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Sceptical Optimism? Dealing with the Problems of Our Time
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Editorial

Sceptical Optimism? Dealing with the Problems of Our Time

Following the launch of the first edition of the Online Journal ETHICS, ECONOMICS, LAW AND POLITICS *Online journal for interdisciplinary discussions on current societal issues* in 2022, in the present issue of 2023, we primarily offer students of the MA study programme Ethics - Economics, Law and Politics (MA EELP) at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum the opportunity to publish selected pertinent.

We seem to live in dark times. War and conflict are evolving, in more and more countries democracy is threatened or autocracies are gaining ground. Environmental problems abound and the prospects of solving the looming climate crisis seem to be meager. On the other hand, there were remarkable improvements during the preceding decades in increasing the global food supply, shielding people from extreme weather events and in tackling child mortality, to name only a few achievements here. Thus, while there are many reasons for being pessimistic, there is at the same time ample ground for optimism. What is needed seems to be a combination of blunt analysis and both realistic and ambitious problem solving.

Maybe something like sceptical optimism is needed. This may seem contradictory. However, it is only contradictory if scepticism is merely understood as doubt and not as critical questioning. The question of whether sceptical optimism or a routine of despair is the appropriate way to react to supposed or justified imbalances in today's societies forms the basis for the discussion in this issue. This discussion is reflected in the essays by Antonio Scarpino, Fabian Vogt, and Dimitrios Oikonomou. Three optimistic perspectives are presented in very different approaches.

Taking up a dictum of Gramsci, in his essay *Pessimism of the Intellect and Optimism of the Will – A Confident Perspective on the Future* "Antonio Scarpino wants "to verify whether there are reasons for a cautious optimism concerning the future." Based on a critical reflection of uncontrolled economic growth and extreme consumer behaviour in times of polycrisis, he argues both for an intellectual questioning of wrong decisions and misconduct and for the conviction that it is possible to change flawed systems through the power of optimistic will.

In his essay *Effective Altruism to Help Others – and Yourself*, Fabian Vogt attempts to show that effective altruism shows a perspective for remaining optimistic despite all crises. However, according to Vogt, two factors are crucial for this: "action and visible progress".

The title *The Need for a New Enlightenment*, enunciates the basic claim of Dimitrios Oikonomou essay, in which he explores the following questions: "how we are supposed to collectively and individually react to an uncertain future accompanied by the promise of a looming catastrophe? Are we allowed to espouse a sceptical optimism or are we doomed to keep going through the desperation routine?"

The published essays were written as part of the 2023 essay competition of the *Friends and Supporters of Economic and Climate Ethics,* a non-profit organization associated with the MA EELP. The latter promotes economic and climate ethics by fostering the research and teaching in these fields.

The three essays are followed by Shumaila H. Shahani's article "Data Monopolization by the Tech Industry: Implications for Democracy". Based on her central thesis "that the un-regulated accumulation of data by the tech industry has led to the consolidation of power among a select few, resulting in the erosion of democratic principles" she first explains the data-driven business model of digital platforms providing. She then explains the risks involved in uncontrolled data collection and in data misuse and highlights threats to democracy and national security concerns.

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Pessimism of the Intellect and Optimism of the Will
A Confident Perspective on the Future

Antonio Scarpino (Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany)

This essay revolves around a simple intention: to verify whether there are reasons for a cautious optimism concerning the future. The answer to this question is less straightforward than it seems: it might very well be, as the Italian author Pier Paolo Pasolini once said that "great pessimism always implies great optimism" (Città Pasolini 2023); or, as instead the American linguist and activist Noam Chomsky stated, we might be faced by "[t]wo choices. We can be pessimistic, give up and help ensure that the worst will happen. Or we can be optimistic, grasp the opportunities that surely exist and maybe help make the world a better place." (Chomsky & Polychroniou 2017). If the second scenario happens to hold, we do not really have much of a choice. For sure, there is no univocal answer to this question, yet making sure that we know all the facts inherent to the present is crucial for providing an answer as plausible as possible.

An analysis is not easy to conduct since we find ourselves at a historical moment which can perhaps be best described with the term "polycrisis". The concept could be defined as "a cluster of related global risks with compounding effects, such that the overall impact exceeds the sum of each part" (Tooze 2022). Despite its appeal, it does not stand for much more than a descriptive framework: it simply points out to the fact that the crises we are facing at present are somehow intertwined and reinforcing each other. More than a comprehensive theory, it is an observation of reality – useful, sure, yet not much illuminating.

What is more interesting for the purpose of this paper are the reasons behind said "polycrisis". Only a deep understanding of the various crises and of their common breeding ground, in fact, can bring about a criterion of behaviour and moral action. Even the more so since the words "crisis" and "criterion" share the same etymological root: namely, the Greek verb "κρίνω", which can be translated into "to choose, decide". We will start this discussion by looking at the above-mentioned crises, the most important being:

- the Russo-Ukrainian and the Israel–Hamas conflicts, to be seen in relation to increased military spending on the side of governments all over the world (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 2022).
- the COVID-19 pandemic and its continued effects on global health and economic output. Rapid and unregulated urbanisation, lack of medical personnel and of cooperation have exacerbated the crisis. (African Union 2022).
- The ecological and climate crises, further aggravated by the uninterrupted state subsidisation of the fossil fuel industry and by the complete absence of efforts to move our economies towards a more rational usage of natural resources.

In my opinion, there is a clear interrelation between all these phenomena, a clear red line connecting all of the above. However, this connection, certainly stemming from issues of the economic type, is systematically ignored by experts and academics of the field. Why is this the case? To get an answer, a deep dive into the economic dogmas of our time is quintessential.

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Modern economic sciences embody an operational working, rejecting transcendence but pretending at the same time to be evangelical. Transcendence is here meant as a "seeking" for (moral) principles that then guide actions, while evangelicalism is here intended as embracing a metaphysical framework to impose certain beliefs and make them look "common sense". The first aspect can be seen when there is talk of the "invisible hand", the fact that leaving markets unbridled is always the best thing to do because they have never failed at bringing about the optimal result. In such definitions, there is no longing for the abolition of poverty, food insecurity, health issues, etc. The second facet is evident when we talk, for example, about the non-accelerating inflation rate of unemployment, GDP-debt thresholds or about the inescapability of "conspicuous consumption" in a well-functioning economy, something that Thorstein Veblen theorised and which is even more true during a time in which GDP growth seems to be the ultimate objective of perhaps all national governments on this planet (Philips, no date).

The management of the relationship between economic activities and the environment will constitute the cornerstone of my discussion. In the past, the *market* was intended as something small, low scale, in which humans would come together to exchange goods and services they needed for survival. In the passing of time, it became something all-encompassing, seeking to monetise every aspect of human existence at an exponential scale (O´Neill 2017). The fact of the matter is that we have reached a point in which economic activities are so extensive and intensive that it is putting the survival of the same species who planned and built them at risk.

"Growth", however, cannot be aprioristically dismissed as something negative: the growth of renewable energies constitutes arguably a positive fact as does growth of budgets in schooling or in public health. In our societies, this is clearly not the case: one aspect to be pointed out, for instance, is that 60% of World GDP is made up by pure and simple private consumption (Our World in Data 2023). Consumption and a consumeristic lifestyle represent the main driver of economic activities worldwide, but the side effects are extreme wastefulness on one hand and brutal (human *and* natural) exploitation on the other.

Consumerism can be effectively defined as an ideology, that is, a system of thought structuring the way we see the world, impacting our social behaviour in a considerable way. Even though it is not often recognised as such, Consumerism has nothing to envy to other "systems of thoughts" and did not arise from nothing. It can be said to be the Son of an "Unholy Trinity" in which Capitalism is the Father and Neoliberalism is the Unholy Spirit, as the well-known author George Monbiot once put it, using a powerful metaphor (Montague & Monbiot 2020).

Illustrating the purpose of Consumerism as an ideology, one suitable description could be the expansion of demand (and production) for mostly superfluous goods, to be sparked through aggressive advertising and "created needs." This practically entails growth in both the vertical and the horizontal sense: the range and the quantity of products (and resources) used both increase at the same time. Given that it is difficult to think of an economy that does not operate in such a way, we can also affirm that Consumerism is a dominant and global ideology, and it is here to stay.

In addition to this, it is intensifying and broadening its society-shaping capacity. This fact is deeply worrying according to a scientific study, the maximum sensible level of consumption

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for a sustainable future life on Earth is 50 billion tons of generic consumption units every year; that would guarantee all people on this planet a lifestyle comparable to the one in 1960s Switzerland – a healthy and well-off one after all. Instead, we consume 80 billion tons of units every year. By the year 2050 and continuing not to tackle the problem of excessive consumption, it is forecasted that we will be consuming 180 billion tons of units every single year. Looking at this data, it is not difficult to see how in the long run Consumerism will lead us towards self-destruction (Hickel 2020).

Despite this simple observation, most economic experts insist in not seeing other ways of economic development which do not prescribe economic growth, mainly driven again by private consumption. Some have even advanced the idea that separating economic growth from carbon emissions will be enough. In fact, there seems to be a widespread belief that economic growth automatically leads to sustainability, because better production technologies reduce energy and resource intensity. In other words, the hope for the future is that more goods will be produced (economic growth) but using at the same time much less resources (less resource intensity). This phenomenon is also referred to as economic "decoupling," but, despite many governmental efforts, most notably in South Korea, it has not been observed anywhere yet. This might be explained by the fact that the price for the products themselves decreases exactly because less resources are needed per unit and consumption usually rises as a result, displacing benefits. In the future, everything will come down to whether resource intensity will decrease faster than the increase rates of consumption, but the signs of this happening are not there. As a policymaker, it would be a waste of time to put so much hope into this happening (Our Changing Climate 2020).

Even massive investments in the "green" sector may result only in a slowdown of environmental damages, as CO_2 emissions could still potentially rise in absolute terms: according to the study of consumption units, aggressive "decoupling" measures (i.e., sudden imposition of strong carbon taxes, pollution fines, and all the other market-friendly measures a government can decide to adopt) will result in ca. 130 billion tons of generic consumption units in the year 2050 (EEB 2019). That is by far not enough: thus, economic growth through conspicuous consumption should not be pursued, but it should be actively avoided, if we want to retain some hopes for a sustainable future. It is better to look for solutions elsewhere entirely, that is for alternative ways of organising our economies without the limitless pursuit of growth.

So far, there are absolutely no signals of a radical shift in the terms of the debate. There is much talk, instead, of "green capitalism", "the greening of modernity", sometimes even coming from renowned voices within the realm of our public debate. Former German sociologist Ulrich Beck was, for instance, a strong believer when it came such propositions (Beck 2009, 34). As it was already mentioned, there is no scientific evidence for "templates for an economy that radically shrinks the world's carbon footprint without also shrinking our quality of life" (O'Brien 2023) and for decoupling of emissions from economic growth.

There continues to be no mainstream economist, at least to my knowledge, that would support a radical shift in the way our societies operate. In the best of cases, there are only ones supporting incremental changes or favouring a transition towards more social-democratic societies, meaning higher tax rates for the rich, more legal regulation, enforce-

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ment of competition, etc. The basics of the capitalistic economy as it is set up today, in particular the profit motive and our access to a consumeristic lifestyle, instead, are never seriously questioned, even if it emerges ever more clearly that a far-reaching overhaul of socio-economic arrangements is what is needed. Why is this the case?

This has clearly something to do with the current cultural climate, whose evolution stays firmly in the hands of the elites. The implication here is that there is cultural, moral, economic, and ideological leadership of a group over subaltern groups. This is *hegemony* in the truest Gramscian sense, that is the linking chain between the structure (the socio-economic arrangements) and the super-structure (the ideas in circulation, the beliefs, the discussion spaces and modalities, the socio-cultural arrangements) of a particular society (Scholar Blogs, no date).

By definition, hegemony comprises the whole worldview and the entirety of beliefs that the dominant classes have imposed on the subordinates and that subordinates have willingly, if not at times enthusiastically, accepted. In a certain sense, the word "hegemony" can be translated into modern-day "common sense". The education system, the media environment around us and our (virtual or real) social networks are those means through which the dominant class imposes a certain hegemony on all of us, intentionally or unintentionally.

In such a situation, not a revolution of the material circumstances of society is so much required (even if it would certainly be helpful), but rather a revolution of the hearts and souls: the simple yet effective conviction that the seeking for ever-increasing profits and a consumeristic lifestyle are and will never constitute at the centrepiece of a fulfilled existence needs to be the starting base for such a revolution. "Pessimism of the intellect" and, thus, an intellectual realisation, as Gramsci wrote, is the antidote for detecting the lies and the deceits that are imposed upon us on an almost constant base, by the myriad of commercials, advertisements, and all the other propaganda tools of Consumerism.

The question remains: how should we approach the future? How should we act in presence of the awesome challenges we face? To me, what the renowned English historian Eric Hobsbawm has said at the end of his *Age of Extremes* (1994) remains crucial to be understood:

> We live in a world captured, uprooted, and transformed by the titanic economic and techno-scientific process of the development of capitalism […]. We know, or at least it is reasonable to suppose that it cannot go on ad infinitum. The future cannot be a continuation of the past, and there are signs, both externally, and, as it were, internally, that we have reached a point of historic crisis. The forces generated by the techno-scientific economy are now great enough to destroy the environment, that is to say, the material foundations of human life. […] Our world risks both explosion and implosion. It must change. […] If humanity is to have a recognizable future, it cannot be by prolonging the past or the present. If we try to build the third millennium on that basis, we shall fail. And the price of failure, that is to say, the alternative to a changed society, is darkness (Hobsbawm 1994, 584–585).

Our objective here is pure and simple survival! The fact that the "forces generated by the techno-scientific economy" have proven that they are now great enough to destroy the environment is certainly true and, for more evidence on this, it suffices to look around. Ultimately, however, these same forces are created and developed by us and are, therefore, under our exclusive control. Whether they serve the purpose of devouring everything for the sake of

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growth at all costs or not really represents a free choice on our side. As Zygmunt Bauman once wrote:

> [T]he most fearsome of disasters are those traceable to the past or present pursuits of rational solutions. Catastrophes most horrid are born – or are likely to be born – out of the war against catastrophes. [...] Dangers grow with our powers, and the one power we miss most is that which divines their arrival and sizes up their volume.

But that's only because:

> In our society, risk fighting can be nothing else but business [...]. The politics of fear lubricates the wheels of consumerism and helps to 'keep the economy growing' and steers it away from the 'bane of recession'. Ever more resources are to be consumed in order to repair the gruesome effects of yesterday's resource consumption. Individual fears beefed up by the exposure of yesterday's risks are deployed in the service of collective production of the unknown risks of tomorrow… (Bauman as cited in Beck 2009, 114).

Only through to the "optimism of the will", we have the ability and power to change the purpose that these forces serve and that is my main personal source of hope. I sincerely hope that it could be Yours too.

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Effective Altruism to Help Others – and Yourself

Fabian Vogt (Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany)

"For myself, I am an optimist - it does not seem to be much use to anything else" (Churchill 1954, 195). Winston Churchill's quote is a practical advice. And it makes sense. Optimists tend to live a healthier life, are more likely to reach their goals and are happier (Conversano et al., 2010). Yet, we are constantly bombarded with horrible news. Burning forests in Canada, Russian attack on Ukraine, high inflation, and a struggling economy in Europe - just to name a few. In a world of poly-crisis, it is hard to stay optimistic. I think two aspects are essential. *Action* and *visible progress*.

Foggy view ahead

Visible progress consists quite intuitively of two parts. First, our visibility is blurred. I don't want to get into a detailed analysis of the media's role, nor do I want to blame anyone for anything. Nevertheless, it is apparent that we are supplied with way more negative news than positive ones. This can have several reasons. One is that our attention is drawn more to negativity, so we tend to consume more negative news. Shows, articles or social media posts get more views, reads, or likes when they satisfy our bias. Now a vicious cycle starts, where we overlook positive reports. This is the negativity instinct. More instincts cloud our understanding of data and statistics. There is a single-perspective instinct, a gap instinct, a generalisation instinct, and more (Rosling 2018). It is beyond the scope of this essay to name and explain all. For now, it is only important that they exist and that they make it harder for us to understand trends. I will show the magnitude in the next paragraph. Those are the insights from the Swedish public health professor and statistician Hans Rosling, who became famous for his effort to educate the public about our flawed understanding of data and trends in development issues.

Start looking for someone playing the guitar

The second part of *visible progress* leads to the question: Is there even progress? Hans Rosling shows strikingly that the world is getting better, while still being very far from ideal. Over the years he polled the opinion of people from diverse backgrounds and a stunning majority (~80%) is convinced that the world is getting worse. He asked the participators questions about[1] the status quo of our world. What is the life expectancy of the world today? How many of the world's 1-year-old children today have been vaccinated against at least some disease? How many girls (in %) finish primary school in low-income countries? And more. All of these questions have the same design. Three answer options; one pessimistic, one neutral/ stagnation, and one more optimistic. E.g.: According to the United Nations in the last 20 years, the proportion of the world population living in extreme poverty has

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[1] All the examples and data in the subsequent paragraph are borrowed from Hans Rosling's book 'Factfulness' (2018). He himself is meticulous in selecting reliable sources to prove his point. They include UN, WHO, World Bank, CDC, Our World in Data, …

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A: almost doubled;

B: remained more or less the same;

C: almost halved.

In all cases, the best answer is the correct one. Yet, the lion's share of people chooses the worst outcome - in every question. We are not only wrong about the world, which then could simply be explained by ignorance, but we are significantly drawn to the worst answer. Then the conclusion has to be that we are misinformed about the world. It doesn't matter if the people in the survey were rich or poor, high formal education or not, young or old. All groups, all around the world scored similarly bad. How to measure if the world is getting better is a daring endeavour. Poverty line, GDP, life expectancy, etc., all have a tail of critique on their own. On a quite simplistic view: It is not about a bigger pile of cash or more time in our life, but the ultimate goal of development rather is to have the ability to do what you want. Hans Rosling shows numerous examples of positive progress from a variety of fields. Someone practising the guitar is experiencing that happiness and freedom of the ability to do what he or she wants to do. So guitars per capita can be one good proxy. In 1962 there were 200 guitars per 1 million people, in 2014 the number rose to 11.000. Another example is that the price of solar panels is today 1/100th of the 1976's price. It is now cheaper than the wildest estimates have ever been. The share of people having access to a secure water source climbed to 88%, coming from 58% in 1980. Starting in 1970 the share of undernourished people was cut in half, while at the same time, the absolute world population more than doubled. We have more national parks, more new movies per year, the highest literacy among adults, and more cancer survivalists than ever before in history (Factfulness 2018). Yet, it is important to make clear again, that things can get better, while still being bad or at least not good enough. Horrible and unacceptable things happen around the world all the time. But a desperate worldview that everything is getting worse all the time is not only counterproductive but also simply wrong. The point I am trying to make here is, there is much more positive progress than we are aware of in our daily lives.

Active and passive action

Now to the second aspect to stay or become more optimistic. *Action* is necessary against the helplessness we probably all feel. After all, I am just one person, how am I supposed to put out the fire in a Canadian forest, stop a war, and revive the economy? A first step is to accept you won't. At least not on your own. And not immediately. Some time ago I had the chance to join a project aiming at UN's 2nd sustainability goal 'Zero Hunger' in Morocco. Our work included preparing and distributing food and drinks among refugees and the homeless. Although my impact was minimal and my knowledge about how to handle these matters foolish, people were grateful. I learned that they started a few years ago with little resources and supporters but grew and were able to offer their assistance now in several places in Rabat. To see directly that projects like that expand makes you believe in positive change.

One form of action that may also make improvements visible for us and hence combines visible progress and action, is *effective altruism* (EA). In his seminal paper 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality' Peter Singer makes the point of moral obligation towards those in need. In short,

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his notorious child in the pond analogy goes like this: If I see a child drowning in a pond, I ought to save it. Even if it will ruin my new shoes. The material value of the shoes is not even close regarding moral relevance compared to a child's life saved. It does not make any difference if that pond is in my neighbourhood, an alien city, or on the other side of the globe. Also, it would not change anything about my moral obligation to act, if there are already several people around the pond, who are capable of saving the child but do not respond. Distance and the behaviour of others do not make a morally significant difference (Singer 1972). What matters is the following: Can we prevent suffering without having to sacrifice something of comparable moral significance? In 2019 an estimated 5 million children died from mostly preventable and treatable causes (Again, a horrible number, but steadily declining). That's more than 13,000 children a day (UNICEF 2020). Many of those are preventable because they are related to absolute poverty which is "a condition of life so characterised by malnutrition, illiteracy, disease, squalid surroundings, high infant mortality and low life expectancy as to be beneath any reasonable definition of human decency" (Singer 2016, 219). Poverty and global income inequality are complex problems to solve. But there are examples where aid and charities have a tremendous impact. The easiest example is immunisation. Each year more than 200 million people become infected with Malaria, which ends for around 600,000 deadly (Malaria Consortium 2022). Children are particularly vulnerable and account for the majority of deaths (Singer 2019). To provide seasonal preventive medicine costs around $7 per child and is an effective measure to prevent deaths and alleviate damage in non-fatal cases. As of 2017 15.7 million children were protected in 12 different sub-Saharan countries through SMC programs. Potentially 14-16 million more children in that area could be reached if more funding is secured.[2]

Singer is convinced many more people could give money to charities instead of unnecessary consumption. Related to the term absolute poverty, there is also absolute affluence, to have income way above a level that fulfils basic needs. How often do we buy things we don't really need and don't even give us substantial pleasure? Originally, Singer argued that we ought to give away all excess money we spend on luxuries instead of only for more basic needs. His example that the purpose of clothing is only to keep you warm instead of also looking well-dressed shows how demanding the principle is. Singer recognises that by now and meanwhile also promotes a recommendation to give away 10% of your income to charitable causes. Ideally, the donated money should be used in a way where it does the best and some charities, organisations, or causes are more effective than others. This makes the *effective* part of *effective altruism*. The previously mentioned SMC program is one great example of many. Even small amounts of money can have a formidable impact.

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[2] Seasonal malaria chemoprevention (SMC) medicine is given four times during each Malaria season and reduces ~75% of all malaria episodes and ~75% of severe cases. The SMC tablets easily dissolve in water. Children who are protected by SMC will help the whole community by reducing the transmission pool. (Malaria Consortium 2022, GiveWell, no date)

Objections

Now I would also like to briefly address some objections. *EA is said to be élitist*. Only individuals with a lot of money can donate. Yes, exactly that is the point. People who can give, ought to give, others don't. An alternative to donating money may be to donate your time and help at a charity. Also, like I said before the originally very demanding principle can be softened (not all your excess resources, but some). True, then the principle is less sound, but at least it is "a way [...] in which theory and practice, if not yet in harmony, are at least coming together." (Singer 1972, 243).

EA is a way that perpetuates an ill system. I'd say, that helping others is the right thing to do in every system, and there is no guarantee for a system change or system fix (nevertheless worth working towards it and that can be done along EA). Of course, aid can be designed in a bad way, for instance, if second-hand clothing is donated to developing countries and conse-quently destroys the local textile industry and leads to more unemployment. It is crucial to make informed and rational decisions.

EA is undemocratic. I tend to agree. Affluent givers can decide on their own which causes they support and which they don't. But since foreign aid payments are not a priority for gov-ernments (in Germany 0.76% of GDP in 2017) (BMZ 2023) and it turns out to be difficult to advocate for more, an easier way is to start individually while campaigning for more conjointly decisions about how much to give and whom.

Charities are ineffective. This can be true; some NGOs are more effective than others and it requires some research to find the better ones. Additionally, charities probably won't fix a failed[3] state, a broken system, or miraculously deliver economic prosperity. But at other ob-jectives, they can be very effective. Disease prevention, disaster relief, and education are splendid examples. To slightly modify Kofi Annan's quote about the purpose of the UN: The objective of NGOs is not to take people to heaven but to prevent humanity from going to hell.[4] EA asks us to sacrifice some of the benefits of a consumer society to support NGOs to help others. Which may help yourself to see more positive progress and to contribute to it. And now we could restart the old debate if altruism is even truly selfless...

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[3] There are rankings for the effectiveness of charities, e.g.: givewell.org

[4] He referred to the UN, I am referring to charities and NGOs in general; the original quote is: '[...] the United Nation's objective is not to take people to heaven, but to prevent humanity from going to hell'; https://www.pbs.org/newshour/ show/kofi-annan-on-40-years-trying-to-end-war-promote-peace (12/09/2012).

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The Need for a New Enlightenment

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The essay competition's topic "Sceptical Optimism vs Desperation Routine – Are there strategies for a confident perspective on the future?" evokes an antithesis that seems to be inherent in the intellectual project of the Enlightenment, a project that has, more than any other, shaped modernity. How do these opposing interpretations of Enlightenment thinking interact with each other in framing the discordant narratives of our time, when humanity is confronted with the all too real possibility of a sweeping climate catastrophe? And, more importantly, how faithful are these diverging interpretations to the spirit of Enlightenment thought? In this essay some effort will be devoted to answering this question, the question, in essence, of how we are supposed to collectively and individually react to an uncertain future accompanied by the promise of a looming catastrophe. Are we allowed to espouse a sceptical optimism or are we doomed to keep going through the desperation routine?

The question is anything but straightforward and the answer given here will of course be highly contestable, but we can make a start in trying to diagnose the main aims of the Enlightenment project by looking at the commonalities among the works of some important representatives of this intellectual movement. Then we shall look at two contemporary expressions of the Enlightenment project specifically in the realm of climate ethics and climate crisis policy, one that could encapsulate the term "sceptical optimism" and one that would fit more the term "desperation routine" and try to see which of the two remains more faithful to the original aims of the Enlightenment as here stated.

What would be the converging strands that unite such thinkers as David Hume, Voltaire and Immanuel Kant? Where do the similarities in their approach to studying the world lie? It seems that they all sought to break with the philosophical tradition as developed until then. While early modern philosophy was still operating within the confines and questions set by medieval (religious) philosophy, the Enlightenment thinkers wished to demolish the systems of their predecessors, to liberate their thinking from philosophical prejudices and look at the world under a completely new light. To do that, they had no qualms, no reverence to show to any of the old minds. Noone would escape their ruthless critique; no time-honoured concept was safe from their scathing pen.

Voltaire raved against the superstitions paddled by ecclesiastical leaders, calling his fellow people to educate and save themselves rather than expect some transcendent eternal salvation by an obviously indifferent God. Even more he took issue with the learned men and philosophers of his time who chose to support those very prejudices and obscurities which seemed to Voltaire to have condemned the human species to a fate of ignorance and stupidity. In his philosophical novel, *Candide or On Optimism*, one of the two main characters, Doctor Pangloss is called upon whenever a bad thing happens to his dreamy-eyed optimist student Candide to gloss over it and portray it in a positive light, using more and more stretched and absurd explanations and arguments. In the same spirit Hume, looking down upon the rationalist pretensions of his philosophical predecessors, sought to repudiate any concept that cannot be substantiated by direct experience. In the process, sacred, ancient concepts, such

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as God, causality, and the notion of the self, fell under the sword of his empiricist criticisms. In his turn Kant proceeded to outdo Hume by undoing in one swift stroke the totality of Western metaphysics up to that date. In his luminary *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant proclaimed that all the big metaphysical questions that have plagued Western thought ever since the Presocratic philosophers are simply outside the purview of the human mind. Hence, they can all be defenestrated, and we can go on occupying ourselves with questions we can actually answer.

All of these thinkers shared in common the intellectual audacity to clear out the debris of past philosophical systems to erect their own. The Enlightenment spirit is a spirit of anti-dogmatism. These thinkers could not tolerate for a moment what they saw as the obvious mistakes of their predecessors' work. Although they approached the work of past masters with respect and intellectual honesty, they didn't hesitate to break with the past and to venture independently to answer the old, ever recurring questions. They, in a nutshell, dared to think[1]. That of course doesn't mean that their own prejudices didn't seep into their own systems, which in turn solidified to become dogmatic constructions equal in rigidity with the ones that they wished to obliterate. After all, the thinkers we mentioned above, and many others among them, were in one or the other way, practically or intellectually, involved in the exploitation, domination and oppression of the vast majority of humanity, whether that was the poor, women, non-white people, slaves, colonized subjects, queer or disabled people. Nonetheless, they tried and managed to keep alive the original spark that got philosophy going in the first place, the impulse to question the given, the traditional, the dogmatic. The Enlightenment project, with all its numerous imperfections, carries within it the germs of its own supersession. For example, the same political Enlightenment project that excluded the poor, non-white people and women from deciding their own fates by equally participating in political affairs and procedures (exemplified in the American and French Revolutions) provided to the future generations of activists and intellectuals the argumentative material to pinpoint and highlight the very gaps and contradictions that rendered the project incomplete, which allowed them then to use these inconsistencies to challenge the ideological veil with which their oppressors masked the fact of their oppression, to show them essentially as liars and hypocrites.

Coming back, then, to the realm of contemporary climate policy and climate ethics, we can discern in the discussions that are precipitated by the looming climate catastrophe two separate definitions of Enlightenment. One is sampled paradigmatically in the writings of Steven Pinker[2], who presents himself as a herald of Enlightenment ideals in a political context that is increasingly anti-Enlightenment and hence "irrational. Pinker takes issue especially with those who doubt the ability of science to work as a panacea and those who don't espouse optimistic positions. The Enlightenment, says Pinker, initiated an age, identified with the advent of the Industrial Revolution and capitalism, which has been characterized by unprecedented and uninterrupted progress. The climate crisis is not so much a mistake as an unintended consequence of humanity's unprecedented prosperity[3] and the solution to it is to

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[1] In an essay on Enlightenment, one could not avoid a reference to Kant's own famous 1784 essay *An answer to the question: What is Enlightenment* (Kant & Wood 1996).

[2] See especially Pinker (2019).

[3] Never mind that the biggest part of greenhouse gas emissions has happened in the last 30 years, after climate change was a well-known and documented natural phenomenon (Stainforth &, Brzezinski 2020).

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apply the same methods and techniques that have been successfully applied so far. These methods and techniques can be summarized as a value-free science whose findings are then embodied in an equally value-free technology. Pinker is a stark proponent of technological solutions to the climate crisis, namely the widespread use of nuclear power possibly supplemented by geoengineering projects and carbon capture and storage technologies. This wonderfully optimistic and frankly psychologically relieving picture of reality states a very simple view: human ingenuity applied to the control of nature will once again save us. We just need to trust in the power of the Enlightenment ideals, in the potency of science and technology and in the seemingly irreversible trajectory towards continuous and unstoppable progress. This set of ideas is usually characterized by its proponents as 'sceptical optimism', although it's a struggle seeing which part exactly of this approach is sceptical.

There is, however, another, less obvious, definition of Enlightenment at play in this discourse. This particular strand of thought doesn't seek so aggressively to adopt the mantle of the old Enlightenment ideals which are now more than ever seen to be ossified constructions and idealizations of our past and current collective plight. What this strand does, exemplified in various theories of ecology, in feminist and indigenous approaches to nature, in post-growth and de-growth theories, is dared to think outside the constraints of our current political and economic situation. This strand of Enlightenment thinking chooses to use the knowledge newly[4] acquired about humanity to sweep away the old prejudices and self-imposed immaturities[5], the there-is-no-alternative thinking, the moral complicity of the status quo supporters. This sort of thinkers dares to reimagine social reality. The issue they take with the technological solution is that, in essence, it doesn't solve but merely postpone the problem humanity faces, which is not the climate crisis per se but a deeply problematic relationship with nature, a relationship of domination and exploitation. In this vein of thinking, opting for nuclear power now will avert the climate crisis in the short term, only until we face a nuclear-waste-disposal crisis in the long term. The 'sceptical optimists' of our last paragraph will swiftly call out these theorists for engaging in a tedious and tiresome "desperation routine". Where is their hope, where is their belief in the capacities of humanity to overcome its problems?

The "desperation routine" thinkers can propose a simple answer: such belief in automatic, natural, everlasting progress is itself deeply metaphysical. There is no empirical evidence that supports a view that humanity will continue to progress overtime, whatever else happens. In order to progress humanity needs to push itself. This criticism of metaphysical optimism is what makes the "desperation routine" thinkers more faithful to the original spark of the Enlightenment, to its originary, anti-dogmatic impulse. These people criticize what has become an intellectual elite of Enlightenment-style thinkers who keep defending ardently the same ideals that first emerged 250-300 years ago without taking into account the deficiencies

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[4] Newly, since it resides in large degree to ideas proposed by thinkers and activists who hail from heretofore excluded parts of the general population. We're talking here about ideas coming from feminist, critical race, Marxist, indigenous, queer theorists, etc. These ideas contribute to our fuller knowledge of how social reality works, since the experiences they were based on were to a large extent excluded from public view and discourse before the 1960s. The view on reality that these ideas offer us are indeed akin to discovering a new continent.

[5] Another reference to Kant's *What is Enlightenment* essay, referenced in footnote 2.

in the political application of these ideals, the monstrosities they helped[6] and still help to cover up, the gross power inequalities of the socioeconomic system they helped erect. They use new knowledge, new criticism, and ideas to supersede the Enlightenment, to essentially apply Enlightenment's intellectual audacity to Enlightenment itself. They underline what is also programmatically stated and used as the title of this essay: the need for a new Enlightenment. The old Enlightenment has become an ideological fossil like the ones Hume, Kant and Voltaire sought to bring down and demolish. The intellectual elite of our times, people like Steven Pinker, are increasingly taking up the role of Voltaire's Doctor Pangloss. It seems, then, as this text draws to a close, that we need to invert the terms we have been using from the beginning, the terms framing the topic of this essay competition. It seems that the people who bravely and daringly, in the face of fierce resistance and ridicule, push towards a New Enlightenment are the embodiment of a truly sceptical optimism, an optimism which knows its limitations and the obstacles ahead but, in the very act of original, stimulating thought, dares to look ahead with hope. The Doctor Panglosses of our time, on the other hand, seem to express the true desperation routine: a belief that humanity reached the culmination of its potential with the Enlightenment 250 years ago, and nothing can lead us anymore to transcend this fixed state of affairs, so we ought not to think about it. In this sense, it doesn't seem unreasonable to take on the mantle of Voltaire and the other Enlightenment thinkers and, in true Enlightenment spirit, try to clear out the debris of a bankrupt and inadequate intellectual and political project to erect something new in its place. It's not so far-fetched either to imagine that those Enlightenment thinkers, Voltaire, Kant, Hume, would take pride in our attempts to clear away their flawed contributions to human thought, just as they did with their predecessors. To co-opt Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous quote: "My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)" (Wittgenstein 2021, 249). Maybe the time has finally come to throw away the ladder of the old Enlightenment and keep on climbing without burdens.

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[6] An interesting account of how Enlightenment thought has played a significant role in the widespread exploitation and domination of the natural environment and of our fellow human beings can be found in Horkheimer (2002).

Data Monopolization by the Tech Industry: Implications for Democracy

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1   Introduction

In the contemporary era, the tech industry possesses vast repositories of both user-generated and non-user data (Bond et al. 2012, Garcia 2017) accumulated through their digital platforms, which are utilized by billions of people worldwide. However, concerns have been raised about how this data is being used. For instance, during the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, instances of Russian interference using targeted advertising came to light. Similar allegations were made regarding the Brexit referendum and the 2017 French elections, which further highlighted the potential for human data to be exploited for political gain. These incidents have heightened concerns over the manipulation of democratic processes through the exploitation of personal information.

This paper argues that the unparalleled access to human data enjoyed by the tech industry has led to an unprecedented concentration of power and resources, allowing them to exert significant control over the thought processes and decision-making abilities of billions of people worldwide. This phenomenon has given rise to a new economic regime known as Surveillance Capitalism (Zuboff 2019). Zuboff describes this new economic order as one that "claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales" (2019, definition, no page). Essentially, the regime of Surveillance Capitalism is built upon the expropriation and exploitation of human data, which poses a direct threat to human autonomy and individual agency – the fundamental components of a democratic society. Moreover, this paradigm creates a power asymmetry by concentrating a significant amount of power through data control in the hands of a select few, leading to far-reaching social, economic, and political consequences. Zuboff argues that this power dynamic amounts to an "overthrow of the people's sovereignty" (2019, definition, no page), highlighting the exigency for ethical considerations and comprehensive regulatory frameworks to reassert people's sovereignty in global politics.

The paper begins with outlining methodologies employed by companies for data collection, the nature of data collected, and the likelihood of its manipulation for political gains. This section not only expounds on the scope and magnitude of data collection but also highlights the extent to which tech industry exercises psychological control over the populace, thereby wielding significant influence on global politics. The subsequent section delves into the underlying systemic factors contributing to this issue, expounding on the inherent flaws within the data-driven business model of digital platforms. I argue that it is not feasible for tech companies to prioritize privacy without risking profitability, given their heavy reliance on data collection. The paper concludes by underscoring the concentration of global political power in

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the hands of a select few, and the significant implications this has for global politics. The central thesis of the paper asserts that the unregulated accumulation of data by the tech industry has led to the consolidation of power among a select few, resulting in the erosion of democratic principles.

2   Data-driven Business Model of Digital Platforms

To understand the risk of data misuse and its potential to subvert democratic processes, it is imperative to scrutinize the business model of digital platforms that rely on data acquisition as a primary aspect of their operations. Technology companies use algorithms to improve user engagement, which is essential to retain their customer base and drive revenue growth. To achieve this, they gather vast amounts of data from various sources to build comprehensive data repositories. Through big data analytics, this information is analysed to generate user profiles and identify patterns and correlations that reveal user behaviour and preferences. The analysis enables platforms to gain valuable insights into user behaviour, improve user engagement and retention, and drive revenue growth.

To acquire this data, the companies often rely on complex and interconnected sources such as social media platforms, search engines, and mobile devices. This data collection is becoming increasingly sophisticated, with the ability to capture a vast array of information about users' habits, social relationships, preferences, attitudes, thoughts, opinions, heartbeats, sleep patterns, and even dreams. A New York Times article examined Facebook's patent applications to determine various methods employed by the company to obtain data from its users (Chinoy 2018). Facebook has demonstrated its capability to identify specific television programs being viewed through a mobile phone's microphone, track the duration of sleep by monitoring phone activity, and predict major life events like birth, death, weddings through credit card transactions. Moreover, Facebook has the capacity to identify pictures captured with the same device by establishing a unique camera signature and detecting minute details such as lens scratches or pixels within the images. Such details are leveraged to draw connections between users who have uploaded photos taken with the same camera and predict the strength of their relationship based on the frequency with which they use the shared device.

These data points are then ingeniously correlated with other data points to construct detailed psychographic profiles of users, providing valuable insights that drive revenue growth in a myriad of ways. For example, social media platforms utilize data to customize the content displayed on users' feeds. This personalized approach ensures that users receive content that is aligned with their interests and preferences, ultimately leading to increased engagement and retention. By retaining their user base, tech companies amass more user data to enhance their algorithms, resulting in even more personalized content. This, in turn, leads to an increase in revenue generated from ad impressions and clicks. Moreover, tech companies utilize algorithms to deliver targeted advertising to users based on their interests, demographics, and behaviour, increasing the likelihood of users engaging with the advertisements on their platform. By monitoring website traffic and user activity, businesses gain a deeper understanding of their customers' needs and preferences, allowing them to prioritize their efforts

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more effectively. For instance, through data analysis, businesses can identify inefficiencies in the supply chain and suggest ways to improve it, such as scrutinizing supplier delivery times, determining the most efficient delivery routes, and adjusting inventory levels to meet customer demand. This can help reduce costs, increase profitability, and improve overall business operations. Furthermore, businesses can also explore new sources of revenue through data. For example, a firm specializing in electronic products could spot the increasing trend of home automation through data analysis and decide to expand its product line to include smart home products to capture this emerging market.

Additionally, advertising companies can tap into this data to design highly targeted and efficient advertising campaigns. The effectiveness of this approach lies in ensuring that the right message is conveyed to the right audience, thereby maximizing the impact of advertisement. For instance, if a user has been searching for a new car online, they may start to receive ads for car dealerships or car insurance companies. Using advanced data analytics techniques, advertising companies can predict and cater to the future interests of consumers with a high degree of precision. A concrete example of this could be seen in the recommendation systems utilized by e-commerce websites, such as Amazon. Based on a user's browsing and purchase history, Amazon's algorithms can predict the customer's future interests and make personalized product recommendations. This helps Amazon reach niche audiences that are more likely to be interested in their products or services. By doing so, Amazon increases the likelihood that users will engage with the advertisements and ultimately make a purchase. Another example of predictive analysis is the Google's autocomplete algorithm, which can predict and suggest search queries to individual users through the analysis of the most commonly searched terms by other users. The primary benefit of this service is that it reduces keystrokes and provides relevant suggestions in real-time, thereby saving time and effort for the user. This approach to search queries allows users to quickly find what they are looking for and also enables Google to tailor its search results and advertising to individual user's preferences. This ultimately increases the likelihood of user engagement and revenue growth for the company. It is evident that data acquisition is an essential tool for digital platforms to gain valuable insights, make informed decisions, increase profitability, and maintain a competitive edge in the marketplace (Qi & Tao 2018).

The practice of data acquisitions also benefits users in a multitude of ways. By allowing access to information such as browsing history, search queries, and demographic data, users enable advertisers to provide ads that align with their interests and requirements. This personalized approach to advertising can assist users in discovering products and services that may have otherwise gone unnoticed and in a more timely and efficient manner. For instance, if an individual has been scouring various websites and performing online searches for laptops, advertisers can leverage this information to showcase ads for laptops from various brands with feature specifications and pricing that correspond with the user's preferences. As a result, user can identify laptops that may have otherwise been overlooked and make a well-informed decision when purchasing. Furthermore, personalized ads are reportedly more engaging and efficacious in capturing users' attention. This approach can make users feel acknowledged and valued by advertisers, ultimately leading to a better overall brand experience. The convenience and personalization are reportedly major factors that motivate users

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to willingly provide their data to technology companies (Calvin 2017, Bass 2019). However, it is essential to assess whether this consent is truly informed and made with full knowledge of the implications of such data sharing.

It is worth noting that the data collected by tech companies represents only a small portion of the overall data collection process, which extends beyond the scope of these companies (Deibert 2019). In addition to the frontline companies that explicitly request permission for data collection, there are various other entities involved in this multifaceted process. These entities include analytics businesses that utilize the data harvested by the frontline companies to construct psychographic profiles of users for their clients, who then use these profiles to employ micro-targeting tactics. Moreover, there are companies that specialize in developing and supplying algorithms, software, techniques, and tradecraft to both frontline companies and analytics firms, augmenting their capabilities and facilitating more effective use of the collected data. The entire digital infrastructure's sustainability is reliant on a vast network of businesses that provide essential hardware, software, and energy necessary to maintain these operations. Thus, the business model of frontline companies that users consent to provide their data to further entails engagement in business-to-business transactions and flow of data that many users remain oblivious to. Consequently, this may result in users unwittingly providing vast amounts of personal data to several other services, through an obscure process of information-sharing.

3   Inherent Risks to Democracy

As established above, the revenue model for tech companies involves collection of vast amounts of user and providing third-party developers, applications, and services with a highly effective and measurable method for targeting potential customers. In other words, these platforms have a direct incentive to collect as much information as possible, including personal information like political preferences, beliefs, and behaviours to enable more precise targeted advertising. The more precise the targeting of ads to users, the higher the engagement rates and revenue generation for the company. However, this profit model can come at the cost of user privacy, as these platforms may engage in practices that prioritize corporate gain over the protection of personal data. This creates opportunities for political manipulation tactics that exploit personal data to sway public opinion or promote specific agendas. One prominent example of this occurred in the lead-up to the 2016 U.S. presidential elections. An external researcher harvested the personal data of up to 87 million profiles through a personality profiling application on Facebook (Heawood 2018). This data was sold to Cambridge Analytica, a political consulting firm that provided analytical support to political candidates. The collected data was used to construct psychographic profiles of voters, a research method that segments population groups based on psychological variables such as personality traits, values, attitudes, interests, socio-economic status, media preferences, and behavioural data. The psychographic profiles were then used to create customized political messages for persuasive psychological targeting, which furnished the Trump campaign with a powerful tool for influencing voters (Guess, Nyhan, Reifler 2018). The Google autocomplete algorithm's search suggestions have also come under scrutiny due to their tendency to promote sensational or

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controversial content over factual accuracy. Investigations into the algorithm have revealed that, in the lead up to the 2021 Capitol invasion, Google's autocomplete algorithm suggested search terms related to civil war that did not align with actual search volumes (Chaslot 2021). Similarly, search options related to COVID-19 and climate change have also been found to be inconsistent with actual search volumes on different occasions. These findings raise concerns about Google algorithms prioritizing sensational or controversial content over factual accuracy, possibly to increase user engagement and retention, as such content tends to generate more attention and emotional reactions from users.

Moreover, algorithms designed to display content based on users' preferences have the potential to exacerbate political polarization and impede democratic deliberation. For instance, if someone holds the belief that climate change is a hoax, they are more likely to engage with content that supports that view, and thus the algorithm will show them more of such content. This is because humans are naturally predisposed to confirmation bias, where they seek out information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs and disregard or avoid contradictory information (Nickerson 1998). Accordingly, users are more likely to engage with content that aligns with their views. Empirical evidence supports this argument, as demonstrated by a 2016 study that examined the online interactions of 376 million Facebook users across over 900 news outlets. The study revealed that individuals tend to gravitate towards news that reinforces their existing viewpoints (Schmidt et al. 2017). Consequently, the majority of Americans who consumed false information during the 2016 U.S. Presidential elections were Trump supporters or individuals with conservative political opinions (Guess, Nyhan, Reifler 2018). However, this phenomenon creates echo chambers that serve as a feedback loop, amplifying and validating pre-existing beliefs while limiting exposure to differing perspectives and silencing alternative viewpoints. As a result, users may be less likely to consider or engage with viewpoints that differ from their own, ultimately impeding meaningful democratic discourse and deepening political biases, which lead to a hostile and divisive social and political climate.

Research further suggests that users' perceptions and behaviour are highly susceptible to the content they consume (Neubaum & Krämer 2016). This means that exposure to content expressing a particular opinion induces users to adopt that viewpoint, thereby creating a reciprocal relationship between user's opinion and their perception of the prevailing public opinion on the matter. A separate study on the interplay between suggestion, cognition, and behaviour indicates that both intentional and unintentional suggestions have the ability to impact an individual's cognitions and behaviour (Michael, Gerry, Kirsch 2012). Consequently, when users encounter the suggestion "civil war is inevitable" from Google's autocomplete algorithm, they may perceive it to be correlated with the search volume on the platform, indicating that it reflects what most people are thinking at that moment (Chaslot 2021). As a result, users may perceive the suggestion as being grounded in truth and feel compelled to take action.

Furthermore, the use of micro-targeting mechanisms is inherently manipulative in nature, rendering the data collected susceptible to political manipulation. Apart from collecting personal data, micro-targeting shapes user behaviour and opinions through tailored content and messaging, thus creating a breeding ground for political actors to exert influence over public

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opinion and behaviour by means of targeted disinformation campaigns. A study conducted on the 2010 U.S. congressional elections examined the impact of political micro-targeting directed at a vast cohort of 61 million Facebook users on their subsequent voting behaviour (Bond et al. 2012, Garcia 2017). The findings showed that these messages had a quantifiable and direct impact on the political self-expression, information-seeking behaviour, and real-world voting behaviour of millions of individuals. Further, the influence of these messages went beyond their direct recipients and had a cascading effect on their friends, and even friends of friends. Additionally, these platforms serve as a conduit for advertisers to micro-target users with information that may be deceitful or biased. One such method employed to achieve this objective is the use of dark ads, a technique that permits the distribution of content to a select audience without it being publicly visible. Dark ads have the potential to present a skewed or one-sided view of a particular issue, in order to influence users' opinions or behaviours without the scrutiny or accountability that comes with public advertising.

Micro-targeting can also be used to engage in more insidious forms of manipulation, such as spreading fake news through bots[1] (Vosoughi, Roy, Aral 2018). In the 2016 U.S. Presidential elections, Russian bot accounts played a significant role in micro-targeting users with false election-related news. As a result, around 25% of Americans were exposed to misleading and false information related to the elections (Guess, Nyhan, Reifler 2018, Badaway, Ferrara, Lerman 2018). Further investigation exposed a market for reusable political disinformation bots, which can be utilized across multiple campaigns (Ferrara 2017, Nied et al. 2017). Ferrara's study specifically identified bots that propagated narratives associated with far-right ideology during the 2016 U.S. Presidential election campaign (Ferrara 2017). These bots were found to have become inactive after the U.S. Presidential elections, only to resurface during the lead-up to the 2017 French Presidential election. A parallel pattern was noted in the context of Brexit, whereby a sizable number of bot accounts, estimated to be 13,493 in number, were found to engage in amplification of false news that favoured the Leave EU campaign (Bastos, Mercea 2017).

The aforementioned events elicit a legitimate cause for concern regarding the ethical use of personal data. The tech industry's data collection practices carry significant implications for democracy, a system premised on the principle of popular sovereignty. Although democracy is a complex concept with diverse forms and various elements, certain fundamental conditions must be satisfied for a political entity to be regarded as democratic.[2] Among these conditions is the idea of popular sovereignty, which maintains that the primary source of political power in a democratic society rests with the people. In a democratic system, the people are the ultimate authorities or rulers, and the government's legitimacy derives from their consent. The idea of popular sovereignty thus serves as a critical safeguard against the abuse of power and the erosion of democratic principles. However, when psychological

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[1] In July 2018, Twitter made a public announcement stating that they were deleting approximately one million bogus accounts daily. Surprisingly, following this announcement, the company's stock price plummeted. This suggests that there may have been business incentives for tech companies not delving too deeply into their own platform to eliminate bots. (The Guardian 2018)

[2] All of these sources define democracy differently with some variations. However, one common element among all of them is the sovereignty of the people. See e.g., European Commission (2020), Council of Europe (2022), Schmitter & Karl (1991), Schumpeter (1943).

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manipulation interferes with political preferences of people, it distorts the democratic process and compromises the legitimacy of the electoral outcomes (Persily 2017).

4 National Security Concerns

The discourse surrounding the potential threat that certain practices pose to democracy has also met with dissenting voices. While some argue that such practices are not necessarily detrimental to democratic ideals, (Kefford et al. 2022) others remain sceptical (Kokas 2022, Calzada 2023). Recent developments, however, suggest that political leaders have recognized the political significance of human data.

A 2017 report from Freedom House, assessing the state of political rights and civil liberties worldwide, shed light on the pervasive practice of social media manipulation by governments globally. The study, encompassing 65 countries, identified that 30 of them engaged in various forms of manipulative practices such as paid commentators, trolls, bots, false news sites, and propaganda outlets during the period from June 2016 to May 2017. Of particular concern was the use of such tactics in election campaigns in at least 18 of the surveyed countries, which severely impeded citizens' capacity to access and engage with factual discourse, essential to making informed decisions when selecting their leaders (Kelly et al. 2017). Moreover, the cross-border flow of data has emerged as a crucial area of concern for both state actors and academics (Kokas 2022, Calzada 2023, Maheshwari & Holpuch 2023, Che 2023). This concern stems from the potential for data to be manipulated for political purposes, and risks associated with the sharing of sensitive data across borders.

Accordingly, TikTok has been facing significant backlash from various governments and organizations globally, leading to multiple bans. The United States, India, the United Kingdom, France (AP News 2023), Denmark (AP News 2023), New Zealand (Craymer 2023), and Taiwan (Chung 2022) have either implemented or are considering a ban on the platform due to concerns about the platform's ownership by the Chinese company, ByteDance (Fung & Ziady 2023, AP News 2023, Chee 2023). Governments fear that the app could serve as a surveillance tool for the Chinese government, posing a serious threat to user data privacy and national security (Maheshwari & Holpuch 2023, Che 2023). Although TikTok's data collection practices are similar to those of other tech platforms (Fung 2023), the possibility of the Chinese government accessing this data has prompted several countries to restrict the app's use within their government departments. For instance, in the United States, TikTok is not allowed to operate within its jurisdiction or collect data from American citizens unless it is sold to an American-based entity (Maheshwari & Holpuch 2023, Che 2023). Nevertheless, China has strongly opposed the 'forced sale' of the app (Che 2023, Kokas 2022). This ongoing altercation over the ownership and use of data collected by Tiktok, underscores the power that data holds in shaping public opinion and political discourse.

5 Conclusion

The tech industry's business model heavily relies on the collection and manipulation of personal data, including that of non-users (Che 2023, Kokas 2022, Lewandowsky & Pomerantsev

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2022). However, any form of manipulation carried out by these platforms undermines human agency and autonomy, both essential components of a democratic society. The assertion that users provide consent for data collection by tech platforms remains highly contentious. As discussed above, the vast majority of users are uninformed about the exact nature of data usage by these entities, the identities of third parties with whom this information is shared, and the purposes for which it is shared. This lack of transparency renders their consent ill-informed, and the credibility of the supposed consent remains questionable. The manipulation of Facebook data during the U.S. elections exemplifies the significant political consequences of these practices. Additionally, Google's algorithm promoting a civil war narrative illustrates how these platforms have an incentive to manipulate user data to serve their corporate interests, thus highlighting the potential risks associated with granting tech companies access to and control over vast amounts of data.

The foregoing analysis also established that online platforms put users in echo chambers, which creates a polarized social and political environment. These environments are conducive to dissemination of targeted misinformation campaigns, which not only undermine democratic values such as openness, transparency, and free exchange of ideas, but also pose a threat to the legitimacy of the democratic process. Furthermore, the content users consume online significantly influences their attitudes and perceptions, leading them to adopt opinions that align with the prevailing discourse. Thus, the psychological manipulation inherent in these practices raises doubts about the existence of popular sovereignty and generates scepticism and uncertainty regarding the extent to which a political system that relies on such practices can be deemed democratic.

It is evident that in the current economic order humans have been reduced to the status of mere data points, with personal data emerging as a highly prized commodity. The vast troves of data possessed by the tech industry have placed in their hands a formidable weapon that can be deployed to manipulate people's thought processes and further their own interests. As a result, the tech industry has unequivocally ascended to the position of dominant player, leading to a shift in power from people to the tech industry. This development can be viewed as a coup, where the peoples' sovereignty is undermined without the need for a complete overthrow of the state (Zuboff 2019).

To safeguard democratic principles and restore people's sovereignty, it is crucial to bring about a shift in public opinion towards the current data collection processes (Couldry & Mejias 2018). Further, the ongoing practice of continuous data collection must be constrained and limited solely to what is essential for achieving specific purposes such as advancements in the education or health sectors. Most often, the collected data is superfluous and remains dormant within the archives of the tech industry, awaiting potential future exploitation. Moreover, it is crucial to ensure that data utilization is carried out in a transparent, accountable, and human-rights-respecting manner. This entails recognizing the significance of community participation and engagement in data collection processes and promoting data democratization to ensure its equitable benefits across all societal strata. In addition, it is essential for experts to collaborate and create alternative ecosystems that can fulfil the original promise of the digital age: to democratize knowledge and empower individuals (Zuboff 2021).

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Thus, to achieve a nuanced and balanced approach towards data collection and utilization practices, it is necessary to safeguard individual rights and dignity while ensuring that data serves the collective good.

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