

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ECONOMY, TECHNOLOGY AND NATURE IN THE CAPITALIST AND MARXIST UTOPIA ACCORDING TO HANS JONAS

A RELAÇÃO ENTRE ECONOMIA, TECNOLOGIA E NATUREZA NA UTOPIA CAPITALISTA E MARXISTA SEGUNDO HANS JONAS

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### Abstract:

This paper explores the historical, philosophical, and ecological dimensions of economic thought, tracing its evolution from ancient *oikonomia* to the hybrid discipline straddling humanities and mathematical sciences. It critiques the shared emphasis of both capitalist and Marxist systems on technological and industrial progress, which often leads to cyclical crises, ecological degradation, and exploitation. Drawing on Hans Jonas' *The Imperative of Responsibility*, the discussion highlights the urgent need for a paradigm shift, where economic practices prioritize environmental sustainability and collective well-being over short-term gains. Jonas' call for ethically and intellectually farsighted leadership forms a central theme, advocating for an "aristocracy of responsibility" to navigate the epochal challenges of modernity. Interdisciplinary research is proposed as essential for developing alternative models that reconcile economic activity with ecological imperatives. By integrating Jonas' emphasis on responsibility and foresight, the paper calls for a reimagining of progress that ensures collective well-being and sustainability for future generations.

**Keywords:** capitalism, Marxism, technology, Jonas

### Resumo:

Este artigo explora as dimensões históricas, filosóficas e ecológicas do pensamento econômico, traçando sua evolução desde a antiga *oikonomia* até a disciplina híbrida que abrange as ciências humanas e matemáticas. Ele critica a ênfase compartilhada pelos sistemas capitalista e marxista no progresso tecnológico e industrial, que geralmente leva a crises cíclicas, degradação ecológica e exploração. Com base em *O Imperativo da Responsabilidade*, de Hans Jonas, a discussão destaca a necessidade urgente de uma mudança de paradigma, em que as práticas econômicas priorizem a sustentabilidade ambiental e o bem-estar coletivo em detrimento dos ganhos de curto prazo. O apelo de Jonas por uma liderança ética e intelectualmente perspicaz constitui um tema central, defendendo uma "aristocracia da responsabilidade" para enfrentar os desafios históricos da modernidade. A pesquisa interdisciplinar é proposta como essencial para o desenvolvimento de modelos alternativos que conciliem a atividade econômica com os imperativos ecológicos. Ao integrar a ênfase de Jonas na responsabilidade e na previsão, o artigo pede uma reimaginação do progresso que garanta o bem-estar coletivo e a sustentabilidade para as gerações futuras.

**Keywords:** capitalismo, marxismo, tecnologia, Jonas.

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## Introduction

The term “economy” is of ancient origin: the Greek word *oikonomia* concerned the administration of house and land according to good practices. Over time, the scope of such administration gradually expanded to become a science. Knowing its history, which is as old as the earliest forms of human civilization, can certainly help understand the genesis of economics – a discipline that studies wealth-related behaviour and its integration into a system – as a practical science, as well as its hybrid status between the humanities and the mathematical sciences. With the progressive specialisation of knowledge, in fact, economics has enhanced its mathematical component in its asymptotic quest to enter the Olympus of exact sciences, even though its subject matter does not allow for reliable predictions. The development of the discipline has thus embarked on paths of abstraction (Latouche, 1994, p.140–141) that has left aside the search for a close link with the real economy.

Those who engage with history and historiography, however, understand that economics is deeply embedded within its historical and cultural context. An epoch, in fact, is not merely a collection of events but a tapestry bound by a shared cultural atmosphere—a *koiné* rooted in specific times and places. Thus, economic systems and theories can be better understood when viewed through the lens of their evolution across different eras and contexts. As the world continually transforms, economic theories must adapt to remain relevant—ideally, anticipating or even shaping these changes.

The 20th century, for instance, saw dramatic shifts in economic life. The rise of joint-stock companies, the formation of trade unions, the spread of wealth, the Great Depression, global wars, the transformation of currency, the new prominence of central banks, the decline of agriculture leading to urbanization and increased poverty, the advent of the welfare state, government intervention in markets, and the emergence of socialist states collectively altered—if not revolutionized—economic systems. To sum up, we could say with John Kenneth Galbraith, Professor Emeritus of Harvard University, that economic theories are a reflection of the world in which they developed: “the theories of Adam Smith in the context of the early trauma of the Industrial Revolution, those of David Ricardo in its later, more mature stages, those of Karl Marx in the era of unbridled capitalist power, those of John Maynard Keynes as a response to the unrelenting disaster of the Great Depression” (Galbraith, 2017, p. 2).

## Technology in power

In recent decades, Europe and other developed countries have increasingly prioritized environmental preservation and the protection of living species, despite significant opposition and resistance. This shift has unfolded within a context of rapidly evolving cultural and social transformations, accompanied by a technological evolution so swift and pervasive that it renders previously established categorizations obsolete (Donnelly, 1989; Øfsti, 1992; Böhler, 1994; Mancini, 1996; Kandel, 1998; Scruton, 2003; Vaz-Curado R. M. Costa, Efken, 2015; Buenos Aires de Carvalho, Oliveira, 2015).

One of the earliest prophets of this situation, the philosopher Hans Jonas, writes in *The Imperative of Responsibility*:

With technology's having seized power—a revolution this, planned by no one, totally anonymous and irresistible—the dynamism has taken on aspects not contained in any earlier idea of it and not foreseeable by any theory, Marxist or other. It now has a direction which, instead of to a fulfillment, could lead to a universal disaster, and a tempo whose frightening exponential acceleration is apt to escape every control. Thus threatened by catastrophe from the very progress of history itself, we surely can no longer trust in an immanent "reason in history"; and to speak of a self-realizing "meaning" of the drift of events would be sheer frivolity. On the contrary, we must take the forward rushing process in hand, in a wholly new way and *without a known goal*. (Jonas, 1979, p. 229-230; Jonas, 1984, p. 127-128)

According to Jonas, the modern-day challenges described above, coupled with exponential demographic growth, overshadow the great political-economic question of whether it is better to have a socialistic society or an individualistic one and, in extreme situations, an authoritarian society or a free one. Instead, the central issue has shifted to environmental protection and the survival of the human species itself. The pressing question is no longer ideological but practical: which social and political structures are best equipped to address present and future challenges? The ideological certainties that shaped much of previous centuries have dissolved, leaving us disoriented in the face of a crisis we have largely created ourselves. Even if we were to retrace our steps to seek solid ground, looking back to earlier eras for guidance, the political wisdom of the ancients or medievals would offer little practical help today. Their systems operated in a world governed by cyclical natural laws—a world oriented toward preservation, balance, and limited growth—vastly different from the situation of modernity.

Not even the suspicion that the cultural and historical phenomenon summarised as the suppression of transcendence may have been one of humanity's greatest mistakes, says Jonas (1974, p. 168-182), exempts us from prioritizing responsibility for the living world—a cosmic abode threatened by corruption and decadence—in our thoughts and actions. The situation is mostly marked by the practical dynamic between economic interest and scientific-technological development, which was ultimately driven by the interest of the few but should instead be regulated for the interest of the many.

To be sure, selfishness has characterized humanity across all eras, but the current dangers force us to no longer underestimate the common destiny of man and nature (Jonas, 1979, p. 246; Jonas, 1984, p.137). Today, more than ever, there is a need to overcome the short-sighted relationship of purely instrumental exploitation that human beings have imposed not only on their fellow humans but even more so on nature as a whole. We need to move towards an ecological perspective whereby *the effective and lasting well-being of the parts is rooted in the general well-being of the whole*. This must be the first objective of an economy worthy of the name, as Pope Francis (2015) argues in *Laudato Si'*, also known as the *Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home*.

So how can humans regain control of their power in time? The answer must come from cultural and religious education, as well as society and politics. Only by coordinating and guiding the historical development of individuals and communities can humanity address these urgent challenges.

## Alternatives

In *The Imperative of Responsibility*, Jonas initially seems to identify communism as the alternative to the so-called “free” economy,” which he defines as the “the very source of the dynamics which drifts to the mortal danger” (Jonas, 1975, p. 254–255; Jonas, 1984, p. 142). In fact, he believes that only politically-imposed social discipline can effectively subordinate the interest of single individuals to the long-term needs of all. In the immediately following pages, however, he notes that Marxism “is no less dedicated to the Baconian idea than its capitalist rival”.<sup>2</sup> It is no coincidence that it was born in the machine age, which, through the increase in production and the consequent demand for its equitable distribution of goods, made it possible to imagine a better future for all of humanity. To confirm this, one need only cite the five-year plans of forced industrial production initiated by Stalin after the NEP, Lenin's new economic policy. In this regard, Jonas observes:

[...] only the magnitude of the prize awaiting the proletariat made the revolution worthwhile. This is entirely legitimate. It seems somewhat at odds with this reasoning that just where the prize already in existence was the highest—that is, in the advanced industrial countries—the masses so far have not chosen this way, and that today, contrariwise, only in the poorest countries does socialism recommend itself as a means of creating that very prize after the capitalist model. But the prize is at least in sight through that model, and the anomaly of Marxism winning in backward rather than advanced societies does not alter the fact that the proof of material surplus already furnished by modern technology, if not at home then elsewhere, is an important factor in the modern socialist ideal. (Jonas, 1974, p.257–258; Jonas, 1985, p. 144)

With its forced industrialisation, therefore, Marxism can be seen as the heir and executor of the Baconian revolution. To illustrate this, Jonas states that those who, like him, were born in the early 20th century witnessed this attitude of the USSR first-hand: statements such as “socialism is electrification”, books entitled “Cement”, glorifying films about railway construction and industrialisation, the honouring of tractors and machinery, the celebration of every large factory, engineering progress and hard work, including Stakhanovism—all these factors were considered very important “contributions to socialism” (Jonas, 1974, p. 276; Jonas, 1985, p. 155). Nevertheless, the USSR could have easily managed its scientific-technological development in such a way as to prevent environmental and humanitarian catastrophes by disciplining the technological drive, if Marxism had been able to renounce its “utopia”, experiencing the classless society no longer as the realisation of the ideal of humanity, but more soberly as the condition of its survival in the imminent epochal crisis.

In practice, however, the organisational advantages needed in the face of emergencies affecting very large populations were nullified by the drawbacks of a centralised bureaucracy that led to top-down mismanagement, corruption and servility. Moreover, the ability to remedy mistakes proved to be slower to

<sup>2</sup> This thesis, regarding the encounter between communism and bourgeois-democratic society, has some points in common with Del Noce 2004, p. 283–284. “In its Gramscian version, the revolutionary party provides the opportunity for the bourgeois spirit to realise itself in its pure state. [...] It's a conservatism that coincides with the appearance of maximum change because the incessant evolution of the technical-scientific instrument brings an equally incessant transformation of ways of feeling and thinking”.

implement than in capitalist systems, which were more flexible and open in their dynamism. Jonas argues in this regard:

The profit-economy, to give it its due, has entries here to its credit as well as to its debit. Just as, on the one hand, it promotes waste at the consuming end by inciting wants, it has, on the other hand, an intrinsic motive to thrift at the source in the interest of lowering costs—a motive which competition then makes altogether compelling. (Jonas, 1974, p. 260–261; Jonas, 1985, p. 145)

Risk does not only drive competition, but also the cost-effectiveness of a social organisation, unlike the bureaucracies of civil servants who have nothing to lose. It must be admitted, however, that the criterion of need, from the point of view of rationality, is a better starting point than profit as the basis for credible and effective social distributive justice (Jonas, 1974, p. 271–272; Jonas, 1985, p. 155–156). The question remains whether the profit motive was really not in place in communist societies. In the past, the pursuit of individual profit did not exist, as the system mostly forbade it or at least did not provide legal means to achieve it, yet it cannot be denied that both Stalin and his successors were driven by an aspiration for collective state profit, at the expense of other states and other parts of the world.

The unchecked and inefficient growth of state bureaucracy is, however, another major problem of recent times shared by these two political-economic forms: it operationally and economically burdens institutions and creates space for clientelism and corruption, damaging the very image and authority of the state. Yet even large private companies today suffer from the complexity of an oversized organisation, which ends up no longer being governable in a highly specialised business world.

Moreover, it cannot be denied that the democratic process struggles to deliberate on, and implement, measures that most citizens, indirectly involved, would not spontaneously self-impose, but which are fundamental for our future and that of the generations to come. Aware of the complexity of the situation, Jonas wonders if “only an elite can assume, ethically and intellectually, [...] responsibility for the future” (Jonas, 1974, p. 271–272; Jonas, 1984, p. 147).

What emerges here is the desire to have rulers who represent the aristocracy of society in terms of ability and farsightedness, as opposed to a political class that in our societies of quasi-plebiscitary democracy conforms to the demands of its electorate, often neglecting realistic political strategies genuinely committed to the public good in the long run. However, the question of how such an elite can be created and granted the necessary power to operate effectively remains open in Jonas' writings.

## Conclusion

In the previous pages, I have highlighted the origin of some notable common criticisms of capitalist and Marxist economies: both basically believe they can solve society's problems through the progress of industrial and technological production (Cf. Severino, 1993, p. 258–264). This certainly became clearer after the 1990s both for the countries in the Russian orbit and for China, where political communism was combined with a market economy. Following Jonas, my goal was to emphasise that these two systems actually have a similar idea of progress. As Marx already predicted in the 19th century with regard to the liberal capitalist



organisation, this shared vision continues to cause cyclical crises of overproduction and unemployment. The increasingly oversized and therefore out-of-control bureaucratic apparatuses in both systems fail to remedy these difficulties.

Thus, the political or economic oligarchies, while referring to different models, on the one hand seek innovations for new market areas by investing in technological productions of dubious necessity and value, and on the other hand favour the conversion of the steel and technology industries into the production of weapons, facilitating their trade and consumption by fuelling hotbeds of continuous war. All this leads to exploitation and violence affecting the weakest parts of the planet, be they plants, animals or other human beings. Indeed, sometimes social peace within the so-called “developed countries” is achieved through the impoverishment of nature and the “third world”, exacerbating the ecological crisis (cf. Sachs, 2015).

What is to be done? Philosophical reflection can help to think about the world in its becoming, so as to better understand, interpret, foresee and find correctives and solutions in the quest for the “good”, which is only such if it can be shared (cf. Michelis, 2009, p. 81–94), as the earliest philosophers, starting with Socrates, taught us millennia ago. As Vittorio Hösle (1991) argues, it depends on the general conditions whether the pursuit of individual good or self-interest leads to a collective catastrophe or whether it instead contributes to the common good, and it is the task of the state, through an appropriate economic policy, to configure general conditions that allow the implementation of the second possibility (cf. Mancini, 2002). Indeed, *a fortiori* if coordinated in supranational organisations, states are best positioned to help private individuals encourage, for example, ecologically correct behaviour even when economically disadvantageous at first.

The search for alternative models to capitalism and communism, starting from the rejection of their obvious deficiencies, has certainly begun, and must be continued and further developed through new interdisciplinary research communities. A first lead has already emerged from the epochal conjuncture of our times: economic and ecological aspects can no longer be separated.

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