Growth or Degrowth? Maurizio Ferraris's Economy of Digital Waste Recycling

Preface by Ana Ilievska (Bonn)

Can we produce value simply by virtue of being human? Should and can we reconcile ourselves to being consumers rather than producers? Should we earn according to our merit or our needs? Can we reconsider 'growth' and 'capitalization' rather than promote a return to some primitivist utopia? If there can be recycling bins for banana peels, Amazon boxes, and plastic bottles, why cannot there be digital bins that would recycle and thus render valuable the 'data waste' that we create during our most banal activities? Maurizio Ferraris's *Webfare* raises many questions like these that some might perceive as provocative or naïve, others as realistic. *In primis*, however, this short book asks us to reconsider the essence—if there is one—of what it means to be human in the twenty-first century. Going against conceptions of the human as *homo laborans* or *homo faber*—the working animal or the animal that creates—Ferraris proposes a view of humans as needy consumers. This description is, of course, not very flattering. But it is based on a simple anthropological fact that is not to be confused with reckless consumerism in the capitalist sense: in the face of nature, the human animal is intrinsically helpless (what Ferraris calls our 'first' nature) and in need of technology in order to survive (our 'second' nature). We still our intrinsic neediness through accumulation or storing for future use (also known as capitalization), and by constant consumption: "We produce for future consumption, and the only animals truly capable of consumption are human animals" (16). This essence of ours as the needy animal goes hand in hand with technology, viz., there is no such thing as a human before technology:

"From the outset, human nature has been a second nature—the result of the interplay between organisms and mechanisms, soul and automaton" (61). Humans are what they are *because* of technology, whether by technology we mean language, a stick, or ChatGPT: "to become human," Ferraris writes, "means to develop increasingly sophisticated technologies" (ibidem) within the "techno-anthropological circle" (60ff). As infinite beings, machines have no internal purpose, no *needs*, but we do. In this sense, both our and the existence of machines is dependent on the feedback we give one another. Being more than just animals and far less than gods, we create machines in order to come to terms with our liminal existence. Indeed, technology would have no place among angels. The existence of technology presupposes imperfection.

Now such a conception of the human-machine relationship is not unproblematic for it implies a potentially destructive co-dependency and an ever-escalating disregard for environmental and political issues in the race to secure resources. I will focus on one of its aspects in this brief introduction: the need for **growth.** Indeed, Ferraris's view of the techno-anthropological circle presupposes something like infinite or at least indefinite growth and sees continuous technological progress as being intrinsic to human civilization. He writes, "[a]dressing the pressing social and environmental issues at hand does not call for less progress, globalization, or capital, but rather demands the opposite: greater progress, precisely because it would be pursued with awareness" (91). Webfare, indeed, "is not about depressing development but harnessing its potential for the collective improvement of humanity, leading to what is effectively a happy growth" (91–2). Such a view promotes an optimistic or at least positive outlook on technological innovation against other contemporary thinkers who see human privacy, labor, and freedom imperilled in what seems to be yet another, subtler but not less harmful mutation of capitalism: surveillance capitalism and the environmental crisis and bullshit jobs that it has begotten.[1] But

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1   See Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2018); David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018); Kate Crawford, *Atlas of AI:*

what if growth could be re-evaluated and pursued equitably and "with awareness"? What if the traces that we leave everywhere on the Web can be accumulated and interpreted in such a way as to transform them into value which can, in turn, be redistributed to those in need? This, in a nutshell, is the core tenet of *Webfare*.

To properly understand and contextualize Ferraris's proposal, however, a comparison is in order. For growth or rather *degrowth* is a central concern of another contemporary philosopher, Kohei Saito, whose idea of "degrowth communism" has gained him millions of readers in his homeland and now all over the world.[2] Both philosophers, obvious in Saito and without explicit references in Ferraris, have Marx as their main interlocutor. While the former wants to salvage Marx by recruiting him among the ranks of environmentalists and promoters of degrowth (something unthinkable for 'traditional' Marxists), the latter stays within a traditional Marxist framework but updates such notions as 'surplus value' and 'relations of production' to fit the current form of capital for the purpose of perhaps overcoming capitalism through its own means. Furthermore, 'growth or degrowth' seems to be the central question of the recent explosion of debates on Artificial Intelligence and technological innovation in industry, politics, and the business world, and of academics alike. As a "regulation-Europe" vs. "innovation-US" narrative is taking hold of the global imaginary, Ferraris's and Saito's thought provides a philosophical justification for each side, whereby Ferraris paradoxically seems to step over to the dark side of US American capitalism and Saito over to the EU's green push for deacceleration and control. How is this to be understood?

For one, Ferraris for years now has been trying to dispel the specters of technopessimism under the banner of a techno-humanist philosophy

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Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence (New Haven: Yale UP, 2021); Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014).

2   Kohei Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 2022).

or 'technosophy.'[3] Friend (and critic) of Derrida and, without a doubt, the most renown scholar of hermeneutics in Italy and proponent of 'New Realism,' for over a decade Ferraris has been outlining a vision of our contemporary times as a tesseract of *spheres* at the basis of which is need and which are interconnected by the traces we leave in order to fulfil those needs. Since the value generated by such a tesseract is enormous ("human heritage"), the entire edifice should be taken out of the hands of both US liberalist and Chinese communist platforms and placed in the hands of competent hermeneuticians (ideally, each one of us) who can coherently and dispassionately interpret the traces we leave on the Web:

> The true revolution brought about by the Web does not lie merely in the possibility to express our ideas, whether right or wrong, but rather in the fact that, as we express ourselves or simply engage in activities like reading, scrolling, walking, looking for restaurants or hotels, or seeking navigational guidance, these actions are meticulously recorded. Once they are recorded, they can be compared with the acts of millions of other humans, shedding light not on the ethereal skies of our thoughts and beliefs, but on the tangible soil of our actions and deeds. (50)

Such a conception of our online lives wants to dispel the myths about us living in an infosphere[4] or in the age of mass communication. Our lives on the internet as expression of our personalities and preferences or as social beings are just the tip of the iceberg according to Ferraris. The much bigger behemoth floating beneath is the massive amount of what one might call "data waste"—the traces we leave unwittingly while we are online, the time and location of our login and Google searches, the steps we take while carrying our phone in our pocket, the sleeping habits that we entrust to health apps. Ferraris calls this information the source of "syntactic data" as distinct from "semantic data" (36ff). Let me illustrate

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3   Maurizio Ferraris and Guido Saracco, *Tecnosofia: Tecnologia e umanesimo per una scienza nuova* (Roma: Laterza, 2023).

4   Luciano Floridi, *The 4th Revolution: How the Infosphere is Reshaping Human Reality* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014).

this distinction: When at the end of the eighteenth century, the philosopher Immanuel Kant, also known as "the Königsberg clock," used to go on his daily walks, punctually (earning him the nickname) and consistently, he did not produce syntactic data for the mere reason that he was not carrying a cellphone in his pocket, allowing external agents to capture this data, aggregate it, and compare it to that of millions of other philosophers who like going on walks. Except for curious onlookers who recorded this habit of his in a diary or biography, there are no recordings of the exact number of steps that Kant took, the exact route that he chose, and the exact duration of his walk.

If Kant had had an iPhone, he would not have only produced what we already know as his semantic data (i.e., his philosophical writings); he would have also contributed to syntactic data, which we could access and compare, say, to that of Hegel and Fichte, and, employing our hermeneutical, interpretative skills, eventually come up with an insight into the walking behavior of seminal philosophers, perhaps publishing a study of findings and subsequently marketing a manual on how to walk like a philosopher (and perhaps become one). Such an accumulation and interpretation of data into syntactic capital not by large companies, but by capable hermeneuticians, is what Ferraris calls "human heritage"—a treasure throve of syntactic data that can be capitalized and transformed into value by "Virtue Banks" and subsequently redistributed in the form of pecuniary rewards not among philosophers, CEOs, and hermeneuticians, but among those in need. Such is the nature of what Ferraris understands as "growth" and "capitalization." He is careful to remind us of the different meanings of 'capital':

> The great misunderstanding about capital is that it exclusively refers to industrial or financial capital [...] when, in fact, "capital" is the umbrella term for any form of accumulation of skills. Therefore, civilization as a whole must be viewed as a process of capitalization. The choice we have is not between capital and the absence of capital, but between just and unjust forms of capitalization. (62)

Saito, as a young Marxist trying to reconcile the differences between reds and greens in matters concerning the environmental crisis, holds quite the opposite view. There is no such thing as 'good' or 'just' capital for capital implies growth, and growth involves constant expansion in search for new natural and human resources, usually at the cost of the Global South. The material conditions of production are continuously externalized so that various "metabolic rifts" emerge, making invisible to the northern centers the true costs of technological development:

> By constantly shifting the ecological rifts and making them invisible to the capitalist centre, the current capitalist order of society appears attractive and comfortable for a wide range of social groups in the Global North. It thus facilitates a general social consensus, while its real costs are imposed upon other social groups in the Global South. (Saito 2022, 33)

In other words, while the Kants of today are taking their walks and counting calories to stay fit, the rest of the world suffocates under the burden of global warming and labor exploitation.

Now which one of these proposals holds the promise of a better future? Is Ferraris guilty of Jameson's and Žižek's charge that it is easier to imagine the end of all life on earth than the end of capitalism? Or is he guilty of *phronesis*, the practical philosopher's attitude who seeks to make the best out of what already lies before him? What indeed, is truly *desirable*, to use the wording of the Mercator-funded project within which Ferraris's manifesto was written? Saito's proposal requires a systemic revolution, a complete overhaul of the current global economy of growth and its institutions towards "degrowth communism," a "stationary and circular economy without economic growth" as a radical alternative to "capitalism that pursues endless capital accumulation and economic growth" (Saito 207). All critique of his re-interpretation of Marx aside, is Saito's proposal *desirable* or even *viable* at all? Rather than framing Ferraris's Webfare and Saito's degrowth communism in opposition, is it perhaps more reasonable to consider them as two steps of the same process, one at its beginning and the other at its extreme end? The issue

at stake here does not seem to be of economic, socio-political, or environmental nature, but is rather philosophical: the very conception of the human and its relationship to technology are at stake. Are humans capable of thinking about degrowth without associating it with such concepts as entropy or even death? Could intellectuals envision a Webfare society without associating it with capitalism and resignation? And would politicians be able to implement it without twentieth-century-déjà-vus? I believe that the problem can be solved through the simple metaphor of waste recycling for, at the end of the day, what Ferraris is proposing is precisely this: **an economy of consensual and conscientious digital waste recycling.** The only revolution that he seeks to bring about is one where society takes care of humans according to their needs and not according to their merits. Webfare is not about accepting capitalism but about accepting consumption and technology as intrinsic to being human, and to be human is to generate value.

Finally, Ferraris's proposal is more than just an essay in philosophy or political economy—it is already being implemented at the New Science Institute for Advanced Studies in Turin through collaborations with potential data intermediaries (or "Virtue Banks") such as banks, hospitals, universities, and cooperatives. The goal is to train citizens, thinkers, technologists, and simply any user with an internet access to understand data and engage critically with the web. At the end of the day, Ferraris's is a thoroughly humanistic (but not anthropocentric) project that seeks "to restore political agency, and consequently, a sense of responsibility" to humanity in view of the latest technological developments. The question whether we should pursue growth or abandon it becomes secondary. Growth is a given, and perhaps old Marx saw something essential there in human nature, and *how*—not *whether*—we pursue it, is the real challenge for our times.

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