

Il tema

Selling Nature, Buying Green. Two Neoliberal Roads to Environmental De-Politicisation

Vendere la natura, comprare “verde”. Due vie neoliberali alla de-politicizzazione ambientale

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Abstract. While acknowledging the declining trajectory of the neoliberal order, this article explores de-politicising tendencies that keep environmental debates and practices deeply embedded in its logic. It focuses on how some central neoliberal patterns and practices remain alive and well, including their ability to cast a shadow over class struggles. In particular, the article examines two lines: the delegation of environmental protection to processes of privatisation, commodification, and marketisation (neoliberal conservation), which reduce conservation to technical decisions that appear politically neutral yet inherently involve ethical and political choices; and the reduction of environmental concern to individual positions and behaviours (neoliberal activism), entrenched in market dynamics and exemplifying a *hyperpolitical* era. These two heterogeneous tendencies withdraw environmental decisions from collective political contestation – the former by handing them over to markets and institutions, the latter by dissolving them into individual conduct. The article concludes that this twofold de-politicisation – together with the emerging forms of hyperpoliticised yet individualised engagement – exposes the limits of our modern and post-modern political categories and calls for new terms and frameworks through which to think the environmental question.

Keywords: environmental depoliticisation, environmental neoliberalism, neoliberal activism.

Riassunto. Pur riconoscendo la traiettoria di declino dell'ordine neoliberale, questo articolo esplora le tendenze alla depoliticizzazione che mantengono i dibattiti e le

pratiche ambientali profondamente radicati nella sua logica. L'analisi si concentra sul modo in cui alcuni modelli e pratiche centrali del neoliberismo continuano a persistere, compresa la loro capacità di oscurare i conflitti di classe. In particolare, l'articolo esamina due direttrici: da un lato, la delega della tutela dell'ambiente ai processi di privatizzazione, mercificazione e marketizzazione (*neoliberal conservation*), che riducono la conservazione a decisioni tecniche apparentemente neutrali sul piano politico, ma che implicano inevitabilmente scelte etiche e politiche; dall'altro, la riduzione della questione ambientale a posizioni e comportamenti individuali (*neoliberal activism*), radicati nelle dinamiche di mercato e rappresentativi di un'epoca *iperpolitica*. Queste due tendenze eterogenee sottraggono le decisioni ambientali al confronto politico collettivo: la prima affidandole ai mercati e alle istituzioni, la seconda dissolvendole nella condotta individuale. L'articolo conclude che questa duplice depolitizzazione – insieme alle forme emergenti di impegno iperpoliticizzato ma individualizzato – mette in luce i limiti delle categorie politiche moderne e postmoderne e richiama la necessità di nuovi concetti e quadri interpretativi attraverso cui ripensare la questione ambientale

Parole chiave: depolitizzazione ambientale, neoliberismo ambientale, attivismo neoliberale.

1. Introduction¹

Today's profound environmental degradation is such that the renaming of the present geological epoch is being discussed.² The current human has turned into a “geological agent,” the consequences of whose actions are impersonal, collective and visible from the stratigraphy³ and impose new priorities on philosophical reflection and political action.

¹ I am profoundly indebted to Serena Marcenò for her support and for our discussions on the content, structure, and flaws of this paper. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers, who so attentively addressed the limitations of my first draft and helped me improve the present version. Any remaining errors and shortcomings, however, are my sole responsibility.

² From a scientific point of view, discussion on the entrance in a new epoch – the Anthropocene – has somewhat halted. On the 21st of March 2024, the International Union of Geological Sciences and the International Commission on Stratigraphy rejected the proposal to use the Anthropocene Epoch as a formal unit of the geologic time scale (see the official website: <https://stratigraphy.org/news/152>). Nevertheless, the Commission and the Union recognize the value of the term as a descriptor of human impact on the Earth system. The term, still widely discussed in the humanities, remains problematic even from other points of view, as the very term implies a certain vision of the relationship between nature and culture, nature and humanity. A vision that accepts the “naming of an epoch after ourselves” (Crist, “On the Poverty of Our Nomenclature,” 14) and that reflects a certain understanding of “class, race, gender, sexuality, nation” (Moore, “The Rise of Cheap Nature,” 78).

³ Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History,” 2021.

And yet, paradoxically, at the very moment when the political stakes of the environmental question are highest, a powerful constellation of tendencies is pushing the ecological question away from the classic domain of politics – away from the open and collective contestation of values, principles, and priorities – and towards forms of decision-making that present themselves as neutral, technical, or simply natural.

This scenario opens the door to a constellation of old and new responses to the ecological challenges that, though profoundly different from one another in their idioms and prescriptions, share a common structure: they each dissolve political questions – about class, race, gender, colonial and neocolonial structures, regimes of war – into something that appears to lie beyond political matters, into markets or into individual responsibilities, into science and technology⁴ or into natural laws,⁵ into the hands of active (or activist) judges,⁶ or into the green and blue economy⁷. Decisions that are eminently political (how to distribute resources, what to produce, what to conserve and how, which futures to imagine) are shifted under the claim of becoming more rapid, efficient, correct, just.

The change in the relationship with politics that tends towards a sort of de-politicisation of environmental matters is not a new development *per se*. It well fits within a wider picture and ideological framework: the one that characterises neoliberal societies and economic orders. In the neoliberal ideology, what appears to be a rush toward de-politicisation is more than present: the market rules itself naturally as the best instrument to promote the allocation of resources; people are to concentrate on their individual interests, needs, and capitals to take care of themselves; the state is relegated to the role of a neutral manager, discouraged from setting or pursuing collective goals (what an act of destructive hubris!). The consequences of these ideological stances are entrenched with the changes in the relationship between people and politics that have occurred in the so-called West, where, after the abandoning of mass politics of the

⁴ See Saito, *Slow Down*, 2 on climate techno-solutionism.

⁵ The re-emergence of natural law theories under the guise of new environmental theories – such as Earth Jurisprudence, Ecology of Law, and Ecological Integrity – will not be addressed here. It is the object of a parallel reflection published by the author as Sajeva, “De la descripción de la ecología a la prescripción del derecho y la política.”

⁶ I here refer to climate litigation and rights of nature cases, where judges all over the world have taken on the fight for the conservation of nature calling States to their responsibilities towards the climate or binding them to recognize rights to nature or to elements of nature. For as important and groundbreaking these decisions often are, they escape democratic decision-making procedures, sometimes also disregarding the realities of local communities and indigenous peoples. The analysis of these cases is not addressed in the limited space of this paper and is therefore delegated to future research and publications.

⁷ See Crist, “On the Poverty of Our Nomenclature.”

last century⁸ we have entered a post-political⁹ era whose developments are characterized by the imposition of technocratic ruling and the search for the softening of political conflicts¹⁰, the anesthetisation of class struggles¹¹, the government of bodies and populations through expanding techniques and technologies of control¹².

This article explores a limited part of these de-politicisation tendencies that keep environmental debates and practices deeply embedded in a neoliberal logic. It focuses on how some of the central neoliberal patterns and practices remain alive and well, including the ability to cast a shadow over class struggles which, confined to individual matters and responsibilities, lose the centrality they should retain *vis à vis* the differentiated impact of environmental degradation among classes. In particular, the article will focus on two lines: the delegation of environmental protection to processes of privatisation, commodification, and marketisation that reduce environmental governance to technical decisions (*technofixes*) which appear politically neutral yet inherently involve ethical and political choices regarding principles, priorities, and processes of subjectivation; and the confining of the environment to matters of individual positions and behaviours entrenched in market dynamics and varying across social classes.

These two tendencies are, admittedly, heterogeneous and seemingly difficult to bring together. The first concerns the institutional discourse and practice of conservation (*neoliberal conservation*). It addresses both national and international conservation actions, tailored at the global scale by international institutions and markets: they, however locally diverse, retain common features that can be readily identified across contexts. The second, a set of practices and individual behaviours (*neoliberal activism*) is by definition partial, since it bears on practices and therefore captures only a portion of reality – no mapping of every practice of environmental activism worldwide could ever be seriously attempted within a single article. Yet both belong to the same de-politicising logic of the neoliberal order: each withdraws environmental decisions from collective political contestation – the one by handing them to markets and institutions, the other by dissolving them into individual conduct.

What connects all these tendencies is the fact that the so-called global environmental crisis is also – and perhaps above all – a crisis of modern and post-modern political categories. To anchor it to this monographic issue: they are inadequate tools to comprehend the world *beyond globalisa-*

⁸ Jäger, *Iperpolitica*.

⁹ Crouch, *Post-Democracy*; Crouch, “Post-democracy and Populism.”

¹⁰ Mouffe, *On the Political*.

¹¹ Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*.

¹² Taşkale, *Post-Politics in Context*; Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control.”

tion. This article will not attempt a re-categorisation but will simply trace some connecting lines of processes that appear distinguished yet retain common features that might prove relevant to find new interpretative paths beyond globalisation.

2. Still talking about neoliberalism?

Among the categories in crisis, neoliberalism surely occupies a prominent position. Using it as an interpretative framework is not obvious at a moment when the collapse of the USA-centred hegemonic order, the increased interdependency of economic and political interests, the withdrawal of the US Dollar as the global currency, Trump's tariff policy, the data monopoly held by large platforms, and the concentration of capitals justify yet another inquiry into whether "capitalism is changing its skin"¹³. Contemporary conditions of "systemic chaos and war" compel recognition of an emerging multipolar international order in which the West can no longer be regarded as "the universal actor orchestrating some kind of liberal rules-based international order"¹⁴ and neoliberalism is witnessing a proper political crisis made of authoritarian leaders, returns to façade nationalism¹⁵, state interventionism, and tariff protectionism¹⁶. Nevertheless, it is not the first time that "neoliberalism is declared dead" (and then turns out to be still alive)¹⁷ and readings centred on neoliberal structures cannot yet be dismissed. Whether or not neoliberalism is reaching its concluding turn, its characteristics remain essential to grasp its still considerable influence¹⁸ – both at the micro-economic level, where strategies of discrimination and exclusion to create value-less groups to be exploited and practices based on the concept of human capital remain alive and well¹⁹; and at the macro-level where the financialisation of the economic system and decentralisation of state control, the erosion of welfare, and the globality of the markets do not seem to be declining, yet.

Neoliberal heterogeneous processes have, in fact, demonstrated the ability to survive the 2008 and Covid-19 crises. Even if lights were lit on the responsibility of the neoliberal economic model as the cause of the financial crisis and on the privatisation of the management of health as

¹³ Chignola, Mezzadra, "Neoliberalismo: che cosa c'è in un nome?."

¹⁴ Mezzadra, Neilson, *The Rest and the West*, 1.

¹⁵ Saad-Filho, "Endgame."

¹⁶ Laruffa, Plehwe, "After Neoliberalism?," 2.

¹⁷ Laruffa, Plehwe, "After Neoliberalism?," 1.

¹⁸ Laruffa, Plehwe, "After Neoliberalism?," 2.

¹⁹ Chignola, Mezzadra, "Neoliberalismo: che cosa c'è in un nome?."

the cause of the lack of effective responses to the pandemic, the subsequent States' responses maintained the repulsion for state expenditure (austerity) and inflation. In other words, neoliberal processes adapted to the very crises they helped generate, giving rise to state policies that, in one way or another, reinforced market mechanisms, maintained reliance on individual behaviours, and perpetuated the existence of subaltern classes and groups²⁰.

3. Neoliberal conservation

The ability of the neoliberal order to adapt and incorporate its own crises is well shown by its relationship with the so-called environmental crisis. Within the neoliberal framework, the conservation of nature, while apparently countering the detachment of people from nature, fosters their complete separation, suggesting instruments to "solve the crisis" that actually tend to amplify it²¹. *Vis à vis* the obvious and predicted impossibility of an enduring indefinite growth and unlimited use of natural resources, neoliberalism has "rolled sideways," giving birth to a neoliberal response to environmental issues: neoliberal instruments and *fixes* meant to limit the crisis while allowing for the continued increase of wealth²². The market has so responded to environmental degradation by offering solutions that are presented as superior and that substitute other – more State-based – options, such as legal restrictions on the use of natural resources, and public expenditures for protection, restoration, and research²³. The neoliberal order has acted incorporating nature, making it part of its system; by giving it a value in the only way it gives values to beings and non-beings: by turning them into commodities and ensuring their circulation, i.e. by "finding new ways to guarantee 'nature on the move'"²⁴. This move allows the extraction of value from nature not only when it is actually used (from the extraction of natural resources, for example) but also from its non-use, or from the *promise* of its non-use (even though conservation of the environment is not just a matter of not touching nature but implies many actions)²⁵. Such a shift in the valuation of nature allowed a wider

²⁰ Esposito, Moini, "Fare un passo di lato per farne due avanti."

²¹ Büscher, "Nature on the Move I," 183.

²² Esposito, Moini, "Fare un passo di lato per farne due avanti."

²³ McAfee, "The Contradictory Logic of Global Ecosystem Services Markets"; Srinivasan, "Economic Valuation and Option-Based Payments for Ecosystem Services."

²⁴ Büscher, "Nature on the Move I," 184. Alike migrants who, once turned into *people on the move*, are guaranteed a value that can be extracted in the labour market.

²⁵ Büscher, "Nature on the Move I," 185.

attachment of capital to nature, allowing neoliberal conservation²⁶ practices to span across a variety of “strategies and mechanisms that seek to reconcile conservation with economic development”²⁷ through the funding of conservation practices with market mechanisms, their re-regulation from state to non-state actors (such as privately owned natural resources, NGOs, international organisations and firms), the commodification of nature and the creation of a financial market for environmental protection assets²⁸. What all these practices have in common is their increased separation from a collective and political arena of discussion: they are managed and implemented by non-state actors and through a (ideologically) self-regulating market whose conditions for existence are enabled by the actions and regulations of States, but whose development is handed to an invisible hand.

The search for technofixes to environmental issues began when the idea of *development*²⁹ (already fully entrenched in the neoliberal discourse and practice) was confronted with the recognition of the limitation of the natural resources of the planet (for example through the famous 1972 Report on *The Limits to Growth*) leading to its conjunction with the word *sustainable*, giving birth to paradigms that combine economic and well-being interests with the recognition of the need to take the environment into consideration³⁰. As shown by the 1980 World Conservation Strategy,³¹ the discourse about and the practice of sustainable development inevitably encountered the discourse and practice of biodiversity and ecosystem conservation, drawing much-needed attention to the importance of harmonizing the second with the existence, rights, and abilities of local communities and indigenous peoples – so far easily disregarded or, worse, treated as existential threats to the conservation of the environment.³² However, the result of such a get-together was not solely the promotion of so-called community-based conservation³³ – whose aims were meeting social devel-

²⁶ Also known as neoliberal nature, green neoliberalism, market environmentalism, green capitalism, for-profit conservation, Nature™ Inc (Fletcher, “Neoliberal Conservation,” 2).

²⁷ Fletcher, “Neoliberal Conservation,” 1.

²⁸ Fletcher, “Neoliberal Conservation,” 1-2.

²⁹ For a reconstruction of the idea of development with a vintage flavour, see Sachs, *The Development Dictionary*.

³⁰ Cardesa-Salzmann, Coccio, “Global Governance, Sustainability and the Earth System,” 439; see also Sands et al., *Principles of International Environmental Law*, 206.

³¹ See International Union for Conservation of Nature, *World Conservation Strategy*.

³² As so clearly shown by the habit of evicting indigenous people and local communities from newly created conserved areas and national parks in line with *fortress conservation approaches* (see Maffi, “Biocultural Approaches to Conservation and Development,” 4; Campese, “Rights-based Approaches to Conservation,” 7).

³³ Agrawal, Gibson, “Enchantment and Disenchantment”; Alcorn, “Indigenous Peoples and Conservation,” 3; Gavin et al., “Defining Biocultural Approaches to Conservation”; Reed,

opment and poverty alleviation goals in combination with environmental conservation goals³⁴ – but also the elaboration of a conservation lexicon and rhetoric that could echo the *utility* of natural resources for humans. A clear example is given by the decision of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment to give its endorsement to the term *ecosystem services* (ES)³⁵ as the benefits people obtain from ecosystems. This *simplified language* was precisely meant for politicians and the private investment world to better understand each other³⁶ and was aimed at taking into account the benefits ecosystems and natural processes provide to human wellbeing and production, and the environmental costs of production. Accordingly, Costanza et al. famously estimated the annual economic value of the world's ecosystems – between USD 16 and 54 trillion – as an effort intended to highlight the centrality of ecosystems to human well-being and economy.³⁷ This intellectual and policy shift – endorsed in the Rio+20 report *Towards a Green Economy: Pathways to Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication* – squeezed ecosystems and natural processes, as well as local communities and indigenous peoples, into the global market system³⁸. It also importantly attempted to overcome the eternal obliviousness of environmental externalities, which are typically ignored and relegated to society, subaltern subjects and the natural environment³⁹. However, it acted and proceeded along with the reasoning of Garrett Hardin's *Tragedy of the commons*,⁴⁰ who, to account for the limits of the environment, accused the common use of goods and natural resources of being a threat to conservation, and promoted a (profoundly racist and classist)⁴¹ rhetoric against overpopulation. He consequently saw protected areas and private property rights to be the only (logical and economically efficient) instruments to conserve the environment and prevent the overexploitation and exhaustion of natural resources. Protected areas are indeed often managed by States, but they belong to what – in a retrospective analysis – was left part of first wave conservation (*fortress conservation*⁴²) as they require a vision of the State

"Stakeholder Participation for Environmental Management," 2420.

³⁴ Hughes, Flintan, *Integrating Conservation and Development Experience*.

³⁵ On the origins of the concept see Ehrlich, Ehrlich, *Extinction*; Lele, "Environmental Justice and the Limits of Ecosystem Services Frameworks," 122. For a recent assessment see Costanza et al., "Twenty Years of Ecosystem Services."

³⁶ Martin-Ortega et al., "Nature Commodification."

³⁷ Costanza et al., "Twenty Years of Ecosystem Services."

³⁸ See Fletcher et al., "A New Future for Conservation," 2.

³⁹ See De Lucia, *The Ecosystem Approach in International Environmental Law*, 197.

⁴⁰ Hardin, *Tragedy*.

⁴¹ A rhetoric that is not hard to spot, especially if read in tandem with his article "Lifeboat Ethics"

⁴² See Fletcher, "Neoliberal Conservation," 2.

that goes beyond the classic neoliberal minimal state and are seen as cumbersome and inefficient as welfare policies are. The current so-called third wave,⁴³ *neoliberal conservation*, builds instead on Hardin's recommendation for the creation of private protected areas that build on private interests in conservation and the commodification of nature as the most efficient and large-scale instrument to promote a sustainable use of nature. Predicated on development optimism and on faith in the capacity of the market to self-regulate, the resulting paradigm champions technocratic, top-down solutions, asserting that these can dissolve the poverty-environment nexus by creating win-win scenarios and "opportunities for local benefits in poor countries through exchanges with private and public parties from industrialised countries"⁴⁴. Among others, the Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) initiative (established during the G8+5 in 2007) explicitly acknowledged this approach, stating that "the failure to account for the full economic values of ecosystems and biodiversity has been a significant factor in their continuing loss and degradation." As a response to this type of challenge, TEEB suggested "the introduction of mechanisms that incorporate the values of ecosystems into decision making, through incentives and price signals. This can include payments for ecosystem services, reforming environmentally harmful subsidies, introducing tax breaks for conservation, or creating new markets for sustainably produced goods and ecosystem services"⁴⁵, as well as eco-tourism, bioprospecting, and green offsetting. The market, hence, takes care of nature in the most efficient way *if* left free to operate through the enlargement of private property. In the words of McAfee: "selling nature to save it"⁴⁶.

Through this rhetoric, the evaluation of the practices used to promote conservation is moved from deliberation on ethical considerations on the balancing of different interests, needs, and values, to a technical and apparently a-political evaluation of gains and costs delegated to companies, firms, and international NGOs. Money becomes "a cultural veil obscuring material asymmetries by representing unequal exchange as reciprocal"⁴⁷, so allowing them to be fit (or, better, pressed) into contract-based relationships where all parties interact as if they were equal because such "commodity fetishism" allows the "masking of the social relationships underlying the process of production"⁴⁸. Furthermore, this process not only eclipses the cultural, spiritual, aesthetic, and biological values of

⁴³ The second wave should account for *community-based conservation*.

⁴⁴ Adger et al., "Advancing a Political Ecology of Global Environmental Discourses," 702.

⁴⁵ TEEB, *The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity*, 9 and 12.

⁴⁶ McAfee, "Selling Nature to Save It?," 146.

⁴⁷ Hornborg, "Colonialism in the Anthropocene," 14.

⁴⁸ Kosoy, Corbera, "Payments for Ecosystem Services as Commodity Fetishism," 1229.

nature⁴⁹ but, by transforming its value into commodified capital, enables monetary compensation to mediate trade-offs – both between poverty and conservation⁵⁰ and between nature and assets previously deemed beyond comparison⁵¹.

While these mechanisms are perfectly consistent with a neoliberal logic, they are importantly grounded in, and thus constrained by, a “material space” and in the material resources which are commodified, evaluated, and exchanged⁵². Such a necessary link acts as a limitation to the potential capital growth and has been overcome by transforming nature into a “fictitious capital,” i.e. “capital without any material basis in commodities or productive activity”⁵³. In this further process of neo-liberalisation of conservation, nature was turned into a “liquid nature” fit to circulate in capitalist commodity markets, even when it is not directly linked to a natural resource or its conservation. Such financial assets may be attached to conservation projects or to environmental risks (extreme weather events, volcanic explosions, earthquakes, and the like), or even to the promise of the future implementation of conservation actions. What matters is not, anymore, the production of conservation goods, but rather their *circulation*: they need to be kept *on the move* to produce value through transactions in the financial market. They function through NGO’s conservation messages, brands that sell *eco-friendly* products, companies providing carbon offsetting options, but also through the reports, policy briefs, and campaigns about environmental issues that create the ideology – and the anxiety – necessary for people and companies to be interested in buying financial products that are associated – at least theoretically – with conservation. The value of biodiversity that is bought and sold is not linked to biodiversity’s *utility* (which was and remains the limited vision of ecosystem services) but relies on “ephemeral values” detached from “any direct basis in material, sociobiophysical nature”⁵⁴. The resulting “fictitious conservation” just needs “a memorable logo, some catchy slogans, smooth marketing campaigns, visually captivating websites, celebrity spokespeo-

⁴⁹ Kosoy, Corbera, “Payments for Ecosystem Services as Commodity Fetishism.” As Pascual et al., “Diverse Values of Nature for Sustainability” observe, social-scientific insights, local perceptions and knowledge, Indigenous worldviews, and non-instrumental benefits derived from nature are routinely marginalized, leaving the framework analytically incomplete and in some cases ineffective.

⁵⁰ Wunder, *Payments for Environmental Services*, 2.

⁵¹ See Read, Cato, “A Price for Everything?” 158 ff; Sikor, *The Justices and Injustices of Ecosystem Services*, 4.

⁵² Fletcher, “Neoliberal Conservation,” 4.

⁵³ Büscher, “Nature on the Move I,” 185.

⁵⁴ Büscher, “Nature on the Move I,” 195, 198-199.

ple, and a take-home message that ‘everybody wins’. It can make people ‘feel good’⁵⁵.

4. Neoliberal activism

“It can make people feel good” without engaging in a political collective discussion. The institutional level of conservation is so entrenched in complex market mechanisms that aim at efficiency that it loses its connection with the reality of conservation and with the collective political debate around it.

This sidelining of the collective political debate links to the second key component of the still existing neoliberal nature of environmental rhetoric and action, the one centred on individual practices, embracing actions and perceptions of responsibility. To fully engage in this second part, we need to draw some of the lines that connect neoliberalism as an economic system to neoliberalism as an ideology able to shape people’s relationship with the political realm.

Once the end of history became a conceivable idea and the “unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism”⁵⁶ was proclaimed, the Berlin Wall fell, employment in industries shrank, and globalisation and global capitalism came to be regarded as natural as the seasons⁵⁷. The wars of the twentieth century were coming to an end, and military operations became undertakings carried out only by those who voluntarily enlisted and by the technocratic élites who directed them, racism was increasingly addressed through legal processes, as in South Africa⁵⁸, and the political and economic climate seemed to promise peace and prosperity even in the absence of sustained political engagement. The perpetual modulation (up or down) of salaries⁵⁹ and the life in a competitive market pushed individuals to concentrate on the overcoming of their personal crises of the moment (economic, financial, urban, environmental) through hard work, attention to detail⁶⁰, the acquisition of new skills and the improvement of their human capital (“remunerative university studies, creation of individual savings for retirement, purchase of one’s home, long-term investment in stock-market equities”⁶¹). This individu-

⁵⁵ Büscher, “Nature on the Move I,” 203.

⁵⁶ Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” 3.

⁵⁷ Jäger, *Iperpolitica*, 26, 10.

⁵⁸ Jäger, *Iperpolitica*, 11-15,

⁵⁹ Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” 5.

⁶⁰ Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, 176.

⁶¹ Dardot, Laval, *The New Way of the World*, 177.

alized over-responsibilisation of people came with identities that were no longer rooted in affiliation with parties and trade unions but rather in consumer choices – “whether sexual, culinary or economic”⁶² and privatised public life revolved around healthy diets, petitions against animal abuse and support for drug addicts.⁶³ In this “ownership society,”⁶⁴ responsibility towards oneself and one’s family and the very identity of each person rested on the value of the products that one can buy. There is no collective solidarity left, no political action possible: only individuals engaged in the market with a competitive logic⁶⁵. *Vis à vis* this private vision of life, there is no time for a collective action or for the interactions with other individuals, there is time only to start a new apprenticeship or training course⁶⁶. Mass consumption, parties, recreational drugs, offer more compelling answers than “boring” politicians in whom people do not recognize themselves⁶⁷ and democracy comes to be treated as something unchangeable and taken for granted – something that could be politely ignored, along with the collective responsibilities it entailed⁶⁸. Western countries “quietly enter[ed] a private utopia” of a post-political era, one that drew a clear boundary between the public and political spheres on the one hand and the private sphere on the other⁶⁹. With the exception of feminist scholars and activists – who continued to argue that the private was political and vice versa – Western populations largely refused to view the two realms as intrinsically interconnected and withdrew from the public sphere to devote themselves to their private lives. People “retreat[ed] from politics”⁷⁰ to devote themselves to shopping, yoga, health and wellbeing and beauty products.

The arrival of the 2008 world financial crisis exacerbated the political crisis which had seen the crunch of political parties, the pulverisation of society, and the dominance of global financial markets⁷¹. Parties – all somehow responsible for the rise of unregulated global finance that led

⁶² Jäger, *Iperpolitica*, 37.

⁶³ Jäger, *Iperpolitica*, 39; see also Beck, Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization*: “The human being becomes [...] a choice among possibilities, *homo optionis*. Life, death, gender, corporeality, identity, religion, marriage, parenthood, social ties – all are becoming decidable down to the small print.”

⁶⁴ Esposito, Moini, “Fare un passo di lato per farne due avanti,” 65-66 retrieve the expression “ownership society” from the inaugural address of George W. Bush’s second term.

⁶⁵ Dardot, Laval, *The New Way of the World*, 209.

⁶⁶ Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” 7.

⁶⁷ Jäger, *Iperpolitica*, 27.

⁶⁸ Jäger, *Iperpolitica*, 34-36.

⁶⁹ Jäger, *Iperpolitica*, 11.

⁷⁰ Bauman, “Identity in the Globalising World,” 127.

⁷¹ Revelli, *The New Populism*, 11.

to the crisis⁷² – tried to rebuild support and a political platform broadening the electoral base by fishing for voters who were disenchanted with politics, uninterested, and immersed in the digital world. The resulting “mood” was that of populism, both “as context” and “as project”⁷³.

As is widely acknowledged, this post-political period still persists; however, it has developed a distinct and additional set of features. Reshuffling the cards of the separation between public and private, while not responding to the demands of feminist scholars and activists, nor rediscovering politics as an integral part of identity (as old mass parties demanded), the slogan “the political is personal” twisted into “the political is nothing but personal”⁷⁴. *Vis à vis* a market that encourages atomisation with products increasingly tailored to individual consumers that can be enjoyed alone – podcasts, gyms, porn – and *vis à vis* the dismantling of the welfare state, civic engagement is now a private affair: participating in the local church activities, volunteering, and doing civil service (strategies that also uplift human capitals and CVs⁷⁵). Politics has hence invaded everything, but not in the ways of the politics of the early 20th century, which required passion, concentration and perseverance. This *hyperpolitics*, as Jäger calls it, is a “politisisation without politics”⁷⁶, a low-cost politics, like consumeristic identity is:⁷⁷ superficial, erratic, short-lived⁷⁸. This pattern echoes the speed of today’s society, which demands constant change and progress: marriages, jobs, and friendships exist in a precarious and fast-paced world, while development plans become short-term and politicians are required to deliver results within very tight deadlines. Long gone are the days of five-year plans or long-term planning in national politics. Politics that feed on tweets needs to provide answers here and now and produce immediate results⁷⁹. Social media is nowadays full of simplified political content ranging from veganism and the fight against climate change to re-emigration and anti-vaccination, from me-too movements to the pillorying of accused but not yet convicted individuals. Just as we consume increasingly short videos on social media, political participation is more pluralistic but also more superficial. Political actions take the form of flash

⁷² Crouch, “Post-democracy and Populism,” 129.

⁷³ Revelli, *The New Populism*, 11.

⁷⁴ Jäger, *Iperpolitica*, 116.

⁷⁵ Jäger, *Iperpolitica*, 56-61.

⁷⁶ As the Italian version of his book’s subtitle goes.

⁷⁷ As Lasch underlines, the open-ended, experimental conception of the good life upheld by the propaganda of commodities that surrounds the consumer with images of unlimited possibilities, makes also the choices of friends, lovers, and careers all potentially subject to abrupt cancellation (*The Minimal Self*, 38).

⁷⁸ Jäger, *Iperpolitica*, 20.

⁷⁹ Jäger, *Iperpolitica*, 24.

mobs, NGOs, Facebook profile pictures, short-term boycotts, influencers, movements, and even companies and polling firms that provide more agile and less demanding alternatives to political parties⁸⁰ – now seen as stale and slow dinosaurs. While this shallow politicisation of social media reigns supreme, a great part of Western political activism concretises in participating in demonstrations, changing profile pictures, and posting videos, but is not accompanied by membership in political parties or trade unions⁸¹. The resurgence of what looks like re-politicised practices mostly did not go through resocialisation and institutionalisation, so creating a shallow hyperpolitics dictated by personal values, guided by a very strong moralisation of political issues (as if they were, in fact, personal and not collective) and rooted in a profound “inability to think through collective dimensions of struggle”⁸². The neoliberal order, in fact, still reigns, and any movement within it is made consistent with capitalism itself: nothing escapes its clutches, as exemplified by T-shirts of popular brands with the word “Rebel” written on them.

This transformation of political participation and subjectivity remains entrenched in the post-political frame but acquires some specific features⁸³ which are most evident in part of the practice of Western environmental activism. Here, market-tailored individual action has become the default, common-sense response to systemic crises. And so, a segment of environmental activism manifests in statements such as: *I’m very concerned about climate change. I’m going to buy a new electric car or to download an app to track my personal carbon footprint on my smartphone.*

*I only buy organic cotton clothing and zero-kilometre products, and I always use a reusable water bottle. I’m a vegetarian, so I eat tofu and drink soy milk (though I own a dog in town, smoke, and drink alcohol).*⁸⁴

As Saito writes, stoned by the sustainable development rhetoric – new “opium of the masses” – people buy their indulgences by acting and thinking green: “buying eco bags and bottles without changing anything about the economic system [so masking] the systemic problem and reduce[ing] everything to the responsibility of the individual, while obscuring the responsibility of corporations and politicians”⁸⁵. This rhetoric encourages

⁸⁰ Jäger, *Iperpolitica*, 30-42.

⁸¹ Jäger, *Iperpolitica*, 45.

⁸² Jäger, *Iperpolitica*, 65, 144.

⁸³ Taşkale, “Still Post-Political,” 3.

⁸⁴ See Goldwert et al., “Climate Action Literacy Interventions Increase Commitments to More Effective Mitigation Behaviors.” See also: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/apr/10/pet-dogs-have-extensive-and-multifarious-impact-on-environment-new-research-finds>.

⁸⁵ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*; see also Saito, *Slow Down*, xiii; Saito, “Interview in A New Way of Life.”

the over-responsibilisation of citizens and directs them towards individualist forms of action⁸⁶. While they are accused of not being radically green enough (*turn vegan, do not use honey, do not fly, etc.*), they are welcomed into an economic system that creates the products that appear to feed their souls, providing them with the *ethical* and *personal* solution to their sense of guilt. If they make the *right* purchase, they are *green* citizens. If they do not choose the *green* product to consume, they demonstrate that their ethical positions are not the *correct* ones, and they are called responsible for the state of the planet.

The lack of long-term and deeply entrenched relationships with political parties, the volatile voting decisions that can be changed with the same speed as a Facebook profile picture, lead citizens to the conclusion that no political party is *green enough* for their vote, and hence they are justified not to join any party nor vote for one. Political parties that reach enough consensus to become part of Parliaments are unlikely to take positions that are as pure as environmental ethics theories demand. Hence, the over-responsible green citizens will rather refrain from engaging in more classic political action, believing their consumption already speaks enough for their greenness. So, the *green* citizens will not be willing to vote and will retreat to their private lives of *green* products that satisfy their hungry souls much more than voting for a party or another.

These practices fit within the highly personal nature of contemporary political engagement – this hyperpolitics scenario – and with the internalized normalisation of market logic. More fundamentally, these examples reveal how these hyperpolitical practices appear critically blind to how class position structures the very possibility of behavioural change. The Berlin vegetarian student who bemoans the difficulty of shopping at organic markets while receiving unemployment subsidies (subsidies which, crucially, enable her family's life in the city, her kid's schooling, and her university attendance) – reveals a profound misapprehension of material constraints that were once foundational to progressive political consciousness. This failure to recognise class as a structuring condition, and the consequent inability to forge a durable, cross-class collective movement for environmental justice, demonstrates how the individualistic focus dominant in Western societies remains perfectly congruent with the neoliberal order, however much that order may now be in crisis.

While the middle class focuses on selecting products that signal or cultivate a green identity, the poorer classes of society possess neither the time nor the resources for such considerations. If confronted with the

⁸⁶ Not to mention that they may even cause more harm than good at times (Saito, *Slow Down*, xiii).

issue, they are likely to deny the very existence of a problem they cannot afford to confront – a problem eclipsed by their immediate and intensifying struggle to secure a decent life or concealed under an ad hoc “alternative reality” manufactured by post-truth politicians⁸⁷. The rich, instead – as in the dystopian future imagined in *Elysium* – abandon the very recognition of a community of reference, understanding that “if they wanted to survive in comfort, they had to stop pretending, even in their dreams, to share the earth with the rest of the world”⁸⁸. The discussion on the upcoming environmental collapse reinforces the individualist myth among those who have the luxury of thinking of themselves as not Earthlings. Whether inspired by “400-odd pages of near-hysterical orotundity” of *The Sovereign Individual: How to Survive and Thrive During the Collapse of the Welfare State*⁸⁹ or by the IPCC most extreme predictions, the small class of super-rich subtracts itself from the imminent apocalypse, imagining futures on Mars (or more realistically in New Zealand).⁹⁰ “Narrow elites project into space (to Mars, to be clear) their desire to secede from a world rendered increasingly uninhabitable by war, poverty, and the climate crisis”⁹¹. This subtraction allows them to claim that they do not need to worry about sustainability or ecological transitions (unless they are economically beneficial): they can continue to “maintain their heedlessly luxurious lifestyle”⁹² and to fuel the exploitation of Earth’s resources, and accept the consequences of such actions because “there will be lifeboats for the rich and privileged”⁹³.

5. Sinking ships

We have so far explored just a few examples of the discourses and practices that are taking place – neoliberal conservation strategies and (a section of) neoliberal activism. Both demonstrate how Western societies are still entrenched in the neoliberal order and use its own instruments – those same ones that have led to talk about the change of the name of the current geological epoch – as a palliative to deal with the challenges our relationship with the environment faces.

⁸⁷ Latour, *Down to Earth*, chp. 5

⁸⁸ Latour, *Down to Earth*, chp. 5

⁸⁹ Written by James Dale Davidson and William Rees-Mogg in 1997.

⁹⁰ See <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/feb/15/why-silicon-valley-billionaires-are-prepping-for-the-apocalypse-in-new-zealand>.

⁹¹ Chignola, Mezzadra, “Neoliberalismo: che cosa c’è in un nome?”

⁹² Saito, *Slow Down*, xv.

⁹³ Malm, Hornborg, “The Geology of Mankind?,” 67.

Environmental challenges are reduced to a sphere of action characterised by market-tailored conservation projects and the crafting of green consumer identities – a focus that perfectly fits the neoliberal framework while subtracting environmental issues from the political arena of collective debates, obscuring the material constraints of class. The result is a profound misunderstanding where these actions reveal a blindness to the structural inequalities that once animated progressive thought – now far too concerned with shaping individual and institutional actions within the logic of markets.⁹⁴ This individualistic focus leaves society fragmented: while some curate a green conscience through consumption, poorer strata are denied even the luxury of such concern, forced to disregard or negate a crisis eclipsed by the immediate struggle for a decent life. Against this, the much-discussed Anthropocene thesis of a universally shared vulnerability rings hollow,⁹⁵ but the truth rests in a grimmer middle ground: there will be lifeboats for the rich and privileged, but they are doomed to sink anyway – just a little later.

This only partially segregated fate underscores the need to move beyond both the neoliberal marketisation and the personalisation of politics – and, with them, beyond the very categories through which we still think the environmental question. Looking from a greater distance, this new form of hyperpoliticisation shows the very limits of our modern and post-modern categories. While it cannot be considered a return to a classic political engagement of citizens of the so-called West, it cannot be ignored as a form of participation in collective matters – though as individuals rather than collective beings. On the other side, the financial and market-based governance of nature today occurs with the approval of a good section of the conservation scientists' picture, so making it harder to distinguish between those engaged in conservation and those engaged in the exploitation of nature. As drawing binary lines becomes more and more challenging – not only within the environmental discourse but across the whole spectrum of political matters – the search for new categories and frameworks may only proceed, with the hope of providing some useful instruments for reaction to the challenges of the present and the future.

⁹⁴ Saito's example of the "Netherlands Fallacy" clearly shows the class struggles in its global form: the North-South divide. While this North European country looks and feels much greener than many countries of the Global South thanks to the implementation of many environmental policies and laws, it still does place a much heavier burden on the Earth (Saito, *Slow Down*, 15).

⁹⁵ See Malm, Hornborg, "The Geology of Mankind?," 67, according to whom the Anthropocene makes the whole of humanity equally vulnerable, such that "unlike in the crises of capitalism, there are no lifeboats here for the rich and the privileged."

What we can now say is that while Fukuyama's prediction of the end of history proved wrong, it was less of a long shot to imagine a today dominated by "economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands"⁹⁶.

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⁹⁶ Fukuyama, "The End of History?," 18.

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