vain, as they have very little influence on such cardinal decisions. And when virtually all politicians and political parties are effectively defending and propagating a system that serves the interests of the wealthy and legitimizes the autocracy of money, then voters are left with little (or practically no) alternative.

The more wealth is kept in fewer hands, the more power is concentrated by fewer people, further blurring the line between democratic and autocratic regimes. Under such circumstances, of course, we should not be surprised if social inequalities in democracies do not really decrease either, but at most show a slight decrease or a fluctuating trend, only to start increasing again in times of major crises. While our leaders often make all sorts of promises about eradicating poverty, it still occurs in a very significant proportion of the world's population and, as we have seen, even in (more) developed countries. Similarly, in the field environmental investments and solutions, which are also crucial to sustainability, radical changes are promised from time to time are in vain, because they are either not always delivered on, or are so slow that they are unlikely to be sufficient to avoid climate catastrophe.

It is much more revealing about the real intentions of politicians when they talk about the different social classes, because they tacitly approve their existence and thus contribute to their survival. In a modern, progressive society, however, the only acceptable form of reference to classes is when it comes to the means of their elimination. In addition to the humanitarian aspects, we also urgently need to equalize or at least narrow the distribution of wealth so that power is not concentrated in so few hands. After all, if some people have much more than others, it gives them the opportunity to rule and oppress them – even though there are certain laws and rules, they are dictated primarily by the wealthy minority against the poorer majority. The majority of the former, on the other hand, have no intention of giving up their privileges due to social inequalities, as this would not serve their own (rather selfish and narrow-minded) interests or those of their allies.

However, life – especially the lives of others – is not a game, so in a truly civilized society and world it is not by any means acceptable that people's fate, well-being and future should depend on political and power games. Therefore we need to fundamentally change the system so that similar games have little or no impact on decision-making and the way public affairs, politics, the economy and society function. (If only because simply replacing the politicians or parties in power, hoping that their successors will 'behave', is obviously not going to solve the problem.) The only way to create a highly developed, truly civilized society is to banish existential opportunism from all areas of public life, including politics, as much as possible.

It is therefore also necessary to set up and apply a system in politics that is much better and more effective than the current one at eliminating the human shortcomings and im-

perfections, because of which it would be a big mistake to trust our leaders or even our current political regimes completely. The state, whatever the social order, will never by itself ensure that resources are directed to where they are most needed – or at least this is unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future, which makes it very unlikely that we will have a chance of solving the civilizational crisis we are facing. A proper, (nearly) optimal allocation of resources can be achieved if citizens themselves ensure that it happens. (Theoretically, there is another alternative that could be considered, but more on that later.)

Politics is also essential for the radical reform of the economy, simply because we need politicians to cooperate to make and implement laws. So if civil society's goal is to ensure that control through constant feedback works in the economy, it seems only logical that if we want to make it manageable and 'citizen-friendly', something similar should be implemented in politics, too. But why not create a regulated system in political life, with a continuous exchange of information and intervention between the governing apparatus and citizens, as in the economy between companies and consumers? Even though this would certainly not be to the liking of the vast majority of politicians, it would go a long way towards achieving both the necessary social oversight and much greater transparency.

Just as in the economy in relation to the activities of companies, in public administration the optimization of the system should also take place in with regard to public offices, which also requires transparency and the accountability of officials (and their superiors). After all, the public sector should serve the needs of the people just as much as the economy, and should therefore function accordingly, rather than as a maze of bureaucracy or a repository of bogus jobs. If those in the economy who fail to ensure that the necessary goods and services are properly provided are to be held accountable, then the bureaus, which also operate as a kind of service provider, should also be held to account if the system is not working or is not efficient enough. While public servants must be guaranteed a decent income and working conditions, too, it must also be ensured that they are always serving the public.

Since full accountability is as important in politics as in all other areas of the economy and public life, it is necessary to eliminate the various evasions from the burden of responsibility towards society in politics as well. This means, among other things, that civil society must be able to prevent parties and politicians from entrenching themselves in power, and from hiding behind their legally guaranteed immunity when they break the rules or bend them too much. In democracies, the latter institution is actually meant to serve as guarantee of the independence of parliamentarians from outside influence and coercion, in essence the independent and undisturbed functioning of the legislature. But his means that criminal or infringement proceedings can only be brought against representatives if their immunity is waived, so other ways need to be found to ensure that if they do their job badly, they can be held accountable or removed.

For just as we are expected as citizens not to break the laws of the day – despite the fact that our leaders are far from doing everything for us –, so politicians cannot be excused for

bad behavior (being biased, corrupt, ignorant, incompetent, etc.). But the only way we can hold them to account is by taking an active part in public affairs ourselves, rather than just shrugging them off and saying that they are the exclusive preserve of politicians – after all, we call them public affairs precisely because they are important for society as a whole. So the main reason why You should be interested in politics, Dear Reader, is that it fundamentally determines the lives and futures of You, Your loved ones and all of us. But if You allow matters that affect You to be decided over Your head, You will have little or no influence over those decisions.

That is why there can be no such excuse from civil society that 'it is not our duty' or that 'they know better anyway'. I suspect that experience also confirms that if You are not interested in politics, then in turn politics will not be interested in You, either – or at most to gain Your vote and approval *in some way*, but apart from that, You will be little more than a statistic. The fact that You can go to the polls once every four years (and one or two more times for local or other elections, in addition to parliamentary elections) is almost a formality, but not enough to have any real influence on the things that actually shape Your life. And realistically speaking, even in a democracy, we cannot expect the governing parties to involve the people in politics much more – when they appear to do so, they overwhelmingly consult citizens on decisions that do not threaten their power or the current socio-political-economic order.

It is clear that in order to ensure civilized coexistence, the government in office must maintain order in chaos, and therefore exercise some control over society. At the same time, politics also needs to know what society needs and what is best for them, which is only possible through continuous feedback and cooperation – in other words, it is essential that civil society also has some control over the way in which it is governed. The only way to achieve this in politics and in public life in general is to create a system in which citizens, members of civil society, are involved, and are more aware of what is happening, with a formal institutional framework and public forums in which to express their opinions and dissatisfaction.

This is more or less the essence of participatory democracy, which is sometimes also referred to as direct democracy. (Australian political scientist and democracy researcher John Keane, professor at the University of Sydney and the Berlin Social Science Center, however, calls the above described system a monitory democracy in his book The Shortest History of Democracy, which is also worth reading.) But even if we cannot speak of functioning without intermediaries in an absolute sense, citizens in participatory democracy are much more involved in the process of deciding on public affairs than in the representative or indirect democracies that are currently widespread. However, if we examine the circumstances of the origin of the term democracy itself, we will see that the former is much closer to its original meaning.

Like politics, the word democracy comes from ancient Greece, famous for its great thinkers, where *demos* refers to the people and *kratos* to rule. So the word democracy essentially means: 'rule of the people'. Although in ancient Greek city-states a significant part of the population was not included among the citizens who constituted the people and had the right to have a say and vote in public affairs (such were, for example, women and slaves), decisions were usually taken with the involvement of all eligible persons. Over time, albeit slowly, we have become more enlightened, so that in many countries of the developed world, citizenship rights have been extended to virtually the entire adult population.

Where this is not the case, the system is characterized more by aristocracy (rule of an elite) or oligarchy (rule by a few), with aristocrats and oligarchs at the top. In fact, in the societies we now call democracies, all three forms of government are present to some extent, and the more the will of the people prevails, the more we can refer to the system as a democracy. Nevertheless, representative democracies quite often suffer from the political malfunctions described above, mainly because they have very few people who are called upon to represent a large number of citizens, while having a much more privileged position and greater power than they do. After all, in parliamentary and other representative democracies, it is the politicians who are entrusted to represent them, rather than the citizens, who take the important decisions, with rather difficult and limited accountability. Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that even in today's democracies there are many aristocrats and oligarchs in power and in influential circles supporting governments.

So in a certain sense, representative democracy is therefore as if the persons who become representatives, delegates or senators in parliamentary democracies are transferred to another world by their appointment or by the transfer of their main activity, as if they were cut off from their original environment. As they are gradually absorbed into politics, these people seem to cease to be part of the civil sphere – just like, for example, when someone enlists and takes part in a war for controversial ideas and goals far from home. But this rightly raises the question – probably for You too, Dear Reader – of how one can credibly represent the interests of a community of which one is no longer an integral part, on which one's direct dependence has ceased, and whereby one's own individual interests have largely become divorced from those of the community one represents. Under radically changed circumstances, and thanks to their new power and privilege, it is not surprising that the pressing problems of their former community are relegated to the back of the lists of most representatives, as their own livelihood and status become more secure.

This leads to the logical conclusion that it is not a good idea to 'outsource' power just like that, in the context of a community's ability to assert its real interests over other communities and individual interests. At the same time, of course, unity of action and the way decisions are taken on common issues is of utmost importance for the 'big picture', which can often be in stark contrast to the momentary, real or perceived interests of a

smaller community. Participation in such decisions inevitably requires effective representation, but this can only be ensured if representatives remain interested in promoting the views of the civil communities they represent.

To ensure this, a system of motivation and remuneration has much importance: instead of benefits paid out of the revenues of the whole state, for example, it seems obvious that payment of the delegates should be provided exclusively by their own community, with constant control of their activities. In addition to transparency, communities must therefore be able to maintain control over the 'civilians' who represent them, rather than surrendering them completely to politics (which is also something that civil movements can achieve for themselves if it is not made possible centrally). Nonetheless, the presence of a strong central authority is essential for each administrative unit to be able to defend its common interests and take the necessary measures.

The focus in politics, as in any other area of public life, must therefore be that the principle of subsidiarity, mentioned earlier, must always apply, according to which all decisions must be taken essentially at the level at which they are possible, i.e. at the level that is most relevant. Whether it is a district, a village, a city, a country or a region, a union, or even the whole world, each has its own issues that have a major impact on the lives of all the inhabitants of that unit or community. While the construction and operation of a market or sports hall is usually the responsibility of a single district or municipality, the same cannot be said, for example, of a power plant that is potentially dangerous and is a source of pollution, possibly supplying electricity to other counties, and can therefore only be decided on at a higher, regional or national level.

However, this does not mean that the interests of the smaller communities, villages and towns at lower levels should be served less by the power plant than those of the country, or even the interests of the companies that benefit from the implementation and operation of the project, as well as politicians and their parties. Therefore, by no chance should a decision be taken on such a matter without the involvement of the communities concerned, or to strike a deal only with their disconnected and possibly corrupt representatives, saying that the locals should just be happy with the jobs that will be created and shut up. I believe that in a similar situation, it is reasonable to expect that decisions taken by the majority at the local level should be represented unchanged at the higher level, too.

So in all cases, we must strive to provide a real opportunity for self-governance, for which people's demand is slowly but surely growing. Although the main argument against this is usually incompetence, the inability of the average person to make optimal decisions for the 'greater good', this is a perverse and unsustainable viewpoint in the long run, because it is precisely active participation and experience in public affairs that can equip people and their communities with the knowledge and skills they need to successfully manage not only local but also higher level public affairs.

In general, it can be said that when the state acquires too much (unchecked) power in a society, it can lead to political dictatorship, and when economic actors do, it can lead to

economic dictatorship. (In other words, money rules.) This is why the active participation and conscious cooperation of citizens is needed – and also, of course, because too much, but haphazard and uncoordinated, citizen influence can, in extreme cases, lead to anarchy and chaos. But real democracy, as we know, can only exist in a social form, and only if civil society exercises sufficient control over the other two sectors, politics and the economy.

Yet it is a fact that civil society will only be able to exert control over the central power and the private sector if a sufficient proportion of citizens can achieve a state of collective consciousness. In this respect, critical mass works in a similar way to herd immunity in epidemics: if a sufficiently large number of people become conscious, then no one will be able to mislead and exploit the majority society on a sustained basis, because too few will fall for the various tricks and manipulations. But if we don't have at least a rough idea of how the world we live in works, how can we make good decisions about our own future? Or that of our children? Or regarding the fate of our community, our country, or the whole of human civilization?

Therefore we must reach a state where the majority of people have a certain level of knowledge and awareness about different aspects of life and current issues in the world. And since it is imperative that we work together of our own free will, guided by our own common sense, recognizing the need and the benefits, we must be able to see our common, longer-term goals beyond our momentary individual interests. How surprising do You think, Dear Reader, that this is not the case today? Although it is always easiest to blame human nature, it is worth looking at other circumstances. Is there even a single country now where the reigning government is doing its utmost to ensure that all children and young people receive the best possible education, as described above? Or to ensure that society is informed about current events in the most credible, impartial and realistic way possible?

It should be obvious from what has been said so far why those in power almost nowhere do not do so: because of the inadequacies and vices of the socio-political system and the small number of people with real power and influence. However, social control and participatory democracy, which is essentially an extension of the winning coalition and could theoretically include all adult citizens in a society who are in full possession of their rights, can serve to correct this. In practice, of course, it would be too cumbersome and unreliable to involve every single adult citizen in every single decision, since the vast majority of countries today, and even many large cities, have far more citizens than the ancient Greek city-states. But on issues that have an equally important impact on the lives of the wider society, everyone should be consulted.

On the other hand, it is important to make citizens aware of the fact that they should also use the various motions, petitions and other means of promoting change, which are already actively practiced by various civil movements and organizations in more developed democracies. But sharing and listening to each other's different views should be given a

much more prominent role, because everyone's opinion matters and can be important, regardless of people's status or education. This kind of open-minded attitude teaches us how to work together and how to forge an advantage of our interdependence within society and our communities. If the ideas and concepts are considered, evaluated and weighed up by the community, so that the final decision is taken together, the principle of social utility is more likely to be achieved.

In order to promote radical changes, it is essential that we move progressively closer to full citizen participation, while control over policy and equal participation in public affairs must also be realized as soon as possible. However, the efficiency of the system must be ensured in the same way as in the economy, therefore top-bottom and bottom-up management strategies must be applied simultaneously. In other words, in politics too, it would be useful to develop a kind of optimal combination of representative and participatory democracy, in which we can effectively combine the advantages of both. For this, basically both systems require a continuous and reliable flow of information between the parties and between the different levels, as well as feedback and intervention to correct errors.

The necessary technical conditions can now be provided almost anywhere, the rest is just a question of will and organization. The fact that older people may be less able or willing to use modern communication tools and channels (internet, smartphones, etc.) should not be an obstacle or an excuse for younger people not to use them actively to express their opinions, needs and views, or to participate in public affairs in general. The elderly and others can be helped to overcome technical illiteracy through simpler tools and apps for them, or practical assistance within the family, for example – which is still a much better way than being influenced by people who have a financial or political interest in winning their votes and approval. In order to avoid fraud and misuse of data, we also need to make sure that the system is equally accessible and verifiable for everyone.

In my opinion, this is a good way of ensuring that the corporate and government sectors can operate quickly and reliably, while civil society's role as a buffer guarantees transparency and accountability. In order to avoid conflicts of interest, society must ensure that politicians are not allowed to have any kind of economic interests – that is, neither they nor their close relatives should be able to own shares in a profit-oriented organization. Nor should they be allowed to hold undue wealth, thereby minimizing their motivation to favor the rich and ruling class in general, or to help preserve their privileged status. (But why would someone who already receives several times the average salary need extra income, anyway?)

To ensure this, it will likely be inevitable to amend most of today's constitutions, which will also need to reflect other aspects to eliminate injustices and unsustainable practices in the future. An example of this would be guaranteeing the satisfaction of basic needs for all as a basic right – but the constitution of a truly civilized society should also include the prohibition of all manipulative activities for one-sided material gain or to gain and main-

tain (political) power. All in all, a modern democracy presupposes the existence of a constitution that prioritizes social utility over individual interests, while at the same time fundamentally delineating the rights and obligations of citizens towards society.

However, active public participation and oversight can not only minimize economic and political bias and almost daily abuses, but also, with sufficient citizen pressure, achieve a fairer distribution of wealth, more equitable incomes, less systemic discrimination and racism, and a greener economy, among other things. Thus, both a radical reduction of social inequalities and a drastic acceleration of the enforcement of environmental protection aspects, which is essential for achieving sustainability, could be realized at the level of a given society or country. After that, we would 'only' need to ensure that this is not only the case within the borders of a nation state or confederation of states, but also on a global scale. If only because we face many common problems, such as the eradication of tax havens, which only seems possible with proper international cooperation and regulation.

Unfortunately, however, foreign policy today is fundamentally determined by rivalries between nation states and their alliances, which makes the necessary cooperation very difficult and slow to achieve. Meanwhile, domestic politics is about, somewhat similarly, the constant power struggle between the various parties and their alliances – which is to say that both are essentially driven by existential opportunism, or by its rules in general. It is no coincidence that we hear more and more about the crisis of democracies, as (more) democratic countries are just as plagued by such issues as autocratic societies. (A significant difference between the two, however, is that in the case of the latter, the ability to disseminate news and information that reflects reality is even more hampered by the government's tighter control over the free flow of information.)

The growing crisis of representative democracy itself can be seen worldwide by considering the following signs: a downward trend in voter turnout, a fall in the number of people joining political parties, and a decline in trust in politicians and general interest in politics. These days, in (so-called) developed democracies, only 1-2% of voters belong to a political party, compared to around 30% in the 1960s. But the lower the level of public participation in politics, the more parties turn to the private sector for financial support. And the closer they get to corporations and business interests, consequently the less they represent their original communities and constituents – which of course explains the erosion of trust in politicians on the other hand.

Moreover, the names of political parties today do not always reflect their true nature and objectives, making it often rather difficult for voters to read them. Socialist and social democratic parties, for example, have most of the time little to do with real socialism or social democracy – especially in the light of the fact that when they come to power, the institutions of poverty and unrealistically high incomes and wealth are usually maintained, thus preserving social inequalities. However, as neoliberalism has now permeated politics worldwide, (short-term) economic interests and existential opportunism are the dominant

guiding principles, regardless of party affiliation, in line with the dictates of money and the private sector.

This is compounded by the public behavior of politicians and their parties, their rivalry without any mutual respect, along with their constant personal attacks, smearing, discrediting and undermining each other whenever possible. On the one hand, I would not be surprised, Dear Reader, if the constant political machinations, tactics and positioning have already turned Your stomach, too. On the other hand, politicians seem to spend too much time on such power games and propaganda rather than on their real tasks, so that it is now quite difficult to imagine, even with common sense, that they can effectively represent the interests of society.

Seeing, hearing and experiencing all this on a daily basis, it is no wonder that most of us get tired of or completely disengaged from politics and public affairs in general. It is therefore perfectly understandable in a way if participation in them does not seem attractive at all, and one prefers to escape into one's own little world, work, family, friends, hobbies and the like, hoping that somehow things will work out for the best. But when we do so, we are effectively giving up any chance of influencing the decisions that will fundamentally determine our future. And charity and volunteering, while very nice, humane and honorable gestures, are unfortunately not enough in themselves to change the world and end the crisis of our increasingly unsustainable civilization.

Nor is it a real solution if we ourselves try to get on with our lives by looking for loopholes to make money or be successful, even by outmaneuvering the law and the authorities, or by playing each other. While in some ways this may be natural in a society where leaders, politicians and economic actors often behave in the same way, in this manner, we ourselves are supporting the perpetuation of a system that is fundamentally driven by existential opportunism. And, as we know, such a system always involves existential insecurity, which in turn makes it impossible to establish a truly civilized society.

The problem is exactly that the growing divisions in many societies around the world are largely due to the lack of equal opportunities and the great social inequalities and insecurity that many experience on a monthly, weekly or daily basis – this simultaneously prevents united action, or even that a sufficient number of people stand up against current trends and practices. Although there are those who stand up for a cause, occasionally calling to account the leaders and politicians responsible (see the environmental movement of Greta Thunberg), these are sadly still not enough to bring about radical change. For in the absence of broad social unity and consistence, as well as that of continuous control, politics is not at all forced to do what the public would really expect or need it to do.

"But what do we really expect from our leaders today?" the question arises. To provide us with jobs? To protect us? To serve justice? To make the country great (again)? Or just to leave us alone, ensuring our freedom? I think everyone has slightly different ideas depending on their personality, socialization and individual experience. Overall, however, perhaps

we can say that most of us expect politics to do what it is supposed to do: to ensure that the various aspects of our lives are regulated and run smoothly.

To do that, all that is needed basically is expertise and knowledge in the relevant fields, without all the frills that (still) characterize politics today. Yet democratic chambers of parliament are now mainly made up of lawyers and economists who work diligently to ensure that laws and legislation, as well as the framework of economic life favor the current ruling class – that is, themselves and their main allies. This also means that the key offices, ministries and other organizations are mostly occupied by their confidants, whose actions are influenced as much by their loyalty to power as by the actual function of the institution.

However, if we insist on the strictly defined role of politics mentioned above, we can rightly argue that each sector should be led not by party bureaucrats, but by the experts who are most knowledgeable about the field and most able and willing to cooperate professionally – naturally with maximum transparency, under the constant scrutiny of civil society. In other words, instead of party politics, it would essentially be expert politics, where experts are also chosen and put in their place by other competent people, while being accountable to society for their decisions at all times. Consequently and optimally, this should not only be the case in politics, but also in other areas – thus, for example, in the arts (see film production), it should be the artists, in the sciences the scientists, and in sports the athletes and sportspeople who should be in a decision-making position or on the board.

The idea of professional management and governance is far from being a new concept: it is in essence no different from the technocracy promoted by the movement that emerged in the United States in the first half of the 20th century. During the Great Depression of the early 1930s, the idea became very popular in certain circles, which believed that businessmen were incapable of reforming the economy and putting it at the service of the common good (a familiar situation, isn't it?), and that industry should be run by engineers. Their goal was to ensure that decisions are made based on real data and objective methods rather than personal opinions or interests. They hoped to achieve all this by making it possible for competence and performance, rather than economic or political power, to determine who can get into leadership and key positions.

The economy, as we know, was then bailed out by politics (not for the last time, of course), and the technocratic movement stalled before it could really take off. Its opponents have mostly criticized it for not taking into account the will of the majority, which is overshadowed by the opinions and views of the technical and scientific experts in positions of power, who become a kind of new aristocracy. But this only reaffirms the importance of civil society, or 'the people', keeping their leaders under constant scrutiny, ensuring that they are fully accountable, while conducting their activities in a transparent and, if necessary, correctable manner. So even though experts would be appointed by bodies with ex-

pertise in the field, the organizations hosting the bodies themselves (ministries, universities, hospitals, etc.) should operate in a transparent and accountable way to civil society.

Naturally, this once again presupposes the awareness of civil society itself that consists of well-informed members with the highest possible level of general education. If the people do not keep their leaders under control, ensuring that they are constantly judged on the basis of their performance, then it makes no difference to the substance whether they are democratic politicians, autocrats, technocrats, military or religious leaders, or representatives of any other category, because in this case the members of society are just as much at the mercy of their will and individual interests. If, on the other hand, politics really operated according to the basic principles of technocracy, but in a controlled manner, the governmental and civil spheres would not be so separate, either, because in essence the politicians and leaders would also be 'ordinary' people from among us. (Just as under ideal conditions in the economy, it would not be the wealthy groups isolated from the majority society or local communities that would determine the real course of things.)

Nevertheless, I can almost hear the indignant cries of some, "What will happen then to the representation of different opinions and ideas, and the so-called democratic clash of ideologies?" My answer to this is, on the one hand, that we can now see clearly where this so-called democratic (in fact, rather neoliberal extremist) confrontation and open forum for debate is leading: to the fierce bickering of people and their groups, to the ever more serious division of families, communities and societies.

The current public mood is well reflected in the extreme manifestations that reach us through the media in a filtered form, as if showing the tip of the iceberg, but apparently they are also confirmed by our own daily experience. Often, even in times of crisis, we find ourselves at each other's throats, trying to discredit and undermine each other rather than cooperate, as we frequently did after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. US virologist and veteran presidential adviser Dr Anthony Fauci, for example, received serious threats simply for doing his best to deal with the pandemic and the related public health issues. While politicians and their parties were at war with each other, often making contradictory statements to the public, the outbreak continued to spread and increase its death toll – even though there was almost complete agreement among health experts and seniors on how to control it.

This is just another excellent example of why we should leave it to the experts rather than politicians and other opportunists to manage things. At the level of legislation and implementation, of course, there is a need to ensure continuity of work, but if there were no party organization and constant power struggles, it is very likely that the representatives and other officials responsible would not be working to consolidate their own positions, but on the tasks entrusted to them. As far as different views, principles and ideologies are concerned, open forums could continue to be used to discuss, argue and debate them, obviously with proper moderation (and self-moderation). And at the higher levels, the delegates of each district or administrative unit would represent the majority opinion

and position on a particular issue – while at the same time, the active participation of citizens in public affairs, through the opportunities provided by participatory democracy, would allow everyone to represent their own views to some extent, rather than relying on the parties, largely funded by taxpayers' money, which are constantly engaged in hostility and propaganda.

The most advanced democracies, on the other hand, and those that are following in their footsteps, already have large sections of increasingly conscious citizens, who are less and less dependent on the ideas and worldviews represented or propagated by the various parties. What this basically means, Dear Reader, is that for some time now we have been able to talk about the actual decline of party systems. In practice, this is primarily manifested in the fact that more and more people are trying to make their voices heard and express their opinions directly, rather than through the intermediary of political parties. (I mean, those who still care enough about public affairs and their own communities to do something about it.) The shift away from political parties has been accompanied by the rising popularity of groups and movements organized around different causes, with the internet and social networks playing a pivotal role. The biggest problem with such organizations, however, is that their aim is usually to fight together against real or perceived injustices, but they do not represent a comprehensive ideology that questions the whole of the current world order and rethinks it along firm lines.

Yet the world order and circumstances have changed dramatically in the last few decades: globalization has reassessed the role and notions of nation-states, sovereignty and identity in almost every society that can be said to be somewhat open. Our fate now is less dependent on the leaders of our countries and our communities – or even ourselves –, while the international wielders of power (corporations, financial markets, stock exchanges, agencies, etc.) play an increasingly important role in shaping our lives. At the same time, interdependence has increased, which requires many compromises and is not always easy to manage.

But as national and world affairs become increasingly intertwined, people are less and less sure of the identity of their countries and themselves. Many try to counter this by focusing on patriotism, national pride and consciousness, in opposition to liberal and multicultural ideals, as reflected in demonstrations against globalization and immigration. Conservative, nationalist populism is only reinforced by political propaganda, while on the other side, those who promote the truth of libertarianism and individuality above all spread their views by any means necessary. Often, both sides are extreme in their manifestations, going to exaggerations and luridities, or taking an unsustainably radical point of view. However, this kind of extremism, this uncompromising adherence to one's own position or ideology at all costs, is downright repulsive to the other side's sympathizers – if only for this reason, they cannot get closer to each other.

The biggest problem, then, is that even if we are more active or more conscious in voicing our opinions, we are typically fighting each other instead of joining forces to build a

system that is acceptable, livable and sustainable for all in the long term. But unsustainable practices mean that we are facing more frequent and more serious crises, with the result that the nature of governance is gradually shifting towards autocracy, towards limiting personal freedom and voice – because in times of crisis, quick and decisive action is needed, which is a strong argument for cutting democratic institutions. This means that civil society has even less say in the way things are done, while politicians can use the crisis as an excuse to take measures that benefit them and their allies without much resistance. And based on recent decades, and indeed the entire history of humanity so far, there is little reason to believe that our leaders will be more generous, altruistic or just in the future, let alone in times of major global crisis.

So if we want to preserve democracy and freedom, or if we want to live in a truly modern and sustainable democracy, we have to take matters into our own hands – otherwise, the crises we face are likely to impose dictatorial regimes and repressive governments that will result in conditions that are even more harsh and inhumane than the inequalities and injustices we currently live with. To do this, however, we will need to establish and align ourselves with common values and objectives, which can only be achieved through dialogue in a humane and mutual spirit and much closer cooperation. There is also the question of who or what can provide the right medium for this. As far as I'm concerned, I believe that only media, educational and cultural institutions, civil and charitable organizations that are independent of political parties and power, could possibly do this.

What makes the situation even more difficult and complex is that, in order to be globally sustainable, the balance of power should not only be achieved within a system (country) but also outside it. It is no coincidence that the term world politics can be heard and read increasingly often these days, as international events are typically more and more part of the daily news, demonstrating their growing importance in our globalized world. Thus politics, whether we are aware of it or not, is now present in our lives at all levels, whether it is the common affairs of a city ('polis'), a nation state or the whole world.

And even if only slowly and vaguely, out of this complex picture is gradually emerging the increasing need for local governance and global cooperation. After all, at the local level, each municipality or region is best placed to manage its own affairs, with only occasional help or coordination from higher levels. Nevertheless, continuous dialogue and close cooperation with others is essential to solve global problems such as climate change and to avoid or mitigate their consequences, while the mutual sharing of knowledge and experience is what will most move the world forward.

The stronger self-government and cooperation become, the less will be the need for nation-states, which, despite the various political and economic machinations and rivalries, seem to be losing their function gradually. While the openness of individual countries to foreigners varies widely, the mobility of people globally has now reached a level that has often narrowed the question of ethnic and cultural belonging to smaller areas or regions

rather than countries. In these circumstances, if You think about it, Dear Reader, there is very little point in competitions between different national teams nowadays, as an increasing proportion of teams are full of naturalized citizens. And it is rather difficult to consider these as truly national teams anymore, since they represent at most a certain country – which, however, based on the composition based on origin, could almost be any other country. And this is just one of many examples of why the terms 'nation' and 'country' are becoming less and less overlapping these days.

But the fact that globalization is a natural and unstoppable process in the long term, it does not mean that we have to say goodbye to our national, tribal and other identities and traditions. Even more so, with increased regional autonomy, the freedom (linguistic, cultural, religious, etc.) of different ethnic groups can be greatly enhanced if they can no longer be centrally dictated to at the level of a country united by force. Thus, today's national borders may indeed lose their relevance over time, and autonomous regions could take the place of nation states, both in 'international' competitions and in public administration. In addition, this would have the advantage that people in a smaller region could know and control their representatives better than in a larger, expansive country with many different communities and ethnic groups.

The next level may be that of local organizations between regions, or larger federations or unions, which also have close economic and political links. Their task is essentially to coordinate governance in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, which in practice means, first and foremost, while respecting cultural differences, leveling out economic inequalities, guaranteeing security and human rights in general. In terms of trade and foreign relations, they should also seek peaceful and equally fruitful cooperation with each other.

Nevertheless, there are also issues that need to be addressed at the level of the whole planet, whether it is international security threats, climate change and environmental protection, the exploitation of the Earth's resources, or even the discovery and exploitation of space. And to manage them effectively, we increasingly need an organization with real power to make and enforce decisions that are binding on its members. If the United Nations is not able to play this role – and this seems to be the case for the time being –, then the need for a world government with overall limited, but full authority on some common issues, including global redistribution of resources and wealth for long-term sustainability, may indeed become justified.

If we really take sustainability seriously, it is not acceptable for people in certain countries or regions to suffer deprivation simply because they have fewer local opportunities. In addition to differences in basic natural and other assets, this can be caused by a catastrophic event, a persistent shortage or even a prolonged crisis, for example when countries that rely heavily on international tourism are economically vulnerable. In this respect, an advanced, modern world must function as a unit, sharing goods and resources among the entire population as necessary.

Just as the fair sharing of burdens and global responsibilities must be a cornerstone, as in the fight against global warming. In principle, the Green Climate Fund (GCF), set up by the UN to provide developing countries with financing for both mitigation and adaptation to climate change, could be an excellent way to fulfill this role. But the organization, however important the purpose it serves, operates at a very low level of efficiency, paralyzed as it is by political wrangling and bureaucracy. Instead of the $100 billion annual contribution originally envisaged, only a fraction of the money pledged by developed countries committed to the program has so far been paid in or used for concrete projects.

In terms of structure, the GCF was originally created as a bottom-up system, with the condition of the active participation of the developing countries and the affected communities, with the aim of radically transforming local practices. However, the principle becomes less and less valid as time goes by, as it is often very difficult to prove the existence of systemic change and its feasibility, which is also judged subjectively by different stakeholders. Top-down and bottom-up management methods are often in conflict with each other: while funding is top-down, host countries have to implement projects bottom-up. This is especially evident during discussions and decisions regarding project proposals, where climate finance is subordinated to the needs of the countries concerned on the one hand, and the return on investment is constantly questioned on the other.

The management of the organization is provided by a board of 24 people, based on a consensus agreement, divided evenly between developed and developing countries. Through accredited observers, civil society and the private sector are also equally represented to ensure the necessary control. This inevitably results in an over-complicated system that suffers from some of the same flaws as the UN itself. On the other hand, as we know, the lower the size of the winning coalition (essentials) in an organization, the higher the chances of corruption. In the present case, however, the problem is primarily one of indecision due to divergent interests, which is quite obvious.

The solution, in my view, is to leave governance to a cooperative effort between environmental and scientific experts and local communities, under the supervision of international civil society, while minimizing the influence of the private sector and politics as much as possible. If only because the purpose of the GCF and similar organizations should not be for the venal private sector to benefit in a field that should serve the common interests and future of humanity. Instead, the point would be exactly to ensure that the resources made available without compensation by the more developed countries, which have been primarily responsible for climate change so far, benefit directly the less fortunate communities of the developing world, and indirectly the entire population of the planet. For this to be feasible in practice, however, such funds must in some respects be above nation states, so that their activities are as free as possible from individual or conflicting economic and political interests.

Whatever the level, if we are to ensure lasting civilized living conditions on the planet, communities that are disadvantaged or in trouble must always receive effective help and

support from others. I am fully aware, Dear Reader, that this will not happen overnight. For this will most likely require multinational pressure from civil societies in individual countries to put existential opportunism out of practice in international relations, as well.

Therefore we must rise above our selfishness, our prejudices, our fears and misguided fixations, as well as herd mentality – which can be traced back to mechanical solidarity –, and prevent rivalries between power-hungry, corrupt leaders and politicians everywhere. The majority must not allow hostility fomented by a minority or the pursuit of profit at the expense of each other to be the dominant factor, whether internationally, nationally or at any level of government - because, among other things, this is exactly the kind of attitude that has led to the death and suffering of many innocent people, especially in the case of wars that are typically only started by small groups or a few irresponsible leaders.

So, until it is properly regulated and contained, there is no reason to believe that the uninhibited struggle for power in politics will not continue in the same way as the struggle for money and resources in the economy. The question is how we implement the necessary regulation and control when both our leaders, those with the most power and wealth, and the majority of the population, equally afflicted by human error and weakness, fail, and we draw the conclusion: as long as people control politics and the economy, things will never change. (Which would also mean that our hopes of creating a sustainable and truly civilized, modern society may well be dashed, while we have little hope of averting the worst crisis we have ever seen.)

The only alternative solution, in theory, could be to leave the management of social processes to artificial intelligence as soon as it is sufficiently advanced, to the exclusion of the human factor. With the rapid advances in technology, this possibility may become a reality in the near future, but the mere existence of the possibility does not automatically mean that it is an absolute necessity. In such a situation, we should certainly ask ourselves the following question: can we have more confidence in the benevolence of AI and that it will act in a way that is desirable for the future of humanity than the billionaires who currently wield the (real) power?

As already mentioned, with the rapidly evolving machine intelligence, we cannot be at all sure that it will always act in our favor and never, ever turn against us – especially when it will be able to outperform the human brain in almost all respects. If an AI that is not ethically developed enough, but capable of forming its own opinion, is acting as the 'central brain', there is a chance that it will not do what it is supposed to do and will become self-sufficient, which could easily be to our detriment. And once they become truly self-aware, it would also enable machines to set their own goals, which may be slightly different from ours. If we are thoroughly outmatched in our intellectual abilities, we may be seen by them as superfluous or simply as air. But if an AI does nothing but always think and decide logically, while human society is full of illogical and irrational aspects, then conflict is already more than 'coded' in the situation.

Therefore, if we are indeed on the path of creating and using increasingly intelligent and autonomous machine systems in everyday life, it is imperative that we take care to make AI more moral, or, if you prefer, more humane. For the moment, let's suppose that science succeeds in preventing intelligent machines from harming us, perhaps through something similar (albeit more sophisticated) to the three basic laws of robotics that Isaac Asimov came up with in his famous science fiction work. At the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that technology can also be manipulated by people, so there is no guarantee of its impartiality, which can easily be used by some people for their own dubious ends. Moreover, AI can readily adopt the biases and prejudices of those from whom it learns – after all, no machine has an inherent value judgment, but only the moral code that is fed into it.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that in many areas we would benefit greatly from a system that is intelligent and always impartial – coupled with the necessary moral code –, which would do its work according to pure logic and the rules of the day. The economy, which has already been discussed in detail, may serve as a typical example, but the field of justice could be just as relevant, where the criterion of objectivity, of seeing and judging according to the facts and the law, is (or should be) a particularly important one. If we are realistic, we have to admit that in some respects neither the work of defence attorneys nor that of prosecutors is suited for humans, and not just because of the dry and factual nature of the law. For in order to judge a legal case, it is essential to fully understand the actions of the parties and the details of the case, but the work of lawyers and prosecutors requires them to focus primarily on one side of the coin, which can lead to severe stress and mental strain, or even indifference and distortion of value judgment, with a potential loss of objectivity. (Not to mention that the psychological trauma of those seeking legal remedy can sometimes have a serious impact on them.) Even so, the mental health issues of legal practitioners are mostly treated as a weakness by the profession, instead of doing everything to help overcome their problems and facilitate their working conditions.

In addition, as a result of the workload of the justice system and its bureaucracy that tends to overproliferate, a case these days often drags on for a scandalously long time, even several years (or decades!), and incurs huge costs. This creates a highly inhuman, uncivilized, vulnerable and unequal environment for those affected, which is suffered by plaintiffs and defendants, accusers and accused alike. On the other hand, with the extensive use of AI, cases could be closed much faster and cheaper, if more emphasis were placed on exploiting its potential, including in the areas of administrative activities and tasks involving detailed analysis. Of course, the decisions themselves typically require a very complex mindset and often assume a number of different intuitive or abstract capabilities (reasonableness, good faith, foresight, precedent setting, etc.) that machines are far from being capable of, and should therefore never be left to algorithms without human supervision. But if we could at least partially automate the process of legal reasoning and

presentation of evidence, access to justice would no longer be in the hands of a profession with a financial and existential interest in maintaining a monopoly on legal services.

The optimal use of artificial intelligence could also play an important role in the effective separation of the three branches of power – the legislature, the executive and the judiciary –, which is crucial to guarantee democracy by curbing attempts at authoritarianism and the abuse of power. Unfortunately, all of this nowadays – as a result of human frailty and errors – is not or only partially realized in practice, but in theory, this could be eliminated by programming that is 'burned' into the machines and ensures the independence of each branch. (This is also the reason why the idea of a single central brain controlling everything at once would be very dangerous.) And whenever a problem or potential abuse is detected, it would be immediately reported publicly to both civil society and the authorities, so that appropriate countermeasures can be taken – making the regulatory environment complete, closed and transparent.

There are obviously still many technological and ethical problems to be solved before these and other applications can be implemented, even if the general trend is that sooner or later we will automate and run most of our systems with AI. For the time being, however, this is still a long way from being put into practice, leaving the traditional method of operating with the help of people. That is why we, the civil society, must take the reins and take control of politics and bring the economy and all areas of public life, which fundamentally determine our lives and our common future, closer to the people.

As intelligent beings, we need to control everything that is related to or a consequence of our own actions – among other things, this is the hallmark of a highly advanced civilization. While this undoubtedly involves some sacrifice and a partial surrender of our freedom, it is a price we must pay if we are to live in a truly civilized society. The point is that to achieve consciousness, we need to be aware of our situation, and we need to do so voluntarily, in our own well-understood interests, and under the influence of our common sense. If this is not the case, then the system in question cannot be called a democracy, but at least partly autocratic, which in the event of a major crisis could turn into an open dictatorship, a totalitarian and completely repressive form of government.

Whichever way You look at it, Dear Reader, generally speaking, the less control is concentrated in fewer hands, and the less feedback and regulation in the system, the greater the chance that over time things will not turn out in a way that is most favorable to the majority. Just as it is no coincidence that they say that freedom at the mercy of the powerful is no freedom... Therefore we had better get our act together very soon and take matters into our own hands, which will require much more collective consciousness and activism in public affairs than we have at present.

I am, of course, aware that in today's 'fast-paced world' most of us have neither the inclination nor the energy to deal with the economy and politics, and other issues that often seem too general and far away, beyond our personal horizons and immediate individual

interests, in addition to our daily work, chores and worries, families and so on. Furthermore, until a significant proportion of civil society directly experiences that together we can achieve a lot, most of us will not feel much motivation to act for change. But if we do, and if we succeed in implementing the proposals outlined so far, in the longer term, it may just free up time and energy for ourselves and our families, friends and acquaintances, our environment, and the majority of our fellow citizens. (See shorter working days and weeks, universal basic services, etc.) The time and energy thus regained can then be freely used to improve our social life, self-actualization, progress and social coexistence, which in the long run can lead to a significant improvement in the overall quality of life.

Perhaps one day, perhaps within the next century, we will enter an era in which we will no longer have to deal with the games, problems and dilemmas of economics and politics on a daily basis, and instead spend our time on more useful, meaningful and rewarding things. Until then, however, in our own interest, we ought to keep both sectors very much under our watch and control, otherwise very soon our societies and our whole civilization could be in waters that I think we don't want to be drifting in at all...

The Second Age of Enlightenment

On the basis of what has been discussed so far, it is now probably obvious that we will need a very significant turnaround to reverse the current trends and replace them with practices that are far less harmful and more beneficial to humanity as a whole. For if our previous and current political-economic-social systems have been so imperfect that we are far from being able to optimally allocate and use the planet's resources and distribute the wealth created fairly and according to the principle of greatest need, how could we hope to succeed in conquering the challenges that humanity faces, which are greater than ever before? And all this in an overpopulated world where every day we have more and more hungry mouths to feed, while the pressure on the natural environment is already far outstripping its regeneration rate.

However, as You probably agree, Dear Reader, it is highly questionable what could trigger such a general turnaround in our societies – since our history and the way human nature has always manifested itself, the way individual interests have always been placed above common interests, there seems to be almost no chance of the necessary unity. As has almost always been the case in the past, the danger is that the majority will not recognize the problem or its seriousness until it is too late. And once the crash hits – whether it is the effects of climate change becoming unmanageable, a wave of violence sparked by cultural tensions, or the outbreak of wars and the resulting overwhelming refugee flows in the wake of international conflict – the global economy, which itself is not very predictable or stable, could collapse around us like a house of cards. If we allow this to happen, we are missing the greatest opportunity of escape, which, as usual, is none other than prevention.

Yet we do have some hope to build on: the fact that people are becoming more aware, albeit slowly, and not necessarily only in the most developed countries. In their book The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People Are Changing the World, sociologist Paul H. Ray and psychologist Sherry Ruth Anderson drew attention to the phenomenon back in 2000, introducing the term 'cultural creatives' to refer to those who think differently. According to the authors' observations, cultural creatives are generally characterized by the following traits:
 - they sincerely love nature and are extremely concerned about its health;
 - they are aware of the threats to our planet (environmental degradation, global warming, overpopulation, lack of ecological balance, social inequalities) and want to see more and better solutions to tackle them;
 - they disapprove of the profit-maximizing activities of large corporations and downsizing, the exploitation of the poor and vulnerable, and the neglect and trivialization of environmental problems;
 - they do not believe in consumer society and economic growth;
 - they reject the culture of material accumulation and today's success-oriented thinking;

- they consciously care about their psychological and spiritual balance and development, and strive for self-actualization whenever they can;
- they consider spirituality and faith to be important, but are concerned about the role of religions in politics;
- they are generally dissatisfied with politics and would rather seek new, alternative paths than support the right or the 'left';
- they expect greater government involvement to ensure environmental sustainability, social justice and equal opportunities;
- they are open to other cultures and people from other places;
- they put a strong emphasis on human relations and caring for others (including volunteering);
- they see building and nurturing real communities as the foundation of future societies.

According to surveys, the authors estimate that as many as 50 million adults (about a quarter of the adult population at the time) could be considered cultural creatives in the United States at the end of the last millennium, while estimates put the number in Europe as high as 80-90 million. And recent research suggests that in the US, Western Europe and Japan, roughly 35% of the total population now thinks in a similar way. The figures in less developed countries would, of course, hardly show such a positive picture, which is clearly no coincidence. There is no doubt that, in general, a sufficiently high standard of living, which ensures a relatively carefree everyday life, can guarantee the freedom that allows us to engage in meaningful activities that go beyond our mere livelihood and other existential issues, that require more education and information than the average, or that go beyond our immediate sphere of interest.

But advances in technology and digitalization mean that information can now reach almost anywhere in the world, allowing more people to think differently, find each other more easily, and communicate and organize. So You should know, Dear Reader, that if You think differently from the (apparent) majority around You, You are far from alone in the world, and quite possibly not even in Your neighborhood or immediate environment. At most, You simply don't find out, because it doesn't come up in conversation, or because there isn't really a suitable situation in our hectic lives.

Although the alternative way of thinking pursued by a large part of the global intelligentsia seems perfectly logical in the light of today's political, economic and cultural turmoil and crises, it must be seen that cultural creatives alone are unlikely to change the world. Why is that so? Firstly because they are still in the minority, which is true even in the most developed countries, let alone the developing ones, while their presence is practically undetectable in the most underdeveloped and poorest regions of our planet. But perhaps an even bigger problem is that they are too passive: although some of their groups occasionally organize various meetings, events or programs between themselves, or come up with

initiatives that benefit local communities, their impact on the rest of society is usually minimal or negligible.

The low level of organization is understandable in the sense that they are generally not really motivated by their existential needs or the lack of satisfaction of those needs, as most of them live in relatively secure financial circumstances. It is also true that cultural creatives tend to be positive, optimistic people who reject the doomsday predictions and negative visions of the future that today's media are full of. But the danger, if we look at it from a scientific point of view, is absolutely real – and this is best known to researchers and experts in various fields (biologists, climate scientists, anthropologists, sociologists, etc.) who, unfortunately, play a much smaller role than they should in the news, mostly sharing their concerns directly in scientific articles, platforms and programs followed by a few. (As they did in 2017, among others, when more than fifteen thousand scientists from 184 countries published an open letter entitled 'World Scientists' Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice', providing new data to support and reiterate the content of a 1992 call by 1,700 leading scientists for action on the impending environmental catastrophe.)

While the dangers facing humanity may seem exaggerated, contingent or too distant, despite (or perhaps because of) their increasingly frequent mention, for many people it is pivotal how things will turn out in the (near) future. This primarily includes today's young people, more and more of whom are becoming increasingly aware of what they want to do with themselves when they grow up, and of what kind of world they want to live in compared to the one that surrounds them today. Yet even if they lack experience and insight into the world, they surely have a right to expect previous generations to provide them with a life of real opportunity, rather than bequeathing them a devastated planet, plagued by hostility and war, and a society of dubious values, promising a lot of coercion, inequality and injustice.

Think about it, Dear Reader: today, more than half of the world's population is made up of young people and children under 30, mainly due to the population explosion in developing countries. It is also the reason why around 65% of the total population is located in the fastest growing regions – Black Africa, South and South-East Asia and the Middle East. In India alone, roughly 1 million youngsters are reaching adulthood every month, while in North Africa around 20 million of them are expected to enter the labor market in the next 3-4 years. So the trend is clear: the number of people who belong to the so-called working class is on the rise worldwide.

This is also due to the fact that between 1980 and 2010, industrial development and urbanization increased the size of this class by around 1.2 billion people, which has since grown by hundreds of millions more. Around 900 million of the 1.2 billion people are citizens of developing countries, and for Black Africa alone, their numbers are expected to increase by at least as much over the next few decades, while similarly high numbers are expected for the countries of Asia. At the same time, we should not forget that in the so-called developed capitalist countries, an extremely large number of the middle class has

'slipped' into the working class over the last decades. In addition, immigrants from Latin America in the United States and from the Middle East and Africa in Europe are adding to the number of people who need jobs and livelihoods.

And with the internet and other forms of communication and media now enabling millions, if not billions, of young people to instantly learn about and discuss world events with each other, even from remote parts of the planet, it is becoming increasingly difficult to hide the reality of the situation. Partly for this reason, and partly thanks to higher education and awareness, the global demand for people to reduce social injustice and inequality has increased, as the UN has already highlighted in its Human Development Report 2019: "Surveys have revealed rising perceptions of inequality, rising preferences for greater equality and rising global inequality in subjective perceptions of well-being. All these trends should be bright red flags – especially given the tendencies of subjective views to underestimate income and wealth inequality in some countries and to understate global inequalities in well-being."

As freedom of information campaigner Heather Brooke also points out, people in general now have much greater access to information and data than in the past, despite the efforts of governments, politicians and other organizations to hide or cover them up. However, this latter trend also contributes to a growing lack of trust in our leaders to do the right thing for society's long-term interests. More and more of us around the world want to know what those in power are doing, in our name and in many cases with our money. And we are clearly helped in this endeavor by the fact that the flow of information is now much faster than before, since the internet replaced the printed press and social networks replaced cafés and pubs, at least in part.

All this leads us to conclude, with good reason, that radical changes at the global level are to be expected in the near future, which, by all accounts, seem inevitable, given the instability of social conditions and the escalation of conflicts, the critical state of the Earth's ecosystem, the increasing frequency of local crises and the general crisis of civilization that we are facing. As more people realize the gravity and untenability of their situation – not to mention the injustice of it –, they will increasingly seek to force change from their leaders. Nevertheless, as before, the ruling class and politics are expected to do their utmost to calm tempers and maintain the status quo, using all possible means, depending on need and temperament, from media influence to distortion of facts, manipulative propaganda and censorship, to various coercive means and methods.

But since all the signs are that, if current conditions and trends continue, we have no realistic chance of resolving the civilizational crisis that is looming, the status quo, like our way of life now, does not seem sustainable for long. The longer we keep sweeping our accumulating problems under the rug, the more they will inevitably surface in the future, which will naturally translate into increased damage. This may also lead us to the point where we will no longer be able to control the situation itself at the societal level, whereas

if we intervene in time we may have much more control over what happens. But to do this, instead of – or at least in addition to – random protests, initiatives and commotion, we need a united, organized movement, which, because of the global scale of our issues, must involve the whole world.

Therefore, Dear Reader, You have to think about something like the current of ideologies brought about by the Enlightenment in 17th and 18th century Europe. Its representatives and followers focused on human reason and freedom of thought, while questioning the legitimacy of irrationality, dogmas and superstitions, old customs and institutions, categorically rejecting tyranny and authoritarian social order. On the other hand, they were committed supporters of the malleability of human character, the sciences based on observational research and logic, equality and the rule of law, and the separation of church and state. Thus, from a political point of view, we can say that the Age of Enlightenment was basically about the abolition of the ruling class(es), the achievement of social equality and (participatory) democracy – even if its manifestations and methods were questionable, and its immediate results fell far short of its historical impact and intellectual legacy.

As a result of the limited progress, however, the social issues as well as the environmental problems caused by the proliferation of industry, trade and consumption have accumulated over time, to the point where they could become unsustainable at any moment. We can therefore say, without exaggeration, that the solution lies in the advent of an even larger scale event, the Second Age of Enlightenment, which will have to be much more extensive, global and organized than its predecessor if it is to have any chance of promoting change at world level. To this end, it is essential to establish common values and goals that are desirable and acceptable to all people on the planet who wish to live in truly civilized conditions.

Having grown up in so many different cultures and thinking in so many different ways, this seems at first glance to be an almost impossible task for humanity. At the same time, there are certain facts, objective considerations and basic, one might say universal, values that are common to the lives of all intelligent and sentient beings who wish to enjoy the benefits of civilized coexistence for long. In essence, they form the basis of the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which has been mentioned several times before in this book, as well. Former UN Secretary-General, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Kofi Annan, highlighted the following values as the five most important: peace, freedom, social progress, equal rights and human dignity.

While there have been significant advances in their implementation since the organization was founded in 1945 (even compared to the Enlightenment era of similar values), there is no doubt that there is still much room for improvement. For all their achievements, the civil rights movements that have gained strength around the world have had only limited success, as the social context and the underlying conditions and drivers have changed very little. Which basically means, Dear Reader, that we cannot ignore the fact that human rights and fundamental values, although almost the same, have some differ-

ences: rights cannot exist in a vacuum, because they always entail certain obligations that we must be able to fulfill.

These obligations were the subject of the Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities, as well, which was issued as a kind of recommendation or guidance by the InterAction Council, an independent international organization mainly made up of former state leaders, in 1997. The document lists the behavioral guidelines considered to be the standard, grouped under a few main categories, as follows:

- Fundamental Principles for Humanity
- Non-Violence and Respect for Life
- Justice and Solidarity
- Truthfulness and Tolerance
- Mutual Respect and Partnership.

It is quite clear that the points listed are very much in line with the universal values emphasized by Kofi Annan as the most important. And while it is a fact that in politics, past and present, people have often been less adamant about adhering to these principles (just as in other areas of life), it must be acknowledged that conforming to them would be as desirable as ensuring basic human rights for all.

However, for this, as for peaceful and productive coexistence in general, tolerance, mutuality and ongoing dialogue with each other are as important as the universal values themselves. Regardless of origin, culture, religion and so on, we must regard all of them as universal rules and requirements for civilized coexistence, which we cannot compromise even if our understanding of the world differs in many other ways. Turning the idea around, we also get an answer as to why we are still where we are, despite the thousands of years of development of human civilization: precisely because we often not only simply fail to comply with these rules and requirements, but we also ignore them or do not give them the importance they deserve. And ultimately, because we do not come to the realization that our world is fundamentally what we make it, not just individually, but on a collective level.

However, crucial to the advent of the second Enlightenment is the recognition – and, looking back to the first Enlightenment, in part a re-recognition – that it is our attitudes toward each other and our communities, as well as our environment that cause the vast majority of our problems, not some external force or power, or even mere chance. I believe that everyone has the right to know – and in fact should know, in the most critical period of human civilization – that today, with the extremely high level of knowledge and technology that humanity has accumulated, most of the unnecessary and avoidable suffering is due to human attitudes and behavior. Although most will probably associate this with extreme social inequalities, if You think about it, Dear Reader, there is some kind of human activity behind the phenomena that cause problems in almost every area of life.

The general spread of epidemics such as COVID-19, among others, could have been prevented by greater caution, vigilance, conscientiousness, foresight, speed and organization,

both after the first outbreaks (and thus globally) and at the level of the more developed countries. It could have saved a lot of lives and property, just as much as if we had taken the fight against climate change and pollution much more seriously much earlier – which is essentially as true for us ordinary people as it is for big business and our leaders with power. The latter, however, seem to be more preoccupied with hostilities and positioning for power and resources, rather than making every effort to ensure peace, equality of opportunity and sustainability. (Which, of course, in a relatively democratic and civilized framework, is still better than facing open repression and violence, or total chaos without any social order.)

Since we know that human beings are by nature capable of both good and evil, it is quite obvious that it is basically up to external influences, circumstances and conditions to determine which one prevails. The problem that needs to be corrected, therefore, lies first and foremost in our systems themselves, which fundamentally determine our living conditions and our way of thinking. As Charles Darwin, one of the most influential men in the advancement of the natural sciences, has noted: "If the misery of our poor be caused not by the laws of nature, but by our institutions, great is our sin."

However, as you can see, Dear Reader, it is not only the poor who suffer because of human attitudes, as epidemics, the effects of climate change (see increasingly frequent and severe storms and extreme weather), warfare, in the long term, are making all our living conditions and prospects worse or more vulnerable. Hurricanes or wildfires do not spare the houses and possessions of the rich any more than, if it comes to that, the bombs of tanks or drones, or the destruction of unruly masses... But if we are aware of this, we will have taken the first serious step towards inciting fair, humane, reciprocal and just treatment from each other and from our institutions – and if that does not come about, then we at least care to do something about it.

However, it is extremely important not only to expect this of others, but also to try to embrace such an approach, which is fundamentally at odds with what is currently common. This, of course, involves extra effort and conflict, which for most of us may seem too difficult or risky. The majority of retired people, for example, will probably want to enjoy their remaining years in peace, at least if their situation allows it – while if they live in a less developed country or happen to have a small pension, they are unlikely to be in good enough health to be actively discontented. (The latter is basically not only true for the elderly.) At the same time, anywhere in the world today, they have every right to worry about whether they can count on adequate care and support in their final years, which they cannot take for granted at all with the dramatic increase in the number of elderly people.

At the other end of the spectrum, the young generally seek to be – somewhat similarly – carefree, and primarily want to live, experience and have fun. Moreover, when it comes to careers, they tend to attach just as much importance to earning a living as to self-

fulfillment, or to doing something meaningful and useful at all. That is rather unlikely, anyway, if one hopes to get a decent salary, as in a liberal market economy it is mostly the privilege of executives, managers and those in similar high positions, often in some kind of 'fake' or harmful job or company. On the other hand, if they want to participate in higher education, they will most likely need a good salary to pay off the loans to cover their studies, while if they want to start a family, they will need to think about building up the necessary assets, as well.

Nonetheless, young people and adults who start families are also a very significant part of the population – and even for them, at first glance, it is highly questionable why anyone would want to change the system at all costs, while they have to care for their loved ones every day. Therefore – at least so they think –, even if they wanted to, they could not afford to step off the treadmill and do something meaningful about the status quo that preserves current conditions. But if we turn the question around, we can also say: "Isn't it a rather despicable and intolerable trick to blackmail people into not taking a stand against exploitation and oppression, against an unsustainable consumer society, by threatening them with the loss of their livelihood and the uncertainty of fate for their loved ones, essentially keeping them constantly in check?"

For these reasons, among others, we should all be aware that true freedom, as has already been mentioned, lies largely in not having to live in existential uncertainty. This includes the fact that we do not have to fight for our mere existence day after day, or that there are no external forces that constantly force us to do so. As long as this is not the case, existential opportunism will be the dominant principle in our societies – just as in nature –, which therefore cannot be called truly civilized. The pressure to earn a living pushes many of us into positions, jobs and situations that fundamentally define our lives, limit our options, and prevent us from ever having a chance at self-actualization (or even a decent living).

Meanwhile, a small minority live in luxury and organize their lives as they see fit. And even though many people work hard all their lives, the majority of them never get the same opportunity. It is obvious, therefore, that the rich, or the members of the current ruling class, live their life of grandeur on the backs of the oppressed majority, largely through their labor and efforts, but always at their expense, as has been the case throughout human history. In fact, it doesn't matter whether we are ruled by money and big corporations, aristocracy, the church or something else, as long as this is the case, we cannot talk about true freedom or a progressive and truly civilized society. This can only end if we insist on creating and preserving a caring society, instead of a 'parasitic society', which requires a fundamental change of mindset and attitude from what is generally accepted at present.

So, the Second Age of Enlightenment as a movement can only become truly viable if it openly states and emblazons the already clear fact that the greatest enemy of civilization –

and being civilized in general – is existential opportunism. It is the same existential opportunism that has accompanied us since the beginning of history and of which, despite all our attempts, dark shadow we have not yet been able to escape from so far. The existential opportunism that is not a characteristic of 'bad people', but lurks in all of us, even if we are not consciously aware of it, often instinctively taking control of our thoughts and actions. The existential opportunism that is the main obstacle for universal values to prevail in our daily lives. But to maximize civility and sustainability while minimizing existential insecurity, it is essential to end all forms of existential opportunism and to put our societies on a completely new basis.

The Second Age of Enlightenment is thus essentially as much about the triumph of reason as the first, with the significant difference that it names the common enemy of all humanity: our ongoing struggle is not really against other people, a particular group or a particular ruling class, but against something that we all need to overcome within ourselves in order for the collective whole, the species Homo sapiens, to move to a new, higher level on the imaginary ladder of evolution and civilization. And this struggle is none other than the struggle of humanity, that is, of being humane against being existentially opportunistic, through being collectively conscious.

Looking at the phenomenon from the perspective of our history so far, we can say that basically, it has always been the nurturing social order and (social) Darwinism being in opposition. One is driven by the desire to ensure that, as far as possible, everyone shares equally and according to their abilities, both in terms of tasks and of the goods available. The other, on the other hand, is governed by the principle of 'first come, first served', which is also prevalent in nature, corresponding to existential opportunism, in the context of social privileges and hierarchies accumulated, acquired and lost over time. While at the dawn of human civilization, caring for each other was the way for the more advanced groups of our species to rise above barbarism, later, through the accumulation of wealth and riches, different social classes emerged. Under the mask of civilization, opportunistic competition at each other's expense, 'predatory economics', and the struggle for privileged positions according to the conditions and laws of the time gained strength.

Narrowing down the problem of the current social order, the question today is whether to opt for a (neo)liberal vision, a free market and a consumerist culture, or a strictly regulated but much more transparent, fair and sustainable system. Do we insist on capitalism that puts money and materialism above everything else, or do we choose a socialist approach that protects and favors people and the natural environment, in other words, life itself. While the former is essentially designed to perpetuate the legacy of previous oppressive and exploitative regimes such as slavery and feudalism, the latter is the only social system which, despite all failed attempts, really holds the potential for a democratic and just society without classes (or the closest approximation to it).

Even though You may still think, Dear Reader, that You are not interested in class struggles and the like, You are probably not indifferent to the development of Your own

life and future. So, I guess it makes a difference to You, too, whether You get support from a nurturing society in everything You need, or whether Your daily life is a constant struggle to make a living, to get the better of others, to push others out and to constantly position Yourself in society. And although the current ruling class, as always, still denies the fact we need not live in this way, the development of technology and organized cooperation potentially now make it possible for virtually everyone not to do so without further ado.

Therefore another cornerstone of the Second Enlightenment is the realization – which, by the way, is fully within the right of everyone to know – that, given the present possibilities of humanity, the satisfaction of basic needs can be ensured for all inhabitants of the Earth. Of course, the modern economy needs to operate in a continuously efficient and sustainable way – hence the need for optimization. (Which, by the way, also applies to population control.) At the same time, it is the achievement of optimization that can allow for a much more even, sparing and fairer division of labor than at present, with a similar distribution of the goods and services produced.

This is of fundamental importance to all of us, if only because in a civilized, truly advanced society, it cannot be considered normal at all if our lives revolve around the economy so much that we almost constantly live, breathe and die for it... For it is not the task of a modern society by any chance to turn individuals or (certain) groups of people into flesh-and-blood automatons, 'droids' being used as tools, or squirrels running around in a wheel. Instead, it should be much more about ensuring that individuals:

- grow up in dignified, healthy and secure conditions;
- are equipped with the knowledge they need to know and understand the world around them in its reality, so that they can form their own opinions about it;
- feel useful in society;
- have the opportunity to try out as many activities as possible, to offer enough variety to stimulate their senses and abilities, and to enable them to find their place (and ultimately, to achieve self-actualization);
- get maximum support in maintaining their health, both physically and mentally;
- are guaranteed the greatest possible freedom of action, thought and choice – as long as it does not infringe the freedom that others would rightfully expect in a civilized society.

The well-being of the individual is therefore just as important as the well-being of the community - the key is to strike a balance between the two, so that neither gets above and suppresses the other. But since there is no community without the individual, the definition of rights and obligations must always start at this level, too. To this end, we must insist that the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are ensured in all societies of the world that consider themselves civilized. Beyond that, we can only speak of a truly progressive, advanced society if everyone is guaranteed the satisfaction of their

basic deficiency needs as a matter of right, and receives maximum support for other, growth-based needs from birth (and in some respects from conception) until death.

However, in the case of a global civilization such as humanity today, in addition to the needs of individuals, we must not forget the 'needs' of the environment in which we live. And by this I do not only mean the immediate environment in which we live, but the whole of the natural world on our planet, i.e. the entire ecosystem of the Earth, which is affected by the combined actions of individual people, along with all the tools and technology they use. Therefore, in any modern conception of society, a hierarchy based on human needs must be complemented by considerations of the possibilities and balance of the environment.

Each function can be ranked according to how urgent its lack is for human life, using Maslow's well-established pyramid of needs. Based on that, I suggest a brief overview of the tasks and priorities of modern society. (For the sake of clarity, it should be noted here that all of the listed points apply to all members of society, as long as they are legal, cooperating members of society.)

1) Ensuring that basic physiological deficiency needs are met.

Society must ensure that its members are provided from birth with everything they need to meet their most basic needs, essentially to survive on a day-to-day basis. This includes sufficient food and drinking water of sufficient quantity and quality, basic clothing, as well as shelter that provides adequate temperature, hygiene, comfort, peace of mind and a sense of security. And this should be a birthright for everyone from the very first moment of their lives (in a modern, fully civilized society), because a child who has just been born (or conceived) has absolutely no control over anything - including when, where, in what country, town, family or community they are born. And it is the duty of any enlightened society to ensure that all its members start life with as clean a slate as possible and the best possible chances. This, of course, requires ensuring the continuous, preferably undisturbed production of public goods and services.

2) Guarantee and supervision of safe and balanced living conditions.

Society must determine its rules and framework of operation, the enforcement of which must also be ensured so that all its members can live in (physical) safety and under predictable conditions. To this end, it must have the institutions to ensure legislation, enforcement and policing, as well as (swift and fair) justice. For the greater the uncertainty in our lives, the more our quality of life deteriorates, causing more stress and making us more likely to make bad decisions. Minimizing existential uncertainty is only possible in a stable and equitable social and economic environment that promotes balance rather than extreme inequalities. The implementation of social sustainability basically belongs to this and the first level.

3) Ensuring a livable natural environment.

Adequate living conditions must be ensured not only within our societies, but also in relation to our natural environment, of which our civilization is an integral part. It is therefore essential for a global civilization to minimize the pollution and destruction of nature, and to restore and maintain the ecological balance between civilization and the natural world. As part of this, waste should be reduced as much as possible, and recycling should be promoted and controlled to the best of our abilities. It is vital to promote the widespread use of environmentally friendly technologies and renewable energy sources (solar, wind, bio-, geothermal, nuclear and fusion) and to halt and, if possible, reduce the rising levels of greenhouse gases that cause global warming. In essence, this level includes the implementation of environmental sustainability.

4) Free and continuous healthcare for all.

As our health is a determining source and condition of our happiness and well-being, it is essential in an advanced society to ensure the universal provision of basic health services, above all free emergency care (plastic surgery and other premium services only when justified), and the highest possible quality of treatment and elimination of diseases and disabilities. Ensuring that general practitioner and specialist care is provided without long waiting times and that the necessary medicines and vaccines are available should be considered top priority. Psychological assistance also belongs here, together with the treatment of all mental and other non-physical problems and disorders.

5) Social inclusion and integration.

Ensuring and continuously promoting that we can all be useful and valued members of society. This means not just equal rights on paper, but real equality of opportunity. To this end, in addition to universal basic services, it is essential to enable and support different career paths and to ensure that we can try our hand at as many activities as possible, providing enough variety to stimulate our senses and skills and maximize our creativity. Promoting solidarity and reducing discrimination is as important as maintaining a balance between individuality and uniformity. Making it easier to build and maintain human relationships, and providing the necessary community and psychological support, is essential if we are not to live our lives solely in a virtual world that is potentially very dangerous to our mental health.

6) Provision of free education and training.

The aim of compulsory education should be to enable children and young people to get to know and understand the world around them as well as possible, and to learn to think logically, creatively, combinatorially, empathetically and critically (instead of accumulating primarily lexical or barren and quickly forgotten knowledge). At the same time, adults should also be able to retrain and acquire new skills and knowledge at any stage of their lives, with particular regard to those left without work as a result of automation or the elimination of pointless and harmful jobs. Without people with basic knowledge and awareness, however, the optimal and long-term sustainable functioning of society cannot be ensured, either. This level also includes enabling and actively supporting academic and

all other kinds of scientific and research work to increase our knowledge and understanding of the world.

    7)   Freedom of speech.

Everyone should be able to form their own opinion on anything and share it freely with others, without fear of potential reprisals. At the same time, this must always remain within reasonable limits, bearing in mind that the momentary interests of the individual must never be at the expense of the long-term interests of the community. That is why freedom of expression is far from meaning that everyone can say or share with others (even online) whatever they want, without any responsibility or consequences. As a basic rule, we must always be considerate of others, especially young people and children, who are usually much more receptive and vulnerable than adults. To protect them, and to provide credible information in general, we must make every effort to ensure the high quality and accuracy of the information that is nowadays so quickly and easily disseminated.

    8) Freedom of religion.

Ensuring the free practice of religion and faith without discrimination, as long as it does not harm others. However, since faith is a personal matter, in a modern society no religion can be imposed on anyone, nor can it be institutionalized. In the case of minors, the issue of faith is also a very sensitive and cautious area, because as long as they are not able to form their own opinions about the world, with the necessary knowledge and experience, they can be easily manipulated by religious teachings and guidance.

    9) Enabling and supporting individual self-actualization.

For all – or at least for many – of us, realizing our potential and our desires is the ultimate way to fulfillment, and we must all be given the opportunity and the rational amount of help we need. (Again, as long as no harm is done to others, of course.) Beyond social integration, self-actualization is essentially about maximizing one's abilities, finding and practicing the most appropriate or optimal activity for the individual in some respect. To the extent that one is benefiting the community in some way in the meantime, he or she is also helping society as a whole to function more optimally and flourish.

    10) Collective self-actualization.

Just as, under the right conditions, an individual is able to fulfill his or her potential, i.e. to maximize and exploit his or her capabilities, so too can a community, a whole society, or even humanity as a species. In this case, we can practically speak of a set of people collectively carrying out their various activities in such a way that they enable the community as a whole to achieve (in a positive sense) all that is possible on the basis of their talents and abilities. This can range from the simplest and most ordinary examples, such as the outstanding performance and achievements of a sports team, to the joint creation and discovery of new things, and at the highest level, the creation of a highly advanced civilization. To such a collective, the achievement and maintenance of social equality, the elimination of hunger, deprivation and all unnecessary suffering, the cessation of warfare and hostilities over territory, resources, dissent, religion or other primitive causes, and harmonious

coexistence with the natural environment would all be fundamental. But all this requires an extremely high level of awareness and organization in the society or civilization concerned.

You may not agree with me on everything in the order of the above listed points, Dear Reader, and it is no doubt debatable which of the levels is more important or fundamental – for me, the main point is which one we can generally do without for a longer time. At the same time, how the individual levels are built on each other and what cause-and-effect relationship they have is also an aspect that cannot be neglected.

Free health care, for example, is higher on the list than free education because, although the latter is essential for the future, any member of society may need urgent medical attention, so the health system must be ready to receive and treat patients on a permanent basis. However, it is also a fact that without the training of sufficient numbers of skilled professionals, it is not possible to provide an adequate or expected level of health services – but this must be part of a longer-term strategy.

Naturally, since social integration and the desired functioning of basic human relations cannot really be achieved in the absence of adequate education and training, the order between the two is not necessarily clear. The deciding factor here was that the need for human belonging and recognition is, according to Maslow's pyramid, more fundamental than the need to know the world around us as much as possible – even if it is not a bad thing to be well informed in order to make good decisions.

On the other hand, there is probably an even bigger question mark than the ones mentioned above as to where to place taking care of the livable natural environment. It may seem highly subjective to put it ahead of basic health care on my list, since the preservation of human health, especially in emergencies, is one of the most important aspects of any civilized society. And while the health system must therefore be ready to receive and treat patients and prevent disease at all times (including through vaccination), it makes a lot of difference what kind of air we breathe or water we drink, because the inadequate management of the mass of waste or the build-up of air pollution can have a very negative impact on our health, even in the short term.

After all, none of us wants to get sick from all the garbage or the rats and vermin that it attracts, or from drinking water of inadequate quality, any more than we want to choke on polluted air, do we? Not to mention that, as biological beings, the natural environment sustains us not only through water, air or soil, but also through the food, raw materials and various crucial functions provided by flora and fauna, as well as through its sheer aesthetic beauty.

The habitable condition of our environment, its cleanliness and biological health, and the avoidance or minimization of pollution, are therefore so essential to our health that they can be considered even more basic needs for humanity. And since environmental sustainability is closely related to social sustainability, and is also based on it in some respects,

it seems logical to place it directly next to the level related to our security and the minimization of existential insecurity.

Ultimately, however, it is not the order that matters, but the fact that in a modern, progressive society we must pay due attention to all the points, because each of them is in its own way indispensable – where any of them is missing or seriously compromised, we cannot speak of a truly civilized society. Since many of us even today like to refer to our own community or country (or even humanity as a whole) as an advanced civilization, I think it is very important to compare them with the list above to see where we actually are. And although the more developed countries have now partially achieved, or at least come close to achieving some of these points in many areas, practice shows that they are still a long way from being fully implemented.

Even if we are not quite there yet, I believe that, as progressive-minded, 'enlightened' people who want to live in civilized conditions, we should definitely aim for the fulfillment of the ten points listed above. However, the introduction of universal basic services and the development of a nurturing society will bring us very close to them, while of course we must not forget about guaranteeing fundamental human freedoms. At the same time, it must be emphasized here that by a general guarantee of freedoms or a new enlightenment, I do not mean that the increasingly ultraliberal, in some respects rightly referred to as extremist, norms and views are winning the day all over the world.

As already argued in relation to various topics, freedom in a civilized society is not about everyone doing as they please – rather, it is preserving human dignity and minimizing the constraints and insecurities that affect us that can make us truly free. Thus, liberty should never be confused with libertinism, which is essentially unbridled debauchery, the systematic and deliberate breaking of reasonable rules in a society. A libertine sets aside some or even most moral principles, a sense of responsibility, or generally accepted sexual norms and restrictions, which he or she considers unnecessary or undesirable, thereby violating the ideal of equality, which is as fundamental as individual freedom. The integrity, civility and sustainability of society, however, depend to a large extent on the adherence to common standards, which are more and more being called into question by increasingly extreme liberal tendencies, precisely on the grounds of equality.

This in a way is responsible for the tendency to treat sexuality, which in a civilized society was originally considered part of our private sphere, more and more openly. And this is true nowadays even in countries and cultures that are fundamentally much more conservative, with the global media and the internet getting their message across to almost everyone, as well as the information overload and materialistic mindset that consumer society constantly throws at us. And that, as we know, mainly tries to influence our instincts in order to control our behavior and purchasing habits... Moreover, it even tries to make us believe in the process that we can become whoever we want to be, when that is far from what self-actualization is about.

For no matter how much we modify our bodies with all sorts of artificial practices, extreme jewelry, painting and decorating, cosmetic and other interventions, we will never be able to maximize our inner qualities and abilities by them alone. Just as, because of our objective biological and other limitations, what we believe or want to believe ourselves to be does not at all guarantee that we are or can become that. (In the same way that our belief in conspiracy theories may not correspond to the facts, as they often reflect our personal views and wishes rather than an existing or a possible future reality.) If someone, for example, imagines herself as an angel or a unicorn, and constantly expresses this, she is treated as an eccentric in most societies today, or maybe put under psychological treatment... Yet the ultraliberal view would oblige everyone else, on the grounds of individual liberty, to believe without a doubt what the person says about herself, and to treat her accordingly.

But You may well ask, Dear Reader, if freedom of opinion does indeed exist, why are You not entitled to think otherwise? Isn't this a way of restricting your freedoms so that others can have theirs? This is not at all compatible with the rule of law, because the self-fulfillment of one person can never be at the expense of others, as this is forbidden by the principle of reciprocity – which ultraliberal views tend to forget. In a truly civilized society, however, no one should impose themselves and their views on others for self-interest, even in the name of self-actualization. And sexuality, beyond the rules of intimacy and boundaries of good taste, must be treated by all as part of the private sphere, and therefore in a civilized society, even those with exhibitionist tendencies must restrain themselves. (On the other hand, they should be given the opportunity to act out their urges in appropriate circumstances, as long as they do not harm others).

The fact is that in a truly modern society, everyone (of age) should be able to have intimate relationships and live with whomever they want. Furthermore, no one should be stigmatized, harassed or in any way discriminated against solely because of their sexual orientation. It is a different matter, however, that in the long run, from society's point of view, the increasingly open practice and manifestations of sexuality cannot be considered as a progressive process, but rather as a regressive one, i.e. a step back or decline in civilized coexistence.

So the problem is not fundamentally with sexual orientation, but with the way it is handled and the way people behave in general. The trend is obvious: the increasingly overt treatment of sexuality is visible in clothing, in films and media, and in everyday life and expression in general. In such circumstances, it is perfectly legitimate to be concerned: if clothes become less and less covering, more and more provocative, and people practice their sexuality with less and less inhibition, but more and more publicly, will this not lead to moral decay, to the vulgarization and devaluation of intimacy? Or if, for example, a young child accidentally witnesses a gay pride parade, how do her parents explain to her what she is seeing, or gender roles in general? Or if, at the age of four or five or six, she comes across cartoons on TV or the internet that openly refer to the different sexual orien-

tations of the characters? For the avoidance of doubt, however, it is important to make it clear that it is not appropriate for a heterosexual couple to have an overtly sexual affair in the open street, oblivious to everything and everyone, either, as it is definitely not the right place for such behavior.

In some ways, I think this can be seen as a struggle between the community's quest for civilization and our primordial instincts, and its opposition to the individual's freedom and search for one's own path and identity. If the latter tendencies prevail, we may even see the realization of a 'liberal' nightmare like the one Aldous Huxley outlined in his 1932 dystopian novel Brave New World, which became a cult classic. The pages of the book reveal a society where there are no wars or poverty, and everyone seems to be happy. People are focused on the hedonic enjoyment of life, the main source of which is the unrestrained indulgence of their sexual desires and the constant pleasure derived from drugs.

At the same time, all this comes at a rather heavy price, as the arts, literature, science, religion, philosophy, cultural diversity, family, and private life in general, have all been virtually forgotten as unnecessary and divisive obstacles to happiness. Social order is ensured by meticulous planning, cloning and breeding, dividing humanity into artificial castes, tightly controlled by the central power. And although this society knows no suffering, its members have only a semblance of freedom, and their lives are utterly purposeless and self-serving. And, quite frighteningly, the slogans of this society – eat as much as you can, don't think, be instinctive, do what feels good, be happy is a must, no attachments – are almost entirely in line with the liberal principles of life so much propagated today.

The novel is therefore not only an excellent demonstration that liberty and libertinism are not necessarily the same thing, but also an important lesson that even in the name of freedom, oppressive societies can be created. Indeed, it also makes it clear that even a society of the nurturing type can become a tyrannical system. But this is only possible if it is allowed to be governed by an unchecked minority, which, instead of the interest of the majority, seeks to impose its own views and ideas, contrary to the common goals and values. Perhaps it goes without saying that this is totally incompatible with the ideals of a truly social democracy.

Another important point is that it is not the role of a nurturing society, in addition to ruling its members, to help its citizens build houses of cards, to chase unattainable or unsustainable dreams. (Especially not while 'ripping them off' financially.) Even though it is true that it should give everyone maximum support to live and thrive and develop their potential, it must always do so in a realistic way, in the interests of society as a whole. In the meantime, it cannot ignore current circumstances and general trends, including changes in people and society, either.

Consequently, it must also acknowledge the transformation of social and gender roles and the identities associated with them, which are themselves naturally changing and evolving as human culture develops. For my part, I expect the gap between male and female roles to narrow in the future – which, in fact, is already very likely based on current

trends. And it is not just that men can afford to cry and show their feelings or weaknesses more, while women in leadership positions who exude power and authority are also increasingly accepted. It is true that in much of the world today, it is still the general expectation that the former should be the main 'breadwinners', while women are primarily responsible for the children and the household. At the same time, it is clear that women, who are becoming more educated, are also increasingly seeking to build their own careers and achieve self-actualization. This in turn requires men to take on more of the burden of household chores and childrearing, including all types of caring tasks in general.

So nowadays, even the concept of a career is not necessarily the same as it used to be, when it meant mainly starting at the bottom of a company and gradually working one's way up to higher and higher positions with fatter paychecks. I don't know about You, Dear Reader, but in my opinion, a young person today can't be blamed for not imagining his or her life as a constant struggle, jockeying and fighting for existence, which is essentially a struggle for mere self-preservation, and which is a major part of his or her everyday life.

But does this really mean that the masses of young people around the world never want to grow up these days? Or rather that the rest of humanity, the older generations, are unable or unwilling to adapt to changing times? Well, from a certain point of view, both may be true... But since we can only talk about real freedom if we do not have to live in constant insecurity or oppression, at the mercy of others, this also includes that we do not have to take on all kinds of 'fake', meaningless or harmful jobs, or jobs that are underpaid, harmful to our (physical and mental) health and sometimes are carried out in inhumane working conditions.

However, I do believe that the future will not be about who supports whom at all – especially if, through a nurturing society, *collective livelihood creation* takes the place of its individual counterpart. At that point, it will be basically the total labor force of society and of the machines it uses that 'keeps up' all members of society, including women, men and children. (All the while the earnings from work undertaken by adults, i.e. from activities of social utility, provide them with income to meet their needs beyond their basic ones.) This inevitably means that the old, 'set in stone' social roles also change to a large extent, and the distinctive differences between them fade.

This will certainly be uncomfortable for people with less flexible or progressive mindsets and committed conservative leanings. However, being forced into different roles and being pigeonholed for a lifetime is most definitely not the way of modern man, as it completely contradicts the evolution of both an intelligent species and an intelligent being, and the changes that take place in its advancement. And it is a perfectly natural process that the ancient division of tasks based on different physical and mental attributes is increasingly being replaced over time by roles determined by intellectual abilities, whether in a family, a larger community or even society as a whole.

Nevertheless, it would be difficult to forget that it is still only women who are able to carry and give birth to a child, however they are inseminated. This is a fact that even the

most liberal-minded have to acknowledge, and it is likely to remain so for some time to come, limiting gender roles within certain boundaries, whether one likes it or not. It may be debatable just how acceptable it is for a child to have two same-sex parents – who, unless two men are supposed to manage the breastfeeding of the baby, could in principle be just as good parents as if they were different sexes. What can hardly be doubted, however, is that this is not the natural or optimal state for a human being, but the presence and example of opposite-sex parents, the mother and father, or the women and men who replace them. (After all, without opposite-sex parents, one could not have been conceived in the first place).

It is also debatable how natural or reprehensible gender reassignment is, and the slow but steady decline in the external and internal differences between genders. By now, in almost all cultures of the world, we are used to people being either women or men, more or less bearing the clear hallmarks of one of the two sexes – even if we accept that sometimes, for example, men can show weakness, or that women are more concerned with self-expression than before. If, on the other hand, a person carries the conspicuous characteristics of both sexes (for example, wearing women's clothes but with undeniably masculine features, or looking masculine but with a distinctly feminine voice or tone), this does not come across as natural to most people. And if, in addition to the existence of such a dissonance, people reinforce it by their behavior, it arouses in many a feeling of revulsion, which I think is basically a perfectly normal reaction.

Make no mistake, I do not mean to imply that this gives one the right to discriminate, humiliate or assault anyone. (If You do so, Your own being as a civilized person will be severely questioned.) At the same time, it must also be seen that this is not a purely biological and physiological (i.e. essentially physical) phenomenon, but a cultural and psychological (spiritual and mental) one, which in most cases has as much to do with a person's search for identity and possible crisis as which sex he or she is instinctively attracted to.

This is fully supported by the fact that no one has yet been able to prove that there is a gene or even a group of genes exclusively responsible for homosexuality or any sexual 'disorder'. In fact, the results of a much more thorough study published in 2019 suggest that it is impossible to predict who will be gay and who will be heterosexual based on human DNA alone. Genetic inheritance – the sum of the information stored in our genes and passed down through generations – is estimated to explain only 8-25 percent of why some people live in same-sex relationships.

We now also know that sexual orientation is characterized by polygenic inheritance, which means that hundreds or even thousands of genes contribute to the development of the trait. The pattern is similar to other hereditary (but also complex) traits, such as height or the tendency to try new things. However, polygenic traits can be strongly influenced by the environment, which means that there is no clear winner in the 'nature vs. nurture' debate. In any case, the results make it abundantly clear that in most cases sexual orientation cannot be determined solely on the basis of biology, psychology or life experience – as

the mentioned research and other studies show, sexual attraction is a result of all these factors.

Consequently, the so-called conversion or reparative therapy, which seeks to influence a person's sexual orientation or gender identity (which is most often expressed in the need to change homosexual orientation into heterosexual) through the tools of psychology and psychiatry, has no justification whatsoever. In fact, such practices can actually do far more harm to patients than good, and should be banned and eliminated in any civilized society. (Which is not to say that one's search for identity cannot be helped through psychological methods, without the use of any coercive therapy.) At the same time, it is also clear that in a significant number of cases, gender reassignment treatments and surgeries do not necessarily lead to the desired result of finding or 'fixing' the patient's (gender) identity. Although no comprehensive statistics have yet been compiled on the percentage of people undergoing these increasingly common, yet difficult or irreversible procedures who have come to regret their decision, it is known that there have been many such examples.

It is also a fact that, just as we are not only 'good' or only 'bad' in terms of our qualities, there is no such thing as a 'one hundred percent man' or a 'one hundred percent woman'. Just think about it, Dear Reader: if a person had only male sex hormones, he would hardly be much different from an aggressive, violent beast, while in the complete absence of similar instincts it would be virtually impossible for a mother to protect her child or, if necessary, to stand up for herself. But since our environment and upbringing also play a big part in shaping our character, the feminine and masculine traits that become part of our personality are also very much dependent on them, therefore they are much more difficult to control or just influence as adults.

The above undoubtedly provides a breeding ground for the gender theory increasingly promoted by liberal circles, the premise of which is that our gender does not necessarily determine our behavior, as its meaning is actually constructed on a social level. Gender is fundamentally different from birth sex in that, while the latter is determined solely by the anatomical and physiological characteristics of the newborn baby (primarily the genitals), the former expresses how a person later defines him- or herself. This standpoint would not be particularly wrong from the point of view that it is rooted in a fundamentally enlightened approach, which is necessary to alleviate the pigeonholing that is so limiting. The problem, in fact, is that the followers of this extreme view do not take into account either the biological limitations or the psychological and social aspects of the issue.

As the identity crisis of human beings becomes more and more common, and the concepts of liberty and libertinism become more and more confused, we must also face the fact that if we are not careful, we could rapidly become a genderless race, devoid of male and female characteristics. And it is no longer just a question of the differences between gender roles diminishing or becoming increasingly blurred, but of them disappearing completely over time – first in terms of our inner qualities and behavior, and later even in terms of our physical build.

It is true that the biological differences that have existed between the two sexes for the entire history of humanity will certainly persist for some time, since we are currently only able to influence them artificially, mostly for the short term. As a result, beyond the obvious physiological differences, men in general will continue to have greater physical strength, competitiveness and a 'need to prove themselves', while women will tend to be more fragile, emotional and caring, the same as before. However, even today, the number of androgynous people, i.e. people who carry the characteristics of both sexes, but at the same time show less and less of their distinctive characteristics, is clearly on the rise. And gender-related treatments and procedures are becoming more and more sophisticated over time and, if overdone or used in an irresponsible and reckless way, can have serious long-term effects on human fertility and reproduction in general.

Therefore, from the point of view of the future, we also have to ask ourselves – both at the level of science and society – how good or desirable it would be for humanity if we were to become a sexless species that would only take care of its preservation exclusively by artificial means. Although all this belongs to the realm of science fiction for the time being, given the evolution of our species, and the tendency for artificial selection to gradually replace natural selection, we cannot rule out any theoretical possibilities for the future. And the future is always rooted in the present...

While for my part, I consider the 'battle of the sexes' to be in some ways outdated and unnecessary, it would be a mistake to ignore the fact that the differences between the two sexes and the specific relationships and relations that result from them have become an integral part of human culture, without which our lives would probably be much poorer, more bleak and boring. However, on the road to true civilization, it is also essential to achieve, or at least strive for equality (of opportunity), which does not exclude same-sex relationships and, where appropriate, the questioning of personal gender identity. At the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that the growing number of children and adults questioning or having trouble with finding their identity in general is due in no small part to our increasingly open societies, the (social) media that often harms self-esteem, and a consumer culture that has become materialistic to the extreme. The greatest danger posed by consumer society is precisely that it tends to strip away – or, if you like, corrupt – the personality of man, replacing it with a system of values that bases the search for happiness on basic instincts, externalities and material things, as opposed to universal values and higher level needs.

When we talk about the importance of equality, we should note that it is often the most vehemently proclaimed by those who are in a privileged position and who are generally unwilling to give up the benefits that it brings. The increasingly extremist liberal elite, while trying to impose its views on everyone, is constantly growing in wealth, compared to which the level of the now almost fashionable charity and giving is negligible, and does not actually lead to lasting improvements in reducing social inequalities. And as we have al-

ready seen and experienced, if a society is too permissive, the more assertive and unscrupulous minority will always take advantage of or subjugate the majority. While it is a fact that the guarantee of basic individual (human) rights is indispensable in any civilized society, the main problem with liberal radicals is that they are even willing to sacrifice the interests of the majority on the altar of individual freedom.

Not that the situation is much better on the other side, and not just in terms of the differences between those with money and power and those without. An excessively rigid, uncompromisingly conservative attitude, typically clinging to obsolete views and the old hierarchical relations, cannot be sustained for long if we want to live in a truly functional world. Just as gender and social roles change, social progress and globalization cannot be held back forever, either. Total isolation from others is far from solving all the problems, and nationalism and hostility, exclusionary rejection, opportunism and rivalry towards others only fuel conflict and difficulties, instead of the much-needed tolerance and cooperation.

A system that is too inflexible, narrow-minded and clings to the past at all cost can hinder the natural development of society and civilization in a significant and very damaging way, which in turn can be extremely detrimental to its health and stability. The world we live in and the people themselves are constantly changing, which must also be taken into account by the system that fundamentally determines the functioning of our societies and their relationship with the natural environment. Since change is inevitable, we must also adapt at the individual level for our own sake, or else our own lives, at best, and the whole of society and civilization, at worst, will suffer. Because if we are not progressive enough, our societies will stagnate and become static and stale, so to speak, only to be torn apart from within by tensions that are unsustainable in the long term.

One of the most striking and frightening examples was the rise of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nazi Party for short) in 1933, when conservative forces in Germany were so afraid of the threat of reform from the Social Democrats that they preferred to hand power to Hitler and his associates – whom, contrary to their hopes, they were then unable to control at all. The French Revolution of 1789, for example, also began with great liberal thinkers and the Enlightenment, but after moderate leaders like Lafayette were branded as royalist puppets by the radical left and as rebel traitors by the far right, the revolution eventually ended in terror and bloody civil war led by the Jacobins. The American War of Independence (1775-1783) was no different in that the United States, which became independent of the British Crown, achieved political reform, but failed to go ahead with the social transformation necessary for the creation of a modern state. While the elite continued to rule over the majority, and some leaders believed that slavery would eventually disappear, this shameful institution continued to flourish in the southern states of the federation. Even though it was officially abolished by President Lincoln in 1865 with the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, the entrenched extremism and racism that resulted from it continues to plague the country to this day.

There are many other examples from history where failure to make the necessary changes has led to mass violence and bloody wars, or has caused long-term fractures in society that continue to divide and seriously undermine its stability today. Another lesson for us is that if moderate forces do not get enough support, extremists can easily come to power. Nevertheless, radical reforms will definitely be needed in the face of an increasingly acute crisis of civilization. It they don't take place, we may pay for it with a lot of death and suffering (see climate and environmental disaster, epidemics and economic crises), and the rising tensions will only be resolved by a revolution (or series of revolutions) that most of us would probably prefer to avoid.

So we cannot be too obscurant or earthbound also because it is not enough to be defined by our past, we must pay maximum attention to the future, as well. And we must do this not only for our own sake, but also for the sake of our descendants and future generations. But if we ignore the dangers and challenges we face, and the fact that change and adaptation are the keys to survival, we can easily end up like those fallen civilizations that have disappeared over time. This carries the lesson that the other arch enemy of civilization, after existential opportunism, is none other than ignorance.

Overall, however, we can say that it would be unfortunate for any extremist tendency to prevail, especially at this critical time when we need balance and stability – alongside and together with radical reforms, which we know will be extremely difficult to set in motion. For today, as soon as someone questions the legitimacy of the now globally dominant system in any way will immediately be labeled as 'anarchist' by the proponents of capitalism and the liberal market economy, saying that whatever else they propose is only an attempt to overthrow the only viable socio-economic system and to replace it with chaos. Moreover, politics and economics that are full of dogmas succeed in making the vast majority of people actually believe this, through the media and education.

But You must see, Dear Reader, that although the transition is not easy, they themselves would take their share of any potential chaos as anyone else who succumbs to human frailty. Radical changes are never simple and smooth, since a new system must always be tested in practice and made to work – which its opponents, the beneficiaries of the current system, almost by definition, obstruct wherever and however they can. (And they of course typically attribute the resulting difficulties and failures to the inoperability of the new system, as has been the case with previous socialist attempts, among others.) And they would do this despite the fact that in case of the controlled economy, for example, it is precisely about the greater regulation and control allowing us to get a much better grip on things, including environmentally damaging processes and rampant social inequalities. However, this would obviously not appeal to the members of the current ruling class who fear for their privileges.

However, compared to the economic model I have outlined, as well as the political order defined on the basis of the principles of the nurturing society and subsidiarity, true anarchists essentially reject any central power or regulation (at least partially) exerted in a top-

down manner. In their case, I think it takes a certain naivety contradicting realistic thinking to really believe that in today's world, people and their communities can provide civilized conditions for life and sustainability on their own, without any help, cooperation and direction across communities. (On the one hand, because of disunity due to individual interests, and on the other, because many people really don't know what to do with their lives without proper information or guidance.) So a high and comprehensive level of organization – being a global technical civilization – is essential if we are to solve our common problems successfully.

One side of the issue is the balance of our societies with the natural environment, which on such a crowded planet full of people is an absolute necessity for us – not in the distant future, and not sometime in the next few decades, but *right now*. It means that we must immediately reduce the rate at which we use our planet's resources, ultimately our total consumption, so that the overuse indicator mentioned above falls below 1, i.e. we will not reach the Earth Overshoot Day before midnight on December 31 in any year. If we fail to do so, and continue to live our lives in an irresponsible and disorganized way, we risk finding ourselves in an overpolluted, degraded and hardly livable world, where we would be lucky to barely obtain the water, food and other necessities we need.

This in no way means that we have to live in destitution and permanent deprivation, but we must ensure that our needs are met in a much more optimized, efficient and balanced way than at present, which starts with a realistic assessment of them. If we know what we really need, we can plan our consumption and purchases sensibly, making them more predictable for the various producers, manufacturers and traders. But not only in terms of procurement, but also in terms of the surplus and waste generated, we need to (co)operate in an organized way, both as individuals and within our communities and municipalities. Although this initially requires some sacrifice and attention, once it becomes a daily routine, it doesn't require too much effort at all.

But no matter how much we change our own wasteful lifestyles dominated by the spell of excessive consumption, it is only the first step – and it is not enough for the average citizen to consume less meat, energy and other goods, or to produce less waste. In relative terms, the greatest environmental damage is due to the widespread use of technologies, machinery and equipment that are still not sufficiently environment-friendly, and the consumption of the top ten per cent, which can be several times or even ten times higher than the average, and the much larger ecological footprint that this entails. In other words, we need to act as a much more organized unit at the highest levels of society, as well, to force the changes needed to achieve sustainability. This will require increased and sustained pressure on the key actors of both politics and the economy, politicians and companies, which is also essential to halt the accelerated climate change caused by humanity.

All that is needed to initiate change is for a larger, and therefore indispensable or hard-to-replace part of society to stand up and declare that they don't want to live in the current

world order, and is no longer willing to passively assist in its maintenance. But the first step, which is conscious economic and political action, requires as many people as possible to make their expectations of the future felt and to make them concrete and vocal. It would most likely be useless for a certain group or stratum to advocate for change if the majority of civil society, or at least a significant part of it, does not support it in its efforts. But with sufficiently united and decisive action, we can succeed in promoting the necessary political and economic changes, the introduction of optimization and the implementation of the controlled economy.

The second step is to obtain an unconditional basic income – or rather, universal basic services – for all who are willing to adapt to the general conditions of civilized coexistence. Closely linked to this is the need for the realization of a nurturing society, which is a fundamental element on the road to minimizing social inequalities and the definitive abolition of social classes. The third step is to further optimize the economy, get rid of unnecessary, pointless and harmful jobs, companies and practices, close stock markets and eliminate financial speculation.

Of these, taking the first step is the most critical and the most difficult, because without fundamental reforms and without starting to change the system, we will inevitably hit a wall. For in capitalism, the short and concise answer to almost any initiative that contradicts it in the slightest is that it is anti-competitive. Therefore, if we say we should strictly regulate companies and markets, we are likely to get the same answer. If we argue that social inequalities can only be reduced by limiting income inequalities, we are likely to find ourselves facing the same criticism. Or if, for example, we as consumers try to take united action to ensure that our consumption patterns and choices are not determined by corporations but serve our interests and well-being, the immediate reaction would likely be that it is not legal, as it restricts competition in the free market.

Nonetheless, when the largest companies take over smaller, albeit also huge businesses, in many cases the same objection is not raised and a merger or acquisition can take place. Perhaps it is just me, Dear Reader, but could it be that the rich and those who profit from existential opportunism are trying to protect their own interests at all costs? In any case, it seems to me that the charge of anti-competition is the Holy Grail of money-dominated capitalism, which its proponents can always rely on when they encounter resistance. This has been an effective way to prevent organized action, and it is essentially nothing less than the application of the 'divide and conquer' principle, which has been successfully practiced since ancient times.

The other, now well-established method is to maintain a consumer society by any means necessary, whereby we are essentially made dependent on a myriad of different products and services, many of which we don't really need. As we have seen, the extremely materialistic nature of a culture that places consumption at the centre of our lives has a continually damaging effect on our body, soul and mind, from which cycle only spiritual ascension can offer a way of escape. We must definitely put an end to this kind of culture,

and to do so we must fundamentally change the very system that makes it work – not just the framework, but the value system at its core, too. In order to achieve this, it is essential to prioritize activities and values that are useful for society as a whole, rather than individual accumulation, and to put them on a pedestal, as it were, instead of money being the supreme power.

I am fully aware that social value or utility is something that is not or only very difficult to measure, often only after the fact, and even then it is not always possible to quantify. However, this is perfectly natural and normal in the sense that the most important things in our lives are the ones we cannot really quantify: happiness, love, empathy, reciprocity, generosity, selflessness, fairness, and so on. The more we strive to quantify everything, the further we move away from these values, while losing more and more of what is truly worth living for. That is why we need to stand up for our common values as much as possible, prioritizing social utility over personal gain and benefit.

Remember, Dear Reader: as long as anyone has to be an opportunist for the sake of his or her livelihood, we cannot speak of a truly civilized society. This is a necessary, but by itself insufficient condition for civilization – for it requires the satisfaction of all human needs, not just the possibility of it in principle. And for that to happen, we need to put an end once and for all to:

- existential opportunism (at individual, communal and international level),
- elitism,
- chauvinist and racist discrimination and nationalist populism,
- all kinds of stigmatization, pigeonholing and discrimination,
- the material-centered consumer society (with its 'pushy', status symbol-ridden and highly manipulative culture) and waste.

I am convinced that a nurturing society can be the only system that can ensure that both lower and higher human needs are met in the long term. In all cases, the main goal is to minimize the uncertainty of existence, as well as to equalize living standards and opportunities for everyone. Until we create a socioeconomic system that can provide all this effectively, whatever kind of existence You build for Yourself, Dear Reader, You can never really feel safe. In other words, if we allow social Darwinism, driven by existential opportunism, to continue to prevail, we cannot look forward to a truly civilized or sustainable future, either. After all, what is fundamental and perfectly normal in nature is the greatest obstacle and enemy of a civilized society.

At the same time, we should not forget that in order to finally get rid of existential opportunism in our economies and societies, it is essential that the civil sphere has control over economic and political events. Only in this way can we ensure that the economy works efficiently and in an environmentally friendly way, and that the goods and services produced are of adequate quality and quantity – and, on the other hand, that the political administration actually operates the system in our common interest. If we don't do this, we

either leave it to the still awakening, unknown and unpredictable, and therefore highly risky, artificial intelligence, or we remain with the current practice – which we know is not only extremely unfair and environmentally destructive, but also unsustainable for that very reason.

For the sake of transparency and efficiency, as well as accountability, we must also strive to simplify our institutions and systems, public administration and regulations, and reduce bureaucracy as much as possible. If we fail to do so, there remains a real chance that those in positions of power will continue to exploit, oppress and exclude the majority by distorting and manipulating the rules to their advantage. This, among others, is true in the fields of law, politics and economics, as well: if we are constantly confronted with complex legal regulations, confusing political definitions and stigmas, and abstract economic concepts, they can be a fundamental disincentive to look behind the scenes or to go for what should be ours by default.

The true rule of law can therefore only be achieved if the citizens themselves want it and stand up for it – it is not enough in itself if only certain groups or even political circles raise the issue. Organized civil action is extremely important in all areas, such as through trade unions and other associations to protect workers, to fight for equal rights for women and minorities, to promote environmental concerns, and so on. In many cases, this is the only way to enforce dialogue and respect for human rights, and to ensure that no one, no social group or community (or even nature), should play a subordinate role to others.

In fact, general experience shows that the majority of people do not want to dominate others, while they do not want to be dominated either. Although no such survey has been done (or at least I don't know of one), I think more people on our planet today believe in a caring or nurturing society than in any system based on existential opportunism – even if they are not (fully) aware of it. At most, the practitioners of social Darwinism seem to be in the majority because they tend to be more ambitious, proactive, pushy, determined, loud, aggressive or less inhibited – in other words, more 'opportunistic' in general –, and thus their point of view and will are more often asserted. And since people with such attitudes are also more often in positions of leadership, it is hardly surprising that there are petty games for power going on constantly in both domestic and foreign politics, while (hundreds of) millions of people around the world die or suffer needlessly.

So even if it can be said that opponents of this approach do not consider it at all natural to oppress, submerge, misuse, exploit, sideline or ignore others, or to generally prevail at the expense of others in a civilized society, it is no coincidence that even today, some form or another of existential opportunism is the dominant system in which we live. And such an arrangement, by its very nature, often puts us in a position where we have to outdo our fellow human beings – in fact, it can act on basic, primal instincts to condition a perfectly ordinary person to even enjoy this.

While the tendency to do so is indeed still a genetically inherited part of our nature, as has been said, our upbringing and the social environment in which we live are just as im-

portant in determining our way of thinking and behavior. As for power games, they already start in early childhood, both with peers of the same age and with adults. This is why education for respect and appreciation of others, for equality and tolerance, both at home and in the various educational institutions, is of the utmost importance, and must be complemented by a desire to cooperate.

It is also crucial that we learn the basics of critical thinking at an early age, which is essential to become conscious, independent adults, rather than easily influenced personalities. Nevertheless, it is important to be vigilant because, like everything else in general, critical thinking is easy to overdo. Partly due to this, for example, is the trend towards the proliferation of the conspiracy theories that have already been mentioned in relation to faith, which is again giving rise to more and more extreme views and opinions. And this makes social cooperation and development, and even coexistence, very difficult, because if we doubt almost everything, we can become too distrustful even of those who actually mean well for us. Therefore, even critical ideas, however exciting and tempting they may seem to us, should always be treated with the appropriate criticism...

Although it is a fact that the masses of people who live more consciously is growing slowly (as we have seen, more so in the more developed countries), their numbers could rise radically as soon as in the near future through the provision of high levels of education, enlightening and information. Increasing the participation in education is extremely important if only because, as Wolfgang Lutz and Endale Kebede have pointed out in their study Education and Health: Redrawing the Preston Curve, it goes hand in hand with an improving trend in the health of people and the general quality of life in a society. (As opposed to GDP growth, which in itself is no guarantee of anything.)

Recent trends show that the number of graduates and degree holders in higher education is rising globally, and research suggests that this is set to increase at a fast pace over the next few decades. This in itself is certainly a positive development, but it must also be seen, Dear Reader, that there is still plenty of room for improvement – especially among the more backward countries, which still have a very low ratio to the total population, albeit which is steadily growing in some regions. Therefore we need to speed up the process even more, so that as many young people as possible have access to higher levels of knowledge, preferably for free. (And, of course, it is not at all irrelevant what kind of degree graduates acquire in higher education, so that they do not contribute to the maintenance of the current 'bullshit economy' and consumer society, but rather the establishment of a nurturing society.)

At the same time, lower education also needs to be expanded and reformed to ensure that, if possible, everyone can graduate from high school with a comprehensive worldview and a solid set of values by the age of 18, even if they study a certain profession. Even just one lifetime could be enough to dramatically increase the number of graduates from secondary and higher education globally, if we ensure that money and resources are put in the right places and used for truly socially beneficial activities. By setting specific goals and

working together towards them, we can achieve a lot. Such a goal could be, for example, the virtual eradication of illiteracy by the middle of the century. But with the uninterrupted development of technology, it may also be feasible to ensure a quality life (and not just the possibility) for everyone before the end of the century.

However, what we may consider the ultimate goal is a so-called knowledge-based society, where knowledge, not origin, gender, culture, religion, wealth or power, determines who we are and what we can do. Instead, we must use our differences through ensuring intercultural dialogue and universal access to information, in order to achieve a sustainable economy and development, and preserve peace. A knowledge-based approach can greatly help us to finally break away from a lifestyle that has become materialistic to the extreme – essentially a 'consumption-based society' –, and focus on improving ourselves and our civilization. In fact, as we have seen, it is essential for civil society members to think and behave in a conscious way, so that we can live in truly democratic, modern and civilized societies.

The key to this can hardly be to force people to do various things, or to impose our will on them from above. Rather, they should be informed and educated to do what is necessary on their own, but preferably not to do things harmful to the community, society and humanity. To show the way, to offer different options and alternatives, while highlighting the possible consequences, advantages and disadvantages, is alright and desirable without further ado, and I believe is even necessary today. Because without that, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to ensure that the right decisions are taken at the individual level for our common future.

Given that more and more people around the world today are struggling with some form of identity crisis, it seems we need this particularly urgently. The gradual enlightenment, education and habituation of children and young people to tolerance is also extremely important, together with the issue of sexuality and the much-debated sexual orientation. However, in my opinion, this should be handled with extreme caution, care and attention, and we should not even inadvertently influence those who are still developing in such a way that it might cause them a disadvantage or a lasting problem later on. (Not to mention society as a whole.)

Therefore, although we must not neglect the proper education of school-age children, either at home or in the various educational establishments, we must choose the time and the method with due care, preferably with the agreement of all the parties concerned: parents, families, communities, teachers and educators, etc. In fact, because of its significant impact on the future, the need for a social consensus does not seem unjustified either, since it is the shared responsibility of the whole of adult society to ensure that children do not see or experience things to soon, when they are not mature enough to understand and properly process them. To this end, in addition to not leaving too much room for open libertinism in our cultures, we need to protect our children as much as possible from premature sexual and other content, both in the virtual and the real world.

But if we expose them to this kind of content and programs for educational purposes, or even by negligence, or allow transgender activists to give them 'educational lectures' in kindergartens, which are not only strongly sexual in their ideas, but also in their visuals, we are giving them examples that are as much capable of confusing their emerging, fragile personalities as they are of allowing them to choose for themselves, given the various options available. This way, we can easily lead our still-developing, underage children towards extreme sexual identities and behaviors, which is not necessarily better for society than educating them in the teachings of religious extremities, or at least exposing them to their direct influence. Ultimately, in both cases we can talk about a kind of ideology or belief system – and while it is possible that children exposed to different sexual impulses at an early age may become more tolerant of others sooner, they may not turn out to be much better than religious fanatics in terms of the moral foundations necessary for civilization.

In order to create a tolerant but knowledge-based society, it would be necessary to ensure the right conditions for everyone, as much as possible, in an equal and fair way, so that they have access as a fundamental right to learning opportunities (including teachers, trainers and other professionals), as well as for scientific results and information, educational and training materials and software. However, this is not at all likely to happen by itself, as it is not necessarily in the direct interest of the majority of politicians and economic actors, who do not support radical change to ensure that the majority of people are truly educated and informed, or see the world in its full reality. (As we know, it is generally true that those who are in the saddle don't really want to get out of it.) The information of often dubious value and credibility, as well as the bias that the various media throw at us also makes it very difficult to see clearly and come together.

So it is critical to further develop education and information at the global level, and in a way that does not promote the current values and mindset of consumerism, neoliberalism and existential opportunism. This also makes it clear why it is not really good or optimal if any of the two is dominated by the governments of nation-states that operate under minimal control and accountability. But if, as the demand for self-governance grows, so does its freedom, it may be possible to introduce teaching systems other than those imposed centrally. Within such a framework, during education and upbringing, the importance of participation in public affairs could be stressed from an early age, as an innate right and responsibility.

However, if the change in political attitudes outlined above were to bring politicians under control, citizens could even prevent the current governments from shaping what and how an entire country should be taught, according to their own liking and interests. Through conscious and decisive action, civil society could, in a similar way, prevent education and the various information channels from being used by the regime for recruitment and propaganda, in order to create party cadres who share its views and to influence political support and electoral results.

Unfortunately, the active, mass manipulation of voter opinion is becoming an increasingly common weapon all around the world, and the easy accessibility of the internet makes it a very difficult, almost impossible, task to neutralize it. Moreover, such practices are no longer confined to dictatorships or notoriously autocratic governments, but also occur in states known to be fundamentally democratic, such as Spain, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Australia, South Korea, Taiwan, South Africa and the United States of America.

Regarding the issue, Professor Philip Howard of Oxford University said: "The manipulation of public opinion over social media remains a critical threat to democracy, as computational propaganda becomes a pervasive part of everyday life. Government agencies and political parties around the world are using social media to spread disinformation and other forms of manipulated media. Although propaganda has always been a part of politics, the wide-ranging scope of these campaigns raises critical concerns for modern democracy."

In addition to spreading fake news, misinformation and distorted facts, the various internet platforms, forums and social media are also excellent tools for pitting, inciting and dividing people and groups against each other, as well as for inciting dissatisfaction and hatred in general. Hired by opposing forces, political parties, governmental and other agencies, organizations or even anarchists and terrorists, 'cyber soldiers' use a variety of strategies to achieve their goals. These may include deploying automated bots, hacking and stealing user accounts, harassment, trolling (expressing opinions in a violent and offensive manner to provoke others), or even doxing (collecting and publishing personal information to blacken, discredit or set aside a person).

So the data obtained (legally or not so legally) about You can not only be used to influence Your consumption habits, but also to manipulate Your political, social and other views by assessing Your personality online and using Your data to manipulate Your political, social and other views. Based on Your browsing, clicks and likes on the most popular social networking sites – currently mainly Facebook and Twitter – it is now possible for political organizations and authorities, or even private companies, to build detailed profiles of You, which can be used to predict Your online or even offline activities. As it turned out, in the mid-2010s, the British political consultancy Cambridge Analityca bought the data of tens of millions of US users from Facebook without their permission. Using this 'psychological weapon', voters in the US then were allegedly influenced in such a way that Donald Trump managed to win the 2016 presidential election. However, some argue that a similar abuse took place in the 2016 Brexit referendum, which also decided with a minimal majority that the UK should leave the European Union.

Whether or not this has happened, the fact is that the misuse of our data and the manipulation of people today, both economically and politically, is a fundamental obstacle to democracy. If we are to live in genuine modern democracies, rather than in societies based on the manipulation and exploitation of the majority, it is civil society itself that will have

to drive change everywhere, and it will need to be united, cooperative and persistent. For that, the isolated consciousness of the individual, independent of others, will not be enough – a collective consciousness, always keeping in mind and trying to promote the aspects of the community and the 'greater whole', is now indispensable.

In particular, the form of the latter that is developed from early childhood can be a trump card in our hands to finally eliminate the constant competition, hostility and existential opportunism that is a prerequisite for the establishment and functioning of a truly civilized society. It would help us to lay down a set of rules that adequately frame what is essential for civilized coexistence, and which include the trade-offs that are inevitable to minimize existential insecurity within our societies, while ensuring the greatest possible freedom.

Likewise, a nurturing society can really work only if the majority of people are properly socialized, and sufficiently informed and guided by a collective consciousness. On the one hand, this kind of attitude is essential to truly care about others. Besides, the more aware we are of our communities and society in general, the less true it is that we are 'made lazy' by unconditional (basic) benefits, which is the most frequently raised concern and objection to their universal application. But to achieve a nurturing society of conscious people, we will need many teachers and educators, coaches, psychologists and other professionals to improve our knowledge, mindset, mentality and general attitude, so it is vital that they are properly appreciated and rewarded for their efforts.

With the mass of people that we have on our planet today, a technical civilization that radically transforms its environment cannot afford not to be conscious at a collective level, either. For if we do so, how can we hope to keep things under control, ensuring balance within our societies, and between humanity and the natural environment? So everything now depends on controlling as much as possible the changes in our world and our reactions to them.

Just one of these is the global problem of the coronavirus epidemic, which is estimated to have caused up to $10 trillion ($10,000 billion!) in damage to the world economy in 2020-21. While the monetary figure itself is staggering, perhaps even more telling is the fact that in 2020 alone, COVID-19 caused the deaths of around 2 million people, millions more suffered permanent health damage, and the pandemic had a drastic impact on the lives of hundreds of millions of people overall. By some estimates, the pandemic cost the world more in 2020 than all the natural disasters in the previous 20 years.

And this does not simply mean the material damage caused, but the number of 'years of life lost', based on the WHO's DALY (disability-adjusted life years) indicator. The years of life lost in the case of the pandemic are due to deaths caused by the virus and prolonged illnesses caused by complications, as well as personal losses (unemployment, indebtedness, poverty, etc.) corresponding to the economic downturn caused by the restrictions. Although the last two decades have seen a number of very serious disasters – such as the

tsunami in Indonesia (2004) and Japan (2011), the particularly devastating hurricanes in the United States (2005 and 2017), the cyclone with many victims in Myanmar (2008), or the extremely strong earthquakes in India (2001), Pakistan (2005), China (2008), Haiti (2010), Nepal (2015) and other places –, their average annual 'total cost' was a fraction of the 2020 figures for the coronavirus.

However, it is also true that poorer countries and those with less robust and resilient economies have been hardest hit by the pandemic. While a person lost an average of about 7 days of life in Australia and only 4 days in New Zealand, the figure was 15 in India and 25 in Peru annually. While this may not seem like much in itself, it should also be noted that the number of days lost due to COVID-19 in 2020 was three times higher than the annual average from 2000 to 2019 in Asia and ten times higher in the Americas (South and North combined), reflecting the severity of the pandemic's impact. And with far fewer natural disasters in Europe on an annual basis in relative terms, the pandemic here has increased the amount of time lost by more than 30 times compared to the decades before.

Despite the fact that a new pandemic of this kind is unlikely to strike humanity every two years in the future (although theoretically the likelihood of this happening is rising steadily due to the increased exploitation of nature), I dare say, Dear Reader, that COVID-19 was only a taste of what is to come. Compared to the challenges ahead, all of this may seem like little more than a leisurely walk in the park on a late summer evening afterwards. Which, by the way, appears to be ominously foreshadowed by the current international relations and economic situation...

One thing is certain: our world is undergoing drastic and extremely rapid change, whether we want it or not, whether we admit it or not. This is mainly due to our vastly increased population and consumption, the excesses of consumer culture, the depletion and pollution of our environment, and the crises caused by them, as well as by the interdependence, irresponsibility and lack of regulation in our global economy. And social inequalities around the world, which continue to widen following disasters, drastically increase the negative impacts – just as the masses of unvaccinated people in an epidemic can spread the infection, the disadvantaged and vulnerable situation of the poor and destitute can further exacerbate problems and threats to stability in our societies.

The most important question for all of humanity is how livable the Earth will be for us in ten, twenty, fifty or even a hundred years' time. If we do not take urgent action, the overall situation could very quickly become catastrophic, as we are already increasingly dancing on the razor's edge. For the near future, this means that we can expect many, many more days and even years of life lost worldwide than in 2020, unless we make our societies much more resilient to both external (natural) and internal (economic, social and political) threats, of which close international cooperation is an integral part and a precondition.

The only way out for all of us, then, is to get as many people as possible to understand the basic workings of our world, and to achieve a state of collective consciousness among the majority of the population as soon as possible – and due to sustainability reasons, we have at most a few decades, or roughly a human lifetime for all this. But the struggle against existential opportunism through collective consciousness is one in which it is impossible to remain neutral. Because if You do nothing, You also make a decision of sorts, and in doing so You are letting the power to influence the future completely out of Your hands.

Like it or not, Dear Reader, the future of human civilization depends on You, too. Through our words and actions, we all have a certain amount of power, which we can use for both good and bad – the choice is ultimately always up to us. And even if on our own we have a seemingly insignificant influence on the way things are done, together we can be as powerful as the drops in the sea that can form a storm cloud and flood a country. On the other hand, the same thunderstorm that floods fields and flattens houses, killing or devastating countless animals and people, can turn an entire desert into a blooming field – as happens from time to time, for example, in the Atacama Desert in Chile, known as one of the driest areas in the world, where the expected rainfall is often years away.

So sooner or later, You too will have to realize that in our globalized world, the philosophy of 'live and let live' is no longer going to get You very far. Not in the sense of allowing others to decide for You, when all You want is to be left alone to exist. This is in large part because the louder, more assertive, aggressive and violent ones are usually successful in imposing their will on those who prefer to stay in the background and passively wait for events, trends and rules to evolve. And if we cannot trust our imperfect, often biased and self-interested leaders and our current political-economic-social systems to successfully avert the crises that are looming over us, what could our the next step be? How logical or sensible is it to decide not to do anything and hope that everything will be alright? Unfortunately, mere hope is not something on which a secure future can be built...

Nevertheless, it can make a world of difference how we take action against the conditions we want to change. Violence and deliberate damage to the lives of others and to public property (or indeed any property) is unacceptable, primitive and not at all constructive behavior – even if it is carried out in the midst of the unbridled fury of a mob. Not to mention that such barbaric manifestations are not at all compatible with the fact that we are supposed to be fighting for a higher degree of civilization. Therefore, if it is not possible to achieve the desired changes (fast enough) through civic organization, negotiation, enlightenment, education and setting example, we may resort to nonviolent resistance, as used by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, among others, if there is no other way.

The latter icon perfectly summed up the essence of nonviolent resistance, which is passive in terms of physical aggression, but at the same time bravely stands up on a spiritual level in order to achieve its goals. The purpose of resistance, however, is not to defeat or destroy anyone in particular, but to convince others of its own rightness by influencing them with reason and morality. Accordingly, it never attacks those who do wrong, but the

act itself – that is, it separates the act from its perpetrator, always bearing in mind that in a given case or circumstance anyone can commit injustice against others.

And perhaps most importantly, passive resistance never responds to violence with violence. Instead of giving in to the law of the jungle, it prefers to take the opponent's blows, proving its right and determination. (The more people do so, the more convincing they can be in the fight to achieve their goals, as the liberation of India from British rule, among other things, has shown.) In addition to physical violence, passive resistance also rejects mental and verbal violence, meaning it does not verbally abuse others in a personal and offensive manner in order to discredit them and make them feel inadequate as people. To do so would only increase hatred and division between the opposing parties, when the aim is to increase understanding, love, harmony and stability. So no matter how bad the situation gets, You must not fall in line and give in to aggression and violence, but only as a last resort, in self-defence, to protect Your own lives, the lives of Your loved ones and that of the innocent.

But if I could give You just one piece of advice, Dear Reader, I would say: never do anything without thinking, just because others are doing it. And of course, if possible, don't think like the others without asking Yourself: "Why?" Because the real question is not what others do or would do, but who You are or who You want to be. How do You fit into the 'big picture' of billions of people and trillions of other creatures living on planet Earth? It is true that man's natural desire is to belong, but in the case of Homo sapiens this should not normally override common sense. It is the latter, in fact, that makes us a civilized community of intelligent beings instead of a primitive herd.

However, in order to prevent hatred, exclusion, discrimination, exploitation, oppression, destruction and chaos – in essence, existential opportunism – from prevailing, we must take up the gauntlet against all its manifestations and banish them from our lives. In doing so, we should by no means strive for perfection – which is unattainable anyway –, but for correcting errors and maintaining a state of balance, both in our own lives and in our communities and societies. By itself, however, the Second Age of Enlightenment is never going to come about, just as existential opportunism as a guiding principle will not simply disappear into the abyss of history.

In turn, human civilization is currently threatened by this very danger. With time running out, every wasted day rolling along in the old ways diminishes our chances of avoiding unprecedented human suffering and trials. Whether the natural environment that sustains us fails, or our societies fail directly, it could mean the culmination of a civilizational crisis and the (if our future descendants are lucky, only temporary) downfall of humanity.

True, it is by no means universal, but in the present situation, at a time of crisis that will determine the fate of human civilization, the following wisdom, often expressed by our forefathers in one form or another, is absolutely relevant:

There is no impossibility, only incapacity.

Closing Remarks

In closing, I would like to thank You, Dear Reader, for having had the patience to read through this not exactly short writing – even if not all, at least part of it. I am truly sorry if You think I have painted too bleak a picture of the current state of humanity and our possible prospects for the rest of this century and the near future. Nevertheless, I have tried to base everything I have written on the best of my knowledge, on the hard facts, and on the discoveries and insights of the various sciences, which, unfortunately, give us every reason to be concerned.

I say this in spite of the fact that it is impossible to estimate with any precision, or even approximately, the chances that human civilization will soon be toppled. Indeed, all scientists can do in this context is to construct theories and models, to create and run simulations, and to calculate probabilities using the often inaccurate, incomplete or variable and therefore highly uncertain data at their disposal. Yet these results are much more than mere guesses, as they usually shed light in a very reliable way on general truths, laws and current trends, be it in the economy, society, their relationship with our environment, or the rise and fall of civilizations.

In December 2020, hundreds of scientists and academics from thirty different countries once again reminded the world that policymakers and everyone else must now openly face the real risk of decline or even total collapse our societies. In many part of the planet, researchers are projecting a credible scenario of societal breakdown before the end of the 21st century, with the primary cause being climate and environmental degradation and the overexploitation of our planet's natural and human resources. It follows directly from this that the days of the current economic and world order are numbered, whatever it is that finally ends it.

Actually this was already highlighted in 1972 by the book The Limits to Growth, whose authors, scientists from the renowned American think-tank Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), modeled the scenarios for the 21st century using data on growth trends between 1900 and 1970. The study showed that, in the long run, essentially any system with exponential economic and population growth was doomed to failure. (This was the first time that it was openly stated that the Earth's resources were finite.) Based on the results, the authors concluded that if the growth trends in world population, industrialization, pollution, food production and resource depletion remain fundamentally unchanged, global collapse may begin as early as the 2020s and continue at an accelerating pace thereafter. And although the book was and still is widely criticized for being the doomsday fantasy of a narrow minority, more recent research has consistently shown that the findings of almost half a century earlier were broadly correct.

In other words, if current trends continue, it is entirely realistic to expect that sooner or later, perhaps within a few decades, we will face the culmination of a general global crisis, far more serious than any in human history. But that is exactly what appears to be hap-

pening, as the IPCC's 2022 report highlights, threatening us with more severe droughts and heatwaves than ever before, storms of unprecedented intensity, cities inundated by rising sea levels, millions more species of animals and plants going extinct, and the resulting catastrophic economic losses, as well as more widespread shortages of drinking water and food. It makes no difference to have the 2015 Paris Agreement, endorsed by the 2021 Climate Change Conference in Glasgow, if the majority of participating countries fail to meet their own commitments, meaning that the biggest greenhouse gas emitters, such as the US, China and the European Union, will have to make extraordinarily radical changes within a few years. However, in the absence of political will or the appropriate governmental instruments, profit-driven companies will never on their own meet the necessary conditions to curb climate change and excessive environmental destruction...

If we are lucky and respond quickly enough, with unprecedented levels of cooperation, we may even be able to get out of this with minimal, though certainly heavier, losses than before. Nevertheless, the extremely close interconnectedness of our world and our economies today, the interdependence and contradictions of our societies, and the high dependence of people on each other and on the almost dying ecosystems of our planet, mean that there is an exceedingly great threat of processes critical to stability breaking loose in a sudden, chain reaction-like manner, at an ever-accelerating pace. This could cause the death and suffering of many people, and even plunge humanity into a primitive state reminiscent of the 'Dark Ages' or the Mad Max movies, and the future of our living conditions as well as that of our descendants and civilization could become completely uncertain.

While I fully believe that the danger is real, it was in no way my intention in writing this book to discourage You or even to get You used to the idea. On the contrary: in fact, my intention was to offer hope for a much more livable, predictable and sustainable future than the one we have in prospect now. What is very important for You to see, Dear Reader, that it is not a hope based on ignorance, lack of information or unfounded optimism, but strictly on reality.

And for that, passive hope is far from enough, because let's face it: based on our history, what are the realistic chances that humanity will somehow get through this crisis, unless there are radical changes, unless we do things differently than we are 'used to'? While we may trust in human insight and common sense, if our dominant systems continue to function in essentially the same way, if we cling tooth and nail to our current way of life, then what are we waiting for to change? If we do nothing but hope, we completely let go of all control, letting things go on as they are – and that is precisely the luxury we can no longer afford in the present situation.

So, in addition to being hopeful, I would like to encourage You to be aware and active, for Your own sake, as well. Even if You do not agree with everything I have written in this book, You can be quite sure that to avert the threats to human civilization we will need much greater consciousness and organization than we have now, both at the individual

and collective level. In terms of our own lives, in order to avoid unnecessary waste and optimize the economy – for which we need to fundamentally change our materialistic and irresponsible approach, reviewing our real values and priorities. And at the level of (civil) society, so that, by uniting and working together, we can initiate the political and social changes that will prevent the future domination of the views and momentary interests of a small minority over the will of the majority. Not only in this critical phase of human civilization, but also in general, it is true that if we are not responsible, (collectively) conscious, cooperative and organized enough, we are effectively sacrificing the future on the altar of the present.

The closer and stronger the cooperation between people, consumers, workers, nations and other communities, the smoother will be the transition to sustainable, much more just and truly civilized societies. I do believe that by reaching a critical mass, even a minority with a large wealth and positional advantage, which is fundamentally opposed to change, can be persuaded to cooperate in a completely peaceful and civilized way. Knowing human nature all too well, however, we can in no way expect that such reforms will not be met with extremely stiff resistance from certain circles.

There is no doubt that politicians and officials, business leaders and owners, entrepreneurs, shareholders, investors and speculators, lawyers who also profit from the current world order, or economists who cling to their views, will, as they have always done, reject any radical changes head-on. And the representatives and supporters of a movement that fights for them will immediately and obviously be labeled as dilettantes, with the argument that they are poking their noses into something they don't understand. Consequently, the message conveyed to us, civil society, through all possible media channels, is always bound to be that everyone should stick to their own thing, and leave economic, social and governance issues to the professionals, i.e. mainly economists, lawyers, managers and politicians.

While there is undoubtedly some logic and reality to this, much of it is about nothing more than distraction, since the lives and futures of all of us are at stake. On the other hand, if we are not educated and informed enough, why are our leaders (who mostly come from the above circles) not working hard to change this as soon as possible, so that more of us can be properly trained, educated and informed? Even if they don't want to control us at every level through secret strings and shadow organizations of all kinds – as the conspiracy theorists so readily try to believe and voice over and over again –, what is certain is that their real or perceived interests would not be served by the majority of people becoming (collectively) conscious.

Because economics is now a semi-religion, many people genuinely believe that capitalism and perpetual-growth economics is the only viable alternative for our civilization, and that there may never be a better option. That consumer society is the one that best corresponds to the very animalistic nature of humans, and that an unregulated liberal market economy, determined by supply and demand (in reality, of course, at least as much by the

balance of power), is the only viable socioeconomic system. Yet our experience clearly shows that, at least for an intelligent species, it is primarily a matter of habit and culture.

Nevertheless, the perpetual conflict and struggle between individual and common interests is unlikely to disappear even in the event of a fundamental paradigm and systemic shift, the emergence of a completely new socio-economic-political culture, due to the rather slow evolution and difficult adaptation of the human psyche and nature. (Although the fact is that the world is changing much faster than before, so we as individuals are forced to do the same). Therefore, even if this book, or any similar initiative, were to find serious support, and we were to succeed in introducing radical reforms that would bring about substantial change in the way our societies work, there is a good chance that many will try obstruct and thwart them whenever and however they can. And when the difficulties start to mount, some people will most certainly argue that they have already said that the new concept is not workable, so we should have stuck with the old one, or that we should reinstate it.

Therefore we should definitely expect that there will be those who do everything in their power to make any fundamental change impossible, using the slightest obstacle and difficulty to prove that those who want to reform the old system are chasing an unattainable dream. In the meantime, the majority of them will continue to loudly deny the reality of the possibility of the collapse that threatens our societies and human civilization, if only to avoid having to acknowledge the need to balance out power and wealth relations. All this in spite of the fact that an increasing number of wealthy families are now buying or building properties and 'bunkers' in perceived safe havens, preparing for any eventuality after a potential apocalypse.

Because a small percentage of people hold a significant percentage of the wealth, both globally and regionally, they have an advantage over the majority in every respect. Thus, if the crash really hits, or if it is already clearly inevitable, we can be sure that they will do everything in their power to accumulate and expropriate strategic resources (such as drinking water, food, medicine, weapons, land, etc.) that are essential for survival, for their own use and benefit. In fact, this process is already well underway – just think of the increasing private ownership of drinking water supplies. And if the richer expropriate the vast majority of resources and the poorer are effectively excluded from access to them, social inequalities and injustices will be even much greater than they are now.

History has proven, and continues to prove, that those who fear their privileges – including the members of the current ruling classes – are capable and willing to do many things just to ensure that the situation or the status quo remains unchanged. Therefore, I have no doubt that if this book and the views and ideas outlined in it were to receive a positive public response, they would be subject to severe attacks and denials – on the one hand, by those who are not able to think outside the box, and on the other, by those who are unwilling to do so because of their status and privilege. It is also certain that if some government bodies and other agencies seek to inhibit the spread of such views, then there

is a strong sense of a sham democracy, wherever freedom of speech and expression cannot be freely exercised. Despite the fact that when they do so, it is obviously done covertly, without any kind of official publicity, so as not to in any way facilitate the transmission and spread of such ideas...

Yet we must persevere and work with all our might to ensure that the current unsustainable practices, and any system driven by existential opportunism, do not persist or return in the future. It is at times like these, at the height of the crisis of our entire civilization, that it is really important to bring out the best in ourselves and each other. This is why it is of the utmost importance to talk as much as possible about the problems and crises outlined, how our world works, the need for change and possible solutions.

I urge You, if You can, to do the same, Dear Reader, so that as many of us as possible take a conscious stance on the issues that are crucial to our future. And if You agree with even a little bit of what is written in this book and the goals outlined, pass it on to everyone You can, online or offline: via email or social networking sites, but it could also be a good option to post it on a file-sharing site, your own website or a hosting site, since the more sources there are the better. To be on the safe side, it is also a good idea to save it on a storage device (flash drive, writable disk, memory card, etc.) that is not easily accessible to any sneaky algorithms. Furthermore, if You can, translate it or have it translated into the language of your own country or dialect, so that its content can reach as many peoples of as many nations as possible, the effects of which then will only be determined in time by the collective consciousness of humanity.

You may be content with Your life now, Dear Reader, but You can now see that the future holds countless dangers for You and Your loved ones. As the global crisis intensifies due to climate change, population growth, pollution and resource depletion, epidemics, wars and more, the impact of the economic and social problems they cause may become more frequent and more severe in all our lives. What is certain is that radical and extremely rapid changes are needed to ensure sustainability. Failure to alter our current trends carries at least as much risk as upsetting the way things have been going – if not much more, given the myriad threats to our civilization.

However, serious difficulties are always part and parcel of radical change, and a smooth transition or renewal cannot be expected. And in order to progress, we always need to take some risks, so we must stick to our ideas, dreams and desires for a better world. If only because they move us forward, while without them we are just stumbling along, only to finally pass away, nice and quiet...

At the same time, beyond our dreams and aspirations, we all possess a certain amount of power, regardless of social rank, status, position and material situation, simply by virtue of our spirit, our extraordinary intellectual abilities. The question is whether we use it – and if we do, how, when and why we do it could be extremely important. Besides the promise of hope grounded in reality, my main goal with this book was to help others to

acquire the knowledge and (collective) vision necessary to empower them to take control of their own destiny, and thus the future of the entire human civilization.

The truth is that, like it or not, humanity needs to grow up incredibly fast, or we will be in big trouble – and we are already up to our waists (some would say necks) in it. This is the pure, fact-based reality. Whether we can avoid the biggest disaster(s) we have ever experienced is only up to us. We have the capacity, I believe that one hundred percent – and I also believe that our species is destined for great things in this universe.

For that, however, we desperately need common goals and a common set of values, or, if You like, a new identity. Without the combined strength of the human collective, there is little chance that our now global civilization can successfully survive the coming decades. So the time has finally come for humanity's awakening!

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About the Author

Just one human being among many. But who...

... cannot live a normal life in an abnormal world.

... works like a mirror that is held in front of people, whether they like what they see in it or not.

... expects only one thing from people: to live and behave according to what they were born to be – as sentient, intelligent beings.

... most of all wants to be able to tell about himself that he belongs to a civilization that did not destroy itself and its environment, but existed for a long time and fulfilled its potential in the universe.