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FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Institute of Political Studies

Department of Political Science

Bachelor's Thesis

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Formation for a dying world: how young university students navigate the
socio-ecological crisis and perceive their role in the future

Bachelor's Thesis

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Declaration

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on 28/04/2024

Anna Bruno

References

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Abstract

This work aims to contribute to the understanding of today's social and ecological challenges by researching the contradictions of modernity, starting from the colonial nature of the latter. The study was built around a set of assumptions, studying the main factors which allow for the reproduction of modern living and prevent people from imagining alternatives. These barriers were explored by interviewing young university students, a demographic highly concerned by ecological destruction, with questions directed towards understanding their perception of the present and the future. The factors identified as significant in the perpetuation of modernity are work, isolation and comfort. Throughout this study, imagination is confirmed as a crucial factor in the creation of alternatives.

Abstrakt

Tato práce si klade za cíl přispět k pochopení dnešních sociálních a ekologických výzev zkoumáním rozporů modernity, počínaje její koloniální povahou. Studie je postavena na souboru hypotéz, jmenovitě na tom, že existují některé hlavní faktory, které umožňují reprodukci moderního života a brání lidem představit si možné alternativy. To bylo testováno při dotazování mladých univerzitních studentů, demografické skupiny velmi znepokojené ekologickou destrukcí, s otázkami zaměřenými na pochopení jejich vnímání současnosti a budoucnosti. Faktory identifikované jako významné pro zachování modernity jsou práce, izolace a pohodlí. V celé této studii je představivost potvrzena jako zásadní faktor při vytváření alternativ.

Keywords

Modernity, coloniality, imagination, socio-ecological crisis, youth

Klíčová slova

Modernita, kolonialita, imaginace, socio-ekologická krize, mládež

Title

Formation for a dying world: how young university students navigate the socio-ecological crisis and perceive their role in the future

Název práce

Formování pro umírající svět: jak mladí vysokoškoláci procházejí sociálně-ekologickou krizí a vnímají svou roli v budoucnosti

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Introduction

Modern ways of living have proven to be unsustainable, with catastrophic effects on diversity of life and culture. Modernity itself is a story that brings all kinds of contradictions. However, human societies, and especially those who first made up the story of modernity and then exported it all over the world, struggle to learn from these contradictions, and they now appear to be stuck. It seems that they are unable to imagine alternatives, and hence they keep reproducing systems that fuel problems already identified long ago, such as the socio-ecological crisis. Born from this context, this research aims to understand what are the factors that allow for the reproduction of said systems and at the same time prevent alternatives from being imagined and realised. It does so by first retracing the steps of the story of modernity back to its colonial origins and patterns, to then apply the theory explored to a qualitative interview study which centres the experience of young university students conducting modern lifestyles and their perceptions concerning present and future perspectives.^p

This thesis project has changed a lot through time, especially because of the magnitude of the themes here faced. In such cases one tends to ask big questions, because of the need for complete, revelatory answers. Talking for myself, a person in their youth surrounded by an extremely complex reality which seems so fragile, yet so incredibly hard to change, I have many questions. My first impulse was to analyse current phenomena and find their root cause(s), reason for which the initial focus was on urbanisation and its role in today's socio-ecological crises. While it stays one of the areas of interest of this research, I found that not only it was too broad of a topic, but also thoroughly researched. Looking for another question, I went back to what most interested me, and I often returned to a point which can be summarised in: what is it that stops us from shifting to ecological societies, despite having all the information that sits in front of us saying that we really should?

By relating with those around me, both in spoken and written form, my focus switched to a research based not only on material facts of the present, but on people's imaginaries concerning the future, their future, within a world which crosses multiple crises. More specifically I chose to interview young university students (people in their early 20s) which tend to be aware and worried about the ongoing ecological destruction, but choose to go to university and specialise in subjects whose very existence seems pointless within human societies going towards self destruction. In short, the idea was (and is) to understand the contradictions between people's perception of the current socio-ecological crises and their action in the world, in particular the directions they choose to take.

According to my observations, nowadays the possible directions one might take are greatly reduced by a number of societal and systemic factors, which force us into massified decisions. Taking paths which steer away from pre-packaged societal expectations is more often than not inaccessible, from many perspectives, which I will elaborate on in the following pages. The old world is dying, yet it prevents us from imagining something different. Let us try to understand why. In the words of Vanessa Machado de Oliveira (2017):

“Many people ask me the question: if not modernity, then what? I usually say that this is a logical question—within modernity’s logic. I warn people who start with that question that they will not like my answer, which is: we will only be able to imagine something genuinely different if we first become suspicious of what we desire and are able to imagine within modernity.” (p.152)

1. Introducing Modernity – where an Attempt is made to Challenge the Single Story

Something that I learned during my studies is to be aware of the single story, the one that is taught and narrated as the ‘truest’ of them all. In all the educational institutions I crossed, the single story was a recurring subject, which I soon found to be boring, and often despicable. It is hard to challenge, because one of its main characteristics is that it is placed above all other stories, often becoming untouchable: some call it ‘objective’. However, I believe it is worth a try, or more, to confront it with the power of other stories.

In my experience, one of the most powerful stories, narrated as a single story, is the one of modernity. The way I perceive it is as a story containing many other stories. As a premise, I came to the conclusion that it is quite hard – and dare I say pointless – to either find a working definition of ‘modernity’ in previous literature or to attempt to create one myself. Instead, this research will attempt to explore the multifaceted story of modernity by looking into it through the perspectives of different authors, and in particular through the critical lenses offered by decolonial and anti-development theorists, who often carry through the double task of unveiling the fallacies behind Eurocentric paradigms and putting light on Other epistemologies, long hidden and excluded.

For instance, one recurring tendency of Western epistemology is a process of “*simplification* of complexity” (Dussel, 2013), often resulting in binary thinking. Simplification, which happens

through rationalisation of life, is a necessary step in order to “make the world system *manageable*” (Dussel, 2013). An example of this process can be found in the conceptualisation of modernity itself throughout the centuries. Famously formalised by Weber in a lecture in 1917, modernity as ‘disenchantment’ was a long-standing critique which goes back to the eighteenth century and the early romantics, who criticised “the Enlightenment emphasis on reason and science at the expense of other ways of apprehending and being in the world” (Saler, 2006, p.695). More specifically, Weber meant it as “the loss of the overarching meanings, animistic connections, magical expectations, and spiritual explanations that had characterized the traditional world, as a result of the ongoing “modern processes of rationalization, secularization, and bureaucratization” (Saler, 2006, p.695). For a long time, this understanding turned into a prevalent discourse, to the point that a *binary* was created between modernity and enchantment. Those that criticised it were labelled as reactionary anti-modernists and those things considered “enchantments” were depicted as “residual leftovers from a premodern world” (Saler, 2006). At some point a different discourse came about, ‘mirroring’ the binary previously discussed, for it labelled modernity as global enchantment, exposed as inherently irrational. This type of discourse, called *dialectical*, can be found in writings of authors that criticised modernity from within its centre (Europe), such as Marx, Adorno and Horkheimer (Saler, 2006). While both the binary and dialectical approaches to the problem of modern enchantment continue to be influential in academia, since the 1990s a new approach called *antinomial* gained popularity: the idea behind it is to reject the ‘either/or’ logic and welcome modernity’s contradictions (Saler, 2006). In practice, it attempts to undo centuries of simplification. This approach goes much further than academia: as a matter of fact, in the past decades there has been a general shift from totality to fragmentation in many aspects of life, ranging from identity to relationships to information and so on. While this tendency could be praised as a return to complexity and a door to new possibilities, a reality check is also necessary: centuries of single stories create the habit to look for grand narratives and certainty. Modernity has no rivals in that sense. Moreover, it still maintains a respectful image, managing to conceal several of its layers. Let us then revert yet another process of simplification.

In the attempt of making visible some of its often hidden faces, the concept of modernity will be often here accompanied by the one of coloniality, reminding us that "the benefits we associate with modernity are created and maintained by historical, systemic, and ongoing processes that are inherently violent and unsustainable. In other words [...], modernity cannot exist without expropriation, extraction, exploitation, militarization, dispossession, destitution, genocides, and ecocides." (Machado de Oliveira, 2021, p.44)

The concept of *coloniality*, distinct from colonialism, was first proposed by Anibal Quijano; while colonialism as explicit political order was defeated in most places, it left a powerful legacy: coloniality, an ongoing form of domination which centres European culture as a universal cultural model (Quijano, 2007). In his essay “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality”, Quijano does not attempt to identify the roots of modernity, but he recognises how defining the colonial enterprise, especially (but not only) in the Americas, was to the project of modernity/coloniality. In fact, he affirms, the European paradigm of rationality could only truly constitute and strengthen itself by relating to other epistemologies, namely those it colonised. The core dualism of subject-object was intentionally applied in relation to the colonies, with Europe as subject and the colonies as object, the first superior and the latter inferior. “The ‘subject’ is bearer of ‘reason’, while the ‘object’ is not only external to it, but different nature. In fact, it is ‘nature’ ” (Quijano, pp.172-3). This reasoning, which we can identify as *coloniality of power*, resulted in the complete submission of those peoples and territories considered ‘object’, negating – and repressing – their ability of producing knowledge. Quijano believes that the key to subvert the paradigm of modernity/coloniality is “to liberate the production of knowledge, reflection, and communication from the pitfalls of European rationality/modernity.” (p.177) In other words, de/colonisation starts from the way we think and interact with our surroundings: it starts from our own imagination.

In order to bring the previous reflection on a more practical ground, we will examine one of the main pillars of the project of modernity/coloniality: the idea of progress. In its general meaning, progress is understood as the attempt to better human life, bringing it to a higher universal standard. Now that standard coincides with security, economic independence, access to healthcare, access to education and so on. To make a life worth living, these basic needs must be met, and anyone that speaks the language of reason will tell you so. Modernity has succeeded in rationalising and universalising what any human needs to live to the point that what – negatively – exceeds the standard is labelled as uncivilised. This example shows to what extent the language of European rationality, or ‘language of reason’, was spread globally, together with Western life standards. Therefore, progress is soon unveiled as a push towards rationalisation of all life: “the imperial law of the world is understanding. Every point in this world must be understood by every other point. As a consequence, every point in the world must be equivalent to every other point” (Achterbusch, 1982, p.11).

1.1 Setting the Context of Modernity – the Story of “Time” and “Space”

When talking of homogeneity in contemporary human societies, there is nothing more apt to the conversation than the understanding of time. In fact, despite a very few exceptions (which nevertheless tend to use both their traditional measure of time and the standardised one), time has been standardised to the Christian Era, the Gregorian calendar and clock time all across the globe. The last few generations whose lives revolve around urban spaces have only come to know and understand the passing of time through the international standard-time zone system, with the clock as their holy reference. To some it might come as a surprise that said understanding of time is a story which is about little more than a century old. Before the arrival of the locomotive and industrialisation, each community calculated time according to natural solar rhythms particular to where it was located (Zerubavel, 1982). Since then, the calculation of time has been restructured, standardised and rationalised according to the needs of a modern world, to help with the flow of information, transport and capital. As Zerubavel explains, this model has been opposed, and still is by some, in the attempt of challenging Western supremacy over the rest of the world and cultures (1982). Nevertheless, this is the ‘time’ most of us know.

On a not so far dimension, the war against diversity is also fought on the ground: it is the conflict of space against place. According to the definition of Sachs in his essay “One World”, in a space-centred perception “the world is on one level, stretching out as a two-dimensional plane where each point equals any other point; what distinguishes them is only their geometrical position” (p. 121). The ultimate example of this perception is the map, which presents a flattened world where places are located in a grid of longitudinal and latitudinal lines (Sachs, 2010). Mapping, or cartography, was and still is an essential tool to projects of colonisation/modernisation, the first phase of transforming places into spaces. “Before the conquest, the local inhabitant's environment was still amorphous. It was up to the coloniser, a quasi-divine figure, to give shape to the space” (Westphal, 2011, p.211). Giving shape meant assimilating that place into the modern system of knowledge, therefore restructuring it according to the rules of science, state and market. While these words at first might bring our minds to projects of urbanisation, it is important to stress that a space-centred perception includes all environments, going from cities to villages to forests, and so on. Many places and cultures have been erased and entirely replaced by space and modernity, but many resist, under constant threat by that rationality which points at optimising and reordering every one, where, thing.

Anthony Giddens, author of the book *The Consequences of Modernity*, explains the particularity of the condition of modernity in terms of time and space, which are at first separated one from the other and then recombined in a way that is the most functional in the division of social life. As a consequence, time and space are reshaped into “standardised, empty dimensions” which form the model for modern social life, commonly characterised by distanced relations that vary according to continual external inputs of knowledge. As a consequence, under the influence of a foreign social ordering and understanding, place becomes “increasingly phantasmagoric”, surreal (Giddens, 1991). To give an example, it might have happened to many people reading these pages to go visit a place praised by many for its uniqueness, to then find it flattened, empty, reshaped – like many others seen before – to the need of the one that comes to look, and not to live. The reverse process might also be familiar to some: to live in a place and see it being transformed into a space, its complexities and depth filtered according to civilisation’s standards, summarised and accumulated in some museum or local restaurant, ready to be consumed by a daily visitor. Or again, to live for years and years in a place and struggling to connect to it and its other inhabitants. These examples reflect how deeply the restructuring of places into homogenous space impacts the human experience within them.

“(E)veryone is shaped by the history of the places they live in, just as these places are shaped by their own history. They develop together. People become intertwined, their lives woven together by geographical trajectories inscribed in the very ground. Breaking this link between people and places also means breaking the link between those people and their past. [...] And it is this flattening that all infrastructure produces, through the mesh of connection, point by point, node by node, line by line, that it cuts across territories, always in a straight line. Forcing matter. To homogenise, to make comparable. Each part of the being, each cut-out part must have its function. Always a problem of planning. Geometry. Measurement. Equivalence.” (Vidalou, 2017, p.66)

Stories of places are our own stories. The single story of modernity has taken a lot of space, and it keeps pushing for more. ‘Time’ and ‘space’ are now rooted in our minds, often leaving us disconnected, suffocated in empty dimensions. Many wander, looking for a different narration of what surrounds them. Hopefully, at some point, they will find one another: it is harder to imagine all alone.

1.2 The Modern Person – the Story of the “Independent Individual”

As the previous story about 'time' and 'space' is spread – often forcefully – all over the globe, the human experience also has to change and adapt to it, creating a parallel story on how one ought to be within the modern world. I will attempt to narrate it by focusing both on the structural dimensions of modern society which most are born into and on the model of the modern individual one is asked to comply to. Now, let the story begin.

With the expansion of the urban and the mechanisation of agriculture, the modern lifestyle reaches the masses. Most people now must possess identity documents, undergo a (more or less) homogenised primary education and often secondary education which shapes them to enter the workforce, they are under the law of nation states and have mandatory duties as citizens. Together with social and technological changes, needs are also reshaped. Many critics of modernity, or postmodern thinkers, have tried to assess the impact of these institutions in human societies. Illich, in *Deschooling Society* (1971), condemns schooling as the first stage of alienation of people, for it institutionalises life and commodifies knowledge. He also highlights the connection between mandatory schooling and poverty, the latter being a concept manufactured depending on the stage of modernisation of a country. Just as schooling, work is defined as the best way out of poverty, the key to consumption and basic needs. Having a job is a necessity, a material and a moral one, which provides protection from accusations of laziness and uselessness within society. As Amelia Horgan explains in her book *Lost in Work* (2021), the conditions in which we work are usually imposed from above, making our entrance into work unfree. "The lack of freedom in the workplace", Horgan explains, "is, in part, the product of a background condition of work. This background condition is that the majority of society must find a job to be able to live. In this sense, we do not make a free choice to enter work. Of course, we are not forced to work. We are not dragged from our beds and plonked in an office chair, made to look at spreadsheets at gunpoint, and shot if we fail to meet monthly targets – but the kind of society we live in is one in which having a job is a necessity. Without a job, except for the very rich, life is made extremely difficult. This is why we go to work." (Horgan, 2021, p.10)

Capitalist work, in fact, includes control and discipline for the sake of maximised profit. In short, it seems that the institutionalisation of education and the spread of capitalist work have contributed to the creation of urban spaces centred on profit. In this sense, neoliberal governance was more than able to modify urban areas, often through shock therapy of deregulation, privatisation and liberalisation, with the goal of transforming them in spaces of economic growth and elite consumerism (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). The current model of urbanisation, which critical urban theorists also call neoliberal urbanisation (Brenner & Theodore, 2002), serves exactly to the

accumulation of capital and the reproduction of social hierarchies, while also alighting the socio-ecological crisis. Outsourcing the material needs (both essential and not) of billions of people living in urban areas creates global infrastructures based on extractivism and over-exploitation of land and resources. This way of living is not only one of the primary causes of the climate crisis, but is also not desirable in the sense that it keeps societies disconnected from the way and knowledge on how they feed, clothe, house themselves, meaning that in times of crisis they will be in a disadvantaged and fragile position.

Now, this is not to say that the whole world now functions in this way and that people everywhere live atomised, disconnected lives. Gérald Berthoud in his essay titled “Market” stresses that “even in a society in which the market principle is becoming the generalized guide to social interaction, a whole universe of interpersonal relationships remains a basic mode of social existence” (p.91). However, it seems that the end goal of societies built around the paradigm of modernity/rationality is to first weaken and then substitute traditional and diverse social practices, such as solidarity and mutual aid, with impersonal interactions mediated by state and market (Berthoud, 2010). The individual within this system can obtain freedom in an ethical way solely by complying with the rules of citizenship and by having consuming power. We can clearly see the outline of the model of the modern individual taking shape: freed from constraints such as spirituality or religion, no longer dependent on community or social links for survival, the ‘modern human’ is self-reliant, accompanied by their ability to consume and be consumed within a system ruled by reason.

At this point one might ask, couldn’t the modern human be one way of being human, among many other ways? Well, yes, ideally. In practice, and in theory too, we have seen that modernity is intrinsically colonial, and aims to and claims universality. Seeing that it is backed by a “system of knowledge that claims validity everywhere and for everybody” (Sachs, 2010, p. 120) and a strong material advantage – gained through extraction and exploitation – over other cultures, it is clear that it is not just one among others. It is a threat to others. Especially since it holds no restraints in enforcing its truth. In fact, as said before, modernity is a project in expansion, constantly forcing people out of non-modern, ‘uncivilised’ ways of living and being, both through direct coercion but also through processes of delegitimisation and indoctrination.

Modernity/Coloniality, with science’s objective and neutral explanatory power (Alvares, 2010) on its side, creates a clear image of how one classifies as human; it explains human nature, needs and desires, making them universal. In accordance with those, it builds a pre-packaged linear path which every individual should take in order to live a decent life, successfully standardising not only

how a human should be, but also how their life ought to be lived. Looking at mass societies today, it can be said that the project of modernity has been extensively successful in its objective. Nowadays billions of ‘independent individuals’ walk the earth, or better said, emptied spaces, following the principle of optimisation in everything they do: relationships, work/study, consumption, vacations, and so on. An example of this phenomenon can be found by looking at the role of students in higher education nowadays. The book *Academic Capitalism in the Age of Globalisation* conceptualises the figure of the university student as a “vessel of knowledge”, a commodity that can be bought and sold (Kauppinen et al., 2014, p.249). University becomes then a site of consumption of knowledge, and the student within tends to act as a consumer: pays tuition, absorbs knowledge and then resells their human capital to governments, corporations and so on. The consumer mentality “has transformed learning into a process of picking up, digesting, and reproducing series of unconnected, short, packaged segments of information” (Kauppinen et al., 2014, p.260). Needless to say, students often resist to this model and strive for a university free of relations ruled by capital. However, higher education increasingly resembles a market, to the point that “there is a growing consensus that higher education is a global enterprise” (Kauppinen & Cantwell, 2014 p.137), and students themselves consciously enter university to increase their value in the market, optimising their chances for a ‘credible’ future and a role in the path of progress. “No one is allowed to rest until everything that is has been improved – that is, no one is ever allowed to rest” (Gronemeyer, 2010, p.63). At the time this text is written, this is the norm of a human life: willingly or not, dedicated to progress and, as a consequence, the success of modernity.

Many take this global historical direction as proof to justify inherently individualistic and gain-oriented human nature. The norm becomes then ‘natural’, somehow inevitable. This view, however, ignores centuries of human conditioning pointed at the current direction. One might even call it *domestication*, but this term is rarely used. Lexicon aside, the point is that humans were and are conditioned, through various strategies, to adapt to and reproduce current social norms and institutions. This discourse is especially relevant here because it allows to uncover the dynamics of power at work within modern societies and denaturalise the mainstream rhetoric which depicts modernity as the best – or only – possible way to create the conditions for lives worth living. A useful key to analyse certain aspects of modernity and retrace their origins can be Foucault’s writings and lectures on biopower: at the core of his theory is an analysis of the exercise of power in the past centuries, which gradually shifted from juridical to disciplinary power, the latter being typically exercised within modern states. In their article, published in 2006, “Biopower Today” Rabinow and Rose explain:

“For a long time, he (Foucault) argued, one of the privileges of sovereign power was the right to decide life and death, a right that, by the classical age, had been constrained to occasions when the sovereign himself was threatened from enemies without and within. This was the juridical form of sovereign power—the right of a ruler to seize things, time, bodies, ultimately the life of subjects. It was the model of power that was codified and generalized in classical political philosophy—a model that remained essentially unaltered when the ‘king’s head’ was displaced from sovereign to state. But, Foucault argued, since the classical age, deduction has become merely one element in a range of mechanisms working to generate, incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize and organize the forces under it. [...] Power, Foucault argues, is now situated and exercised at the level of life.” (p.196)

Said power, commonly known as disciplinary power, is one that exercises control on many levels, ranging from an “anatomo-politics of the human body, seeking to maximize its forces and integrate it into efficient systems” to a “biopolitics of the population, focusing on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanisms of life: birth, morbidity, mortality, longevity” (Rabinow & Rose, 2006, p. 196). Biopower, or modern power, can therefore be seen as liberating, in the sense that it offers opportunities in exchange for control. For example, it can provide someone with medical assistance if they are willing to conform to the rules of social order, like we have seen with the measures put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic such as green passes in many European countries. This form of ‘liberation’ can be defined paternalistic, since there are specific conditions set from above under which one can access it. Moreover, due to the expansion of the paradigm of modernity/coloniality, an increasing number of people is born into these conditions and can hardly exit them. First, because of the long-lasting legacy of politics based on ‘basic needs’ of each individual; second, because those trying to actively create alternatives will face power in its sovereign, juridical form.

1.3 Basic Needs: the Anchor of Modernity/Coloniality

‘Basic needs’ is something that has been taught to most of us in school. It is a theory that claims universality for what each human needs. In a globalised world, it might seem a useful tool to provide all peoples with what they ‘objectively’ need, ranging from food and shelter to education and healthcare. However, there is much more to this story. For starters, it has to be acknowledged that the theory of basic needs itself is the result of a process of simplification of reality, as it narrows the human experience in the world into one standard. Despite this intrinsic limitation, it could be argued that most theories are a result of simplification. Still, by looking at the history of basic needs

and how they were operationalised, we can see that the way knowledge is formulated and spread is in fact very relevant. Basic needs have been naturalised, becoming one of the single stories at the backbone of modernity/coloniality.

The (hi)story of basic needs is one of neocolonialism, hidden behind the mask of development. It is a story of exportation of Western standards of living in all the places where they needed to be 'raised', namely the 'underdeveloped' world. The discourse that soon became popular is that "most people are needy, these needs give them rights, these rights translate into entitlements for care, and therefore impose duties on the rich and the powerful" (Illich, 2010, p.100). 'Needy' became synonym to 'poor', and poverty is a problem that must be solved.

"In 1962, the United Nations began to operationalize poverty. The secretary general referred to 'those people who live below an acceptable minimum standard'. He gave credence to two notions: humanity could now be split into those above and those below a measurable standard; and a new kind of bureaucracy was called for to establish criteria of what is acceptable – and what is not. The first instrument that was created to establish this standard was called the GNP." (Illich, 2010, p. 100)

By using GNP as a global measure of comparison, needs are first identified at the regional or national level. However, development does not stop there, as it implements "other sets of globally established economic criteria and systems of comparison" with the goal of assessing specific needs. (Rahnema, 2010, p.181). Intergovernmental organisations such as FAO, Unesco and WHO all have their criteria which establish when it is proper for them to intervene in their area of interest. For instance, for WHO "the criteria of poverty are expressed in terms of the ratio of doctors, nurses and health centres to the population" (Rahnema, 2010, p.181), criteria which disvalue and ignore local medical knowledge and application. Therefore, "needs are perceived as figures or combinations of elements disembedded from the particular mode of livelihood characteristic of each culturally defined vernacular space" (Rahnema, 2010, p.181). As can be easily guessed, decades of politics of intervention based on basic needs brought more disasters than solutions. However, the narrative of basic needs is still quite influential globally, supported by the 'human rights' discourse.

If 'poor' means 'in need of something', and each human has specific needs that must be met, then to be poor means to be 'less human'. Development, therefore, is driven by humanistic reasons and aims to give people the chance to live full human (and humane) lives, which is their natural right. Development is progress. And everyone *needs* and *has a right to* progress.

The narrative above, stripped down to the core, is the mainstream behind political discourse and action from the '60s until current days. This is cause of many contradictions. For instance, modern/colonial institutions, structurally dependent on extraction and exploitation, are called upon to solve problems at the roots of their very existence. A fitting example can be identified in a recent case debated at the European Court of Human Rights, where a group of older Swiss women accused the Swiss government of “violating their human rights by failing to take sufficient action on climate change” (Dickie, & Abnett, 2024). The ‘climate case’ was won and “the Court said it interpreted the European Convention on Human Rights language on a right to private and family life to encompass a right to effective protection by governments from climate change's adverse impacts on lives, health, well-being and quality of life” (Dickie, & Abnett, 2024). While climate activists often deeply criticise development, they frequently still rely on ‘rights’ because that is what is recognised by the ruling institutions. This means using their ‘privileged’ position of needy individuals worthy of rights to defend biodiversity and a chance for a not-so-fucked-up future. However, it is necessary to point out the obvious: this approach, in many ways, keeps legitimising a system where those holding power are made managers of life in all its forms, from seeds to humans, and so on. “The process began originally with the loss of the commons and now appears complete as people are turned into abstract elements of a mathematical stasis” (Illich, 2010, p.107). Then, even if ‘we are running out of time’ to take significant climate action, the question of perpetuating the legitimacy of institutions that assert such a deep control over life (biopolitics) should be taken more seriously. Modern citizenship can be an instrument to access rights and comforts, but its use implies dynamics of exclusion, homogenisation and control. At the same time, through the provision of basic needs, it keeps people dependent on the structure that feeds them. It keeps them anchored to modernity.

“The various kinds of traditional state systems that in times past used to be spread all over the world were often violent and authoritarian. But one thing they did not – or could not – do. They did not try to enter all areas of human life and they did not set up total systems for social and political engineering, based on a theory of inexorable historical laws. Such states had neither the technological wherewithal nor, in most cases, the philosophical hubris to mount any such ambitious effort. As a result, the citizens, even when victims of state violence, had a few escape routes open. The state, too, knowing that its writ did not run beyond a point, had to learn to live with human diversity, if not on ideological grounds, at least on grounds of realpolitik and pragmatic considerations. Under the dispensation of the modern nation-state, similar escape routes can be kept open only when the polity is fully democratic. Otherwise, the state’s control

over a citizen's rights and freedoms is much more total. With the help of modern technology, management systems and information control, such a state can successfully plug the escape routes that used to be available to the citizen of pre-modern or non-modern societies." (Nandy, 2010, p.303)

1.4 Security and Control: Modernity is not a Choice

As Ashis Nandy writes (above), a defining characteristic of modern societies is that they are extremely hard to exit, or to escape from. In most cases, even if one were to decide they no longer wanted to live within the comforts and obligations of modernity, they would have to stay tied to it. An example of this is that in many countries it is mandatory to register a kid at birth, so that the parents are given a certificate of birth which confirms that they are the rightful parents of the newborn. If this procedure is not complied with, kids can be taken away from their carers and assigned to child protection services. This law, other than reproducing and legitimising solely the nuclear family, makes it mandatory for each life to be registered to the government; furthermore, this process is not limited to humans, as the lives of other beings are also regulated (for instance, even dogs, plants and animals considered livestock have identification numbers or passports in many countries). Once a life is registered, there starts the process of standardisation and homogenisation. Standards of living are applied to all people, whether they want it or not, and ways of living outside of those standards are repressed, made difficult to access and maintain and even illegalised. For instance, in the past decades it has become increasingly difficult for homeless people to sleep on the streets in public spaces, because of laws that have prohibited free camping and set up urban decency standards. The result is the criminalisation of those people that do not meet the standards of living. This and many other obstacles to creating alternatives show that, when standardisation is not successful, more explicit forms of control are exercised.

What makes this more interesting is that the expansion of technologies of control, such as mass surveillance, militarisation of public spaces and data collection, is put into effect under the principle of security of citizens and consumers. A recent example is the approval of the creation of the EU Health Data Space, which will digitally store information "on all medical treatment, including vaccination status, medication and pregnancies, laboratory and discharge reports", making such files (and more) accessible to a large number of organisations throughout Europe for research and policy use, no direct consent from patients needed (Breyer, 2024). The EU officially claims it "protects the health of citizens and improves the resilience of healthcare systems" (European Commission, 2024). Similar processes of data collection and surveillance are happening under the

name of protection and security all over the world, and in particular in high-income modern states, where such technologies are easier to implement because of pre-existing networks of social control. These measures aim to further rationalise the human experience in the world, make it predictable and therefore easier to manage and commodify.

“The idea of development is enthusiastic about this gigantic project of standardization. ‘The main cause of fear’, as Descartes wrote, ‘is surprise.’ Being secure means to be secure against surprises. Security demands exclusion of the unforeseeable. This understanding of security involves establishing the same degree of familiarity and knowledge the world over. And in order to produce a worldwide homogeneity, one has to undertake the eradication of all that is foreign. ‘The best surprise is no surprise’” (Gronemeyer, 2010, p.63)

We can see, then, how the story of modernity/coloniality attempts to take all the space, ingest and disvalue other stories. Despite this, many resist, and new ones are born every moment. But many also die, suffocated by growing measures of control and standardisation. Modernity is in crisis, but it is still so difficult to escape from it. In the meantime, we can live its contradictions and learn from them.

1.5 What about today’s contradictions?

It is a common narrative nowadays that we have a little window of time left to change the course of history and prevent the worst effects of the socio-ecological crisis: it is ‘now or never’. While change is a certainty, it seems like the direction that human societies are taking are not at all that revolutionary in comparison to the past decades. Greenhouse gas emissions keep rising and the window gets smaller and smaller. The way we live – by we I mean the north of the world, including the north of the north and the north of the south – is not sustainable, but as we have seen in the previous chapters, modernity/coloniality is a story that is very hard to let go of. Furthermore, as Fisher points out:

“instead of saying that everyone is responsible for climate change, we all have to do our bit, it would be better to say that no-one is, and that’s the very problem. The cause of eco-catastrophe is an impersonal structure which, even though it is capable of producing all manner of effects, is precisely not a subject capable of exercising responsibility. The

required subject - a collective subject - does not exist, yet the crisis, like all the other global crises we're now facing, demands that it be constructed.” (Fisher, 2022, p.72)

While Fisher’s analysis could be perceived as overly pessimistic if applied to the whole world, it definitely holds some truth in those places where the commons have been completely extirpated, such as in most Western countries. Coincidence would have it that it is exactly those societies that live almost uniformly by modern standards of living that desperately need to change. However, they are the same societies where resistance is at its lowest and management of life is most successful. Fisher describes this current reality as one of “capitalist realism”, defined as “a pervasive atmosphere, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action” (Fisher, 2022, p. 22), which results in people being in a state of ‘reflexive impotence’, conscious of how bad things are, but even more conscious that they can’t do anything about it. (Fisher, 2022, p.27). Fisher focuses his research mostly on young students, which he often finds to be in a state of ‘depressive hedonia’, characterised as “the inability to do anything else except pursue pleasure”. The youth has a sense that 'something is missing' but cannot think of ways to fill this void other than with pleasure (Fisher, 2022, p.28-9).

This youth knows that the future will very likely look extremely different from life as we know it, but has no certainty on what these changes will mean for their life and communities, or even if our species and many others will survive these changes. “This uncertainty haunts us and daunts us. Little wonder that many people attempt to cling to opinions and approaches that assume certainty and security, despite mounting evidence to the contrary” (Gillespie, 2019, p.45). In response to these approaches, climate psychologist Sally Gillespie, in her book *Climate Crisis and Consciousness: Re-imagining Our World and Ourselves* suggests that, in order “to embrace the reality of what is happening, we have to develop other-regarding rather than self-regarding” (2019, p.23). In other words, it is necessary to re-adjust our perspectives, trained to look mostly at ourselves and our immediate needs, to the outside world. It is necessary to start caring for others and “to spend time with what is, rather than what was or what should be” (Gillespie, 2019, p.47).

And, to quickly end with a pressing question: “how long can a culture persist without the new? What happens if the young are no longer capable of producing surprises?” (Fisher, 2022, p.9).

2. Methods

Now that the state of the art has been thoroughly reviewed and explored, it is time to discuss methodology. This chapter will indeed attempt to outline the methodological approach here selected according to the research questions, objectives and aims.

2.1 Research Problem and Aims

Right to the point, here follows the research question(s):

(1) In light of the urgency and general acknowledgment of the current socio-ecological crisis, what are the factors that lead to the perpetuation of modern urban living and people's participation in it? (2) What is the role of young university students in this situation?

As visible, the first part of the question (1) is quite broad, reason for which follows the second part (2), attempting to narrow the research question to a more specific demographic, namely university students. Due to the experimental nature of this study, a mixed qualitative approach was preferred, consisting of interviews and vignettes focused on understanding the paths and life imaginaries of young people who are currently studying in university. As previously expressed, this dissertation revolves around the realm of imagination and its extents, aiming to better understand contradictions between perception and action and identify the barriers between them. To clarify, the working aim of the present thesis is to contribute to a better understanding of contradictions between personal perception of the current socio-ecological crisis and action of young university students by analysing the narrative behind their present and future imaginaries. The following pages will provide a more detailed report of the process behind the methodology, going from the research design and philosophy behind it, to data collection and analysis and finally limitations.

2.2 Methodological Approach

2.2.1 Research philosophy, approach and design

This research springs first and foremost from my desire to talk to fellow people about the future. Since I came to understand the seriousness of the socio-ecological crisis, talking about future imaginaries has been one of my main activities, soon crossing with all other spheres of life,

including academia. For instance, something which captured my interest was the fact that the absolute majority of young people I met knowingly chose paths coherent with a dying world: either work or university, the latter often providing specialisation for the first. Even more interesting, if asked, most people would express concern because they did not place hope in what they were doing and often could not visualise a future connected to it. They would also express extreme concern concerning the ecological state of the world. Then, they would go back to their routines, changing more or less nothing about their action and direction. This prompted in me a big

“why?”

I took the bachelor thesis as an opportunity to start a conversation and answer this question and many others that came with it. The research process consisted of reading challenging literature and, eventually, interviewing young people studying at university in Prague and Rome. To clarify, when I first started this research, I lived in Prague, and I later moved not so far from Rome. While most of the interviews took place in Rome, I decided to keep the research material collected in Prague because I believe that my assumptions can apply to all young university students living in urban areas in Europe. This specific demographic was selected for various reasons:

- young people show to be very concerned about environmental issues in polls (UNDP, 2021)
- university is often seen as a continuation of school but, unlike the latter, it is not mandatory. This (generally) means that the student has chosen to take that direction and can respond for it.
- Rome (/Prague) is the closest urban centre to where I live and I believed it important to interview people with urban lifestyles and habits.

On the other hand, interviews were chosen as a research tool that would allow me to get in direct contact with people and gain a more detailed perception of their experience and imaginaries. The semi-structured interview design allowed me to collect information that is easily comparable but also adaptable to each specific person. Additionally, part of the interview was based on two vignettes, namely “text, images, or other forms of stimuli [to] which respondents are asked to respond” (Harrits, & Møller, 2021, p. 3), which I constructed according to assumptions and research question(s), just as the rest of the interview. In line with the research question, I inserted throughout the interview questions that aimed to uncover those factors responsible for the perpetuation of modern urban living, which I identified as:

- work (profession and schooling)

- isolation (lack of community, poor mental health)
- control (repression, security)
- comfort (order, refusal of the unpredictable)

These factors will be further explained in the discussion. Here follows the interview structure:

1. Introduction – info about research, what to expect, consent form
2. Open questions
3. Administration of two vignettes in form of narrative followed by related questions
4. Biographic information
5. Final comments and feedback
(+ breaks in between when necessary)

Part 1 – Introduction

- Name, preferred pronouns
- Info about research
- Structure – what to expect
- Give printed consent form. If signed, start recording

Part 2 – Open questions

- What do you study?
- Why did you choose to study this?
- Were you considering any alternatives?
- Do you feel like university is preparing you for the future?
- Do you think there is anything that you could do now that would better prepare you?
- What do you think you will do after university? (What do you expect your normal week to look like?)
- Would you rather do something else?
- (if you did not have to worry about sustaining yourself economically, would you be doing what you are doing?)

Part 3 – Vignettes

In this part, the participant will be given a piece of paper with a vignette in the form of a narrative on it. They will be given the option to read it either by themselves or aloud together with me. The necessary time will be given to read and understand (5 min approx).

Imagine this scenario:

You meet a friend of yours after quite a long time. They are also a young student. At a certain point they tell you that they are unhappy in their current life and have been looking for alternatives. They explain this choice by saying that they are no longer able to cope with the stress of having so many obligations, but mostly they don't see it getting better in the future. They are worried about the

current state of the world, especially concerning ecological destruction and climate change. They often feel isolated, exhausted and depressed, and they need to change rhythm, air and surroundings. Then they tell you about the options they've found so far: most of them seem to entail community living, leaving fast-paced, productive life behind and learning new, practical skills. They tell you that while they are hopeful and excited, they are also accepting uncertainty, as they cannot know how it will go. They will keep you updated and hope to keep in touch.

- What questions would you ask your friend as soon as you learn this news?
- Are you worried for your friend? Why?
- Are you excited for your friend? Why?
- What would you suggest to your friend?
- Could you imagine yourself in the position of your friend?
- Do you see something attractive in the alternative described by your friend?
- What do you see as obstacles?
- Did you ever think of doing something similar?
- When you think of what this friend of yours looks like, what pops up in your mind?
- Do you know anyone exploring alternatives already?

Imagine this scenario:

You receive an email from your friend after some time. It goes like this:

Hello (your name),

As promised, here I am with updates! There is so much to say, I'll try to sum it up. First of all, I'm very excited about my "new life". It's been only a few weeks but I feel so much better, and it seems like I can handle it so far. If you remember, I was quite concerned with having no privacy any more, but honestly it has not been a problem so far. I enjoy community living, a lot! I'm learning so much from all the people living here, and I spend most of my time in the garden, learning how to grow veggies. I also have a lot of time to think, write, draw and have endless talks with Vero and Luka, my roomies. They have been here for quite a long time and I'm catching up a lot on the history of this place thanks to them. They also tell me it hasn't always been easy: apparently some people don't like what we do here and from time to time there are problems with the police. Similar projects to ours have been taken down, spaces evicted and locked, just to stay empty again. This makes me so angry and sad when I think about it. Sometimes I feel so little, facing a giant who is about to step on me. Still, what I'm doing feels right, and I'm with many other nice people here. I cannot wait for you to visit! When will you come?? And how are you doing these days?

Hugs,

Your friend

- What were your main feelings reading this?
- Are you surprised by this email? What surprises you?
- Can you imagine yourself in the position of your friend?
- Do you think you would like to go visit, check it out?
- When your friend writes of the project's problems with police, what do you imagine?

- Do you share the feelings of anger and sadness related to the obstacles encountered in creating alternatives? Do you feel something else instead?

Using the Likert scale to answer:

1. How concerned are you about the current state of the world? (from strongly concerned to strongly not concerned)
2. How concerned are you about the socio-ecological crisis? (from strongly concerned to strongly not concerned)
3. How much do you think your future will be impacted by the socio-ecological crisis? Can you imagine that many things in life as you know it will have to change? (from strongly agree to strongly disagree)

Part 4 – Biographic information

- Age
- Gender
- Size of the city/cities they grew up in
- Education

Part 5 – comments/ feedback

- How do you feel? Would you like to share?
- Is there anything you want to add?
- Do you have any comments that might help me with future interviews?

The interview structure here transcribed was translated to Italian in order to make it accessible to students in Rome. The translation could have resulted in limitations, mostly due to the lack of gender neutral grammar, shortcoming that has been resolved whenever possible by avoiding gendered language.

2.2.2 Data sampling, collection and analysis technique

Once the interview structure was ready, I proceeded to think of how to get in contact with people that would be up for interviews. Something that was clear to me from the beginning was that the wider the sample, the more accurately I could understand the relevance of my assumptions. By wider I do not mean necessarily in number, but in variety. At first, when the research was still based in Prague, the sampling was done through email with the help of my supervisor who forwarded the invite to be interviewed to his students. While in Prague, I only managed to collect one interview. Looking at it in retrospect, it might have been a serious limitation to interview students in Prague by using that method, as those that had answered me were exclusively international students and often depending on visas. This could have been a problem as people on (either work or study) visas have quite strict rules to comply to and this often results in the impossibility of imagining alternatives. The limitation could have been solved by trying to interview students with Czech citizenship, and

that would have probably been my next step, if I had not moved close to Rome. Once there, it was significantly easier to reach a wide variety of students through university group chats and through friends, who passed me contacts of people interested in the interviews. In that case, I made sure that there would be diversity by contacting people that crossed different contexts. In Rome, I collected six interviews, with a total amount of seven interviews as data base for this research. While there could always be more variety, I believe the data sample represents a wide enough variety of experiences to investigate the assumptions and set up a discussion. For instance, among the people interviewed there are students of cinema, law, physics, medicine, politics and economics, humanities and naturopathy, ranging from the ages 20 to 26.

The data collection was carried through exclusively in person with in-depth interviews which took from 25 minutes to over one hour and a half, depending on the person. All interviews were audio-recorded, with the previous consent of the interviewees through a printed consent form. The recording of one interview was partially lost.

The data collected in the interviews was examined through narrative analysis, which allowed to identify trends and compare them to previously formed assumptions, in line with a deductive approach. The findings and the following discussion were grouped mainly according to the four factors previously mentioned: work, isolation, comfort, control.

3. Findings

3.1 Interviews

By analysing the interviews, the following observations can be made:

Young people currently in university did not consider alternatives to it when choosing what to do after high school. They knew they would go to university, the question was mostly what to study and where. As a matter of fact, when asked about alternatives, they almost exclusively (6 out of 7) mentioned only other university courses.

Many students are not sure whether university is preparing them for the future, some say definitely no and others say yes, but in a more general sense. Without any explicit reference to it in the questions, all of them associate the future with finding a job. Apart from the medicine student, none seems to have any certainty concerning future employment.

mostly, university just takes time away from useful things, and you just do it because it is useful for your career (interview n°1)

or...

theory is useful in some ways, but there is too little practice. So, if it prepares you to work? In part, because a theoretical basis is necessary. (interview n° 6)

or...

The university environment is more or less the same environment and the same dynamic as when you are in high school. You study, you take your exams, you graduate and then you think about working. And so it's always something that you keep putting off, trying to find a job, you seem to be getting closer and closer but until you start looking for a job you never get there. (interview n°4)

When young people are asked what could better prepare them for the future they almost exclusively bring up things that can enhance their value in society (marketable skills, languages, experience, international stays, internships) and take them closer to getting a (good) job. One jokingly added that therapy could help too.

Maybe gaining as much experience as possible: that's why I started working in a totally different field, trying to collect all-round experience in different fields, in different associations, in different realities, I think this can prepare me. I don't feel that there is anything more. (interview n°7)

or...

Yes, definitely. Of course, the answer will always be a yes. I would like to be able to maybe have more free time to be able to study languages and that I think is needed for the future in general (interview n°5)

The only clear exception comes from the naturopathy student, who affirms that “*keeping himself constantly updated on what's happening, reading and writing, being in the present*” will better prepare him for the future.

After finishing university, students say they will either work or keep studying to then work. When asked if they would rather do something else, people tend to either say no, or to wish for better jobs, or to say they would like to exit obligations for a while.

I like to do it (take a break) in small doses, maybe after the exam session I always try to take a week's holiday, at the seaside, where I can disconnect from everyone. (interview n°5)

or...

I guess it would be great to have a job that is fulfilling your goals and value but that is more the next five years plan (interview n°1)

When confronted with the vignette scenario of a person experiencing high levels of stress who wishes to stop conducting a productive modern lifestyle, people tend to identify with it but also

clarify that if they were to exit it would only be for a little while, either because they believe in what they are doing, or they are consciously stuck in their reality.

that is, although – as I was saying at the beginning – it is an ideal that has accompanied me all my life, I have to come to terms with the fact that my personality has grown and developed in a context that is diametrically opposed. I kind of wallow in capitalism. [...] I could well imagine myself there, but not in the long term, indefinitely. I should have a ticket back in mind. I repeat, I'm a citizen, I must return to Rome. I don't run away. I hate Rome, but when I leave and then return, I'm happy. (interview n°3)

or...

Yes, for sure, it's a life outside the box, a life... I think I wouldn't be able to make it my life, it would be nice to have a parenthesis of uncertainty, maybe to travel like that without a direction and help. It's nice, it's attractive, but I wouldn't be able to do it forever. (interview n°5)

When asked what is attractive about alternatives, people mention better life and mental health, community living, learning new practical abilities and tranquillity. When asked about obstacles, they mention legality, social expectations, losing a social net, access to resources and healthcare, uncertainty and comfort, economic instability, adrenaline to accumulate.

The obstacles that still stop me from a more natural lifestyle are - I have given myself this personal explanation - the adrenalin rush that you get from chasing something that runs away, in the rhythms of life as we commonly interpret it, such as a degree, an accumulation. (interview n°7)

or...

Certainly (an obstacle would be) the economic point of view, from the point of view perhaps of not having economic stability and then having a family. I would like to have a family. (interview n°5)

After the scenario changes and a conflict with authorities is mentioned, people tend to be less keen to identify themselves in the scenario, with some explicitly saying they do not want to go against authorities. Others seem more concerned with not staying for too long, and they say they would definitely not do it indefinitely, with the exception of the person studying naturopathy.

in part: the slow life without pressure, doing your own thing... yes, it's nice; the more 'anarchic' part less so. (interview n°5)

When people are asked what they imagine with the police involved, they say it is too vague to say for sure, but they mention: occupations, illegal activities, problems with neighbours, orders from above, bigger interests at play. Most people share feelings of anger and sadness related to the

difficulties encountered in creating alternatives, some of them are unsure what to feel because they do not know the context and have doubts about police involvement. There was also a mention of nostalgia of a past before digitalisation and globalisation.

When asked to react to a friend in need and give them advice, some people reacted by suggesting introspective work in all aspects of their life, or to be careful of not losing their individuality, goals and values, or to detach themselves too much from the rest of society outside the chosen community.

I would tell that person not to get too lost in something that makes them lose themselves, in general makes them lose what could be their personality. That is, not to flatten oneself to the circumstances. (interview n°3)

I would ask them to do deep introspective work, so try to – one by one – select and identify all those areas of their life in which they feel something is wrong. (interview n°2)

4. Discussion

Modernity and development discourse, despite being in crisis, are deeply ingrained in our way of thinking and acting. This creates contradictions. In fact, people live by stories whose premises are crumbling, but struggle to find new stories, new ways to face their everyday reality. This research attempted to explore the perspective of young people currently enrolled in university and the reasoning behind the direction they are heading towards. Since this research is characterised by a deductive approach, a set of assumptions was present in structuring it. Here they follow.

4.1 Assumptions

Young people are worried about the climate crisis and many other sociological problems which are a result of modernity. They are often anxious and depressed. They are unsatisfied. Yet, they have some standards that have been set for them and they have to meet them! Otherwise they will face further instability, find themselves at the margins of society with no safety net to fall back on. Furthermore, neoliberal governance filled all possible spaces and it is extremely difficult to create outside of commodification patterns. The easier path is to become students – vessels of knowledge – and have a place within the global market. Both as consumers and as products. Eventually join the labour market. In most cases, university is not a transformative place, nor is capitalist work. Most people reject work (psychologically, physically, etc.) but they go back to it because of lack of al-

alternatives within modern societies. High living standards, privatisation of all spaces and activities, government control and repression according to capital interests are all factors that contribute to this. Young people have and can only imagine a very limited agency and range of choices, not necessarily because of material means (even though it often contributes a lot) but because of the paradigm in place. The main factors contributing to this reality are:

Work

Work is a condition in which one has obligations (time, energy, availability) connected to money (it can be a job, a profession, or higher education). In modern societies, life without money is extremely difficult, making work a necessity. Furthermore, people rarely decide the conditions under which they work, making entrance into work unfree (Horgan, 2021). People also struggle to imagine and accomplish alternatives in which they do not have to work, since modernity narrates human life around work: you study to work, work to live, and retire because you worked.

Isolation

Isolation is a situation caused by lack of community or social net. In modern individualistic societies, isolation is normalised, and people live atomised lives. This is because individual gains and self sufficiency are given moral priority over building community and social interactions, making people oriented mostly towards themselves and their own personal accomplishments. It is often cause and effect of poor mental health. This is especially tricky because poor mental health, and in particular depression and anxiety, tends to immobilise people rather than bring about change.

Comfort

Comfort can be defined as the state of knowing what is. Modern comfort is based on constant availability of resources, order and stability, resulting in the refusal of the unpredictable. In modern societies, a comfortable life is one in which needs are satisfied, but the manufacturing of ever new needs keeps people preoccupied, hindering their imaginaries and creativity.

Control

Control consists in regulation and restraint of action based on standards of order and security. These standards are enforced by law and alternatives are repressed and criminalised. People that attempt to put in practice alternatives are often antagonised through means of control, making it harder for them to sustain these alternatives or to embark on other imaginaries since they are likely to fail.

It is now possible to understand the relevance of the previous assumptions by comparing them with the findings.

4.2.1 Work

Throughout the interviews, work featured central to imagining the future consistently across the collected interviews. For instance, the fact that, when asked about whether university is preparing them for the future, the interviewees all spontaneously mentioned work means that the majority of young people sees working or finding a job as a necessity, rather than a choice. University, or higher education, can be assimilated into the concept of work, because of the fact that young people see it as something they have to do in order to be valuable within the market. University can be seen as the equivalent to theoretical specialisation, in most cases essential to access a more practical specialisation.

Either I start doing a job I don't like, or I do something else, or if I really want to work in astrophysics it is much much easier to find a job after my master's degree. (interview n°4)

Even in cases where the interviewees were in university to pursue more knowledge concerning a passion of theirs, they could hardly imagine pursuing it through different ways. It appears that, since they had to have a job, they chose to do something they could potentially enjoy. Others consciously avoided making a passion of theirs into a job, because it would end up "becoming a sacrifice, something that one must do" (interview n°5). One exception to these patterns was the person studying naturopathy who affirmed they wanted to study so they could become "a person well detached from a whole system, who works for other people's wellbeing, but it is not considered a job, it is more a lifestyle that you can bring to those around you" (interview n°2). Another observation that can be made is that when people mention alternatives to finding a job, they picture the image of an escape, often international, from obligations and responsibilities that come from living in a modern world. Therefore, their alternative imaginaries are far from them, so far that it can be evinced from their tone and words that they do not really consider these scenarios as 'real' alternatives.

another option I would have liked is just to leave, just like that, without a goal or objective, but I don't know, I hope I can still fit it in with what I'm doing. (interview n°5)

Further proof of the market mentality of young university students is their answers to the question "what could better prepare you for the future?", to which a great majority replied with things that

would enhance their human capital, such as marketable skills, widely spoken languages, internships in their field, and generally 'experience'. In some cases they make an explicit connection to work, in others not. In short, there seems to be a general tendency towards self-optimisation, for people to 'work on themselves' and identify what they can and cannot change. This tendency can definitely be traced back to decades of neoliberal discourse on individuality, but could also be a sign pointing to the fact that, since it seems so hard to challenge and change realities, young people often focus on how to cope with them as individuals rather than to face them in groups or at the societal level.

4.2.2 Isolation

From the questions following the first vignette it is possible to analyse young people's reactions to the realisation of alternatives, whether they identify with someone seeking alternatives and what they think are advantages and disadvantages of exiting fast-paced, productive lifestyles. Since most people can relate, at least to a certain extent, to a person who feels depressed, isolated and under stress, it suggests that it young people share those same experiences.

The scenario describes a person that is in distress by the context in which they live. But they are justified, I think it is a feeling common to many people nowadays. Unless one lives in a bubble caused by their socio-economic status, those emotions described come in more or less explicit ways to everyone. (interview n°3)

Most of the interviewees explicit the need for tranquillity and less stress, others also add they would enjoy community living, often referring back to past experiences. Others say they can imagine living in the conditions described in the vignette minus having to share spaces with many people they do not know, as they would rather imagine a life that is "slower" and "more responsive to a person's natural needs" (interview n°7) with their family members, friends or partner. Nevertheless, the interviews show that all people would enjoy less stressful lifestyles, but that in reality they experience tranquillity as the exception, in the occasion of vacations or breaks.

Another interesting answer concerning the attractive sides of living alternatives outside of productive patterns was a 'clean conscience':

(an attractive to this lifestyle is) no longer having to take into account your own impact in the world at the geopolitical level, because you also cleanse your conscience since that, by not participating, you are not even accountable for so many things that are happening in the world. (interview n°3)

This answer came from a person that self declared as ‘more conscious’ than their peers, knowledgeable at the political level. Their answer could mean that, at least to a certain extent, their conscience is not at peace with their current lifestyle, causing more stress in everyday life. This state of being could be described, using Fisher’s words, as one of ‘reflexive impotence’, where one is aware of how bad things are, but also more aware that they cannot do anything about it. This state often coincides with individualistic approaches to life, which results in people rarely trusting others and focusing mostly on their own path.

life in the city, however social, remains very individualistic; therefore you are a subject, you make your own future, it is you and only you (interview n°2)

In this context, it does not come as a surprise that people struggle to imagine long lasting alternatives. In fact, apart from some rare (and romanticised) exceptions, alternatives require to be imagined and created collectively. In modern individualistic societies, collectivity and community are not so common, and even less so are those that attempt to counter the story of modernity. This can also be observed by the fact that most people interviewed had no direct experience of alternatives and a limited indirect experience, through stories or people they knew but were often distant from. This distance could be caused by the fact that people who explore alternatives often create, willingly or not, a detachment from modernity and people that are deep into it. Or it can also be that people that are critical of modernity, but consciously stuck in it, also keep a distance from realities that would highlight the contradictions in their lives. This is also confirmed by the fact that people that really want to live differently, find each other and create communities:

I’ve met a lot of people over the last few months. The more you want to do it yourself, the more you meet people around you who actually want to do it as well. The more you get into it the more you find, actually, a whole network that wants to find alternative ways to live well, live better. (interview n°2)

4.2.3 Comfort

Concerning the reasons that people identify as obstacles to living alternatives, they can all be traced back to comfort in its many forms, ranging from access to resources and economic stability to a more explicit need of certainty.

A person that interpreted the vignette as an attempt to completely exit a modern lifestyle mentions that the biggest obstacles would be access to water, energy and healthcare, the latter being particularly serious, since they talk from the perspective of a person “that had quite a lot of health problems in their life”. They also add it would be important to face how to organise a different society. All these problems can be reconducted to a characteristic of modernity that Giddens calls “expert systems”, namely “systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise that organise large areas of the material and social environments in which we live today” (Giddens, 1991, p.27). Modern healthcare, energy and water distribution and even socio-political organisations can be defined as expert systems that detach people from the way many aspects of their life are organised, “removing social relations from the immediacies of context” (Giddens, 1991, p. 28). Therefore, one of the reasons why people can hardly imagine alternatives is because they live in the comfort of complex systems of which they lack understanding. “Simply by sitting in my house, I am involved in an expert system, or a series of such systems, in which I place my reliance” (Giddens, 1991, p.27). Considering this context in which people are detached, “disembedded”, from most of the things, people and systems they interact with, the struggle to imagine alternatives is more than understandable.

Another obstacle which came up in more than one interview is the economic factor. One person, who interpreted the alternative in the vignette as ‘farm life’, said it would be a very expensive lifestyle and for the moment they could rather imagine for themselves a ‘digital nomad’ situation (interview n°1); another argued that living alternatives would mean a lack of economic stability, and that they needed to have a job since they wanted to have a family and give their kids the same opportunities they had growing up.

I believe that, of course, it is necessary to have a job. What I do, I do (it's not just for that, though) also because I know that I will have stability to be able to raise my children in the future, so that they too can have the opportunity to go to school, university, whatever they want, to be able to travel... (interview n°5)

From these answers we can evince that it is hard to imagine a life not moderated by money, which is often seen as the only way to access resources and opportunities. In addition, since people have lost or have been dispossessed of the knowledge to meet everyday necessities, such as growing food, making things, and so on, they often completely rely on expert systems, which are also accessed through money. So far, at least in countries with a more or less stable economy, money is a certainty. Therefore, living modern lifestyles is associated with the easiest way to earn an amount of

money that can ensure stability and, as a consequence, comfort. Also, in most cases, modern life moderated by money is not only the easiest way, but also the only known possibility.

4.2.4 Control

This factor was, from the beginning of the research, harder to conceptualise and therefore reconstruct what role it plays in the context of modernity. The idea that I wanted was whether people feel or have experienced a difficulty in creating alternatives also because of social control and repression of alternatives. However, most of the people interviewed did not really have a first-hand contact with (explicit) repression, because of lack of experience with alternatives. The only one recalls experiences of when they were younger:

What comes to mind is things that I lived during occupations in high school, situations in which it is necessary to talk to the police and attempt to explain that what people are doing is something that hurts no one, and the stress of not being understood...
(interview n°4)

Other than this, most answers collected include people's opinions on police and police intervention, ranging from distrust to the belief that they protect some values. Most people said they were worried for their friend in the vignette, either because they were probably doing something illegal, or because they were identified as dangerous by authorities. However, it can be significant to point out the fact that some people were less likely to identify with the person in the scenario once police was mentioned, with two people – the same that were sceptical towards the fact that the alternative described was attracting police attention – explicitly saying that they would not be comfortable with police being involved, as they would not like to be in 'opposition' to legality. Others reacted instead in solidarity with the alternative:

if the project was already identified as something dangerous, first of all it means that it moved people's conscience, it made noise and had an impact. It is not a self referential experience that isolates itself, it had contact with modern reality which found in it a scapegoat, a breaking point. And this is worrying, because these realities are not the problem. (interview n°7)

Overall, the material is too scarce to understand what difficulties are connected with the creation of alternatives also due to social control and repression. This could both mean that it is indeed not a significant factor, or that it is a more marginal one. More detailed research is necessary concerning this particular topic.

4.3 Further remarks

Something interesting concerning this research is that all people interviewed declared themselves from worried to very worried concerning the state of current events and the socio-ecological crisis, but this did not transpire from the rest of what they said in the interviews. When asked whether they can imagine if many things in their lives will have to change due to the socio-ecological crisis, most answers were related to rise in temperatures and future limitations they might face as individuals such as having to move to colder places or not being able to go on vacation somewhere. Other than that, there was also a mention of a 'dystopic' future in which water was rationalised. This might be due to the fact that mainstream news about climate issues are often catastrophic but not so informational, resulting in people feeling alarmed about something they barely understand. This would also explain the fact that most interviewees did not think it so necessary to find alternatives to their modern lifestyles. A way to look at this could also be that, since people that live modern lifestyles are distant from ecological cycles, they are therefore distant from the current implications of the climate crisis, which is already impacting food crops and water availability all over the world. They live in a condition of manufactured comfort. One of the few things they experience directly are rising temperatures and occasional extreme events, which are hard to hide or ignore. This would explain why their imagination is limited to these events.

4.4 Limitations

This research has some limitation both on the practical and theoretical level. For what concerns the latter, it is important to recognise the limits of researching such broad topics such as modernity, which can easily bring to generalisation. I would like to stress that this writing springs from the experience of a person that lived exclusively in Europe and who has quite a narrow understanding of other cultures, met exclusively through media or conversation. This means that, while the thesis speaks broadly of modern living, I recognise there might be endless forms of existence and resistance within the story of modernity all over the world, which might vary greatly from one another. Therefore, criticism is more than welcomed.

Concerning instead the practical side of the research, limitations can be found surrounding the data sampling and analysis. For instance, the small sample collected could be said to lack variety; this could be also due to the fact that the message of invitation to the interviews asked those interested to initiate contact with the researcher, which might have excluded people too busy to help, or people too shy to text first, and so on. In addition, the invites sent in Italian made use of language modified

to be gender neutral, which may have driven some people away. For what regards the analysis, the fact that the approach used was deductive means that the data collected was interpreted according to previously formed ideas, which might have left out some other aspects and readings.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to understand what are the factors that keep fuelling modern living and that prevent people from shifting to more sustainable alternatives, or even from imagining them. The way this question was studied was through qualitative interviews which involved young university students that live in and around big urban centres, namely Rome and Prague. First, a theoretical background was painted, picturing the origins and context of modernity, to then move to an exploration of its patterns, such as individualisation, standardisation and control. At this point, the discussion was brought back to current days and questions, making room for the analysis of the material collected from the interviews. Overall, support was found for three of the contributing factors, which were identified as central to the reproduction of modernity, namely *work*, *isolation* and *comfort*. On the other hand, *control* turned out to be only a marginal factor, which could benefit from further research. Therefore, it can be stated that, in contrast to expecting a serious crisis brought by climate change, people keep participating in modernity because of living conditions which make it necessary to work, because of the comfort typical of modern societies and because of living in a state of isolation and lack of community. While these results do not give much to hope for, they offer a new key to understand where we are now. In a way, it is relieving to see that most of young people's imaginaries are not so distant from modern reality. That is, if we believe that imaginaries shape the world around us. Like we have seen, normative imaginaries tend to result in normative lives. Hence, it would be enough to overcome at least some of the factors here identified to open up our minds to other imaginaries and build alternatives. For instance, it would be significant for people to exit conditions of isolation and, whenever possible, to reconnect to the soil and the knowledge to live with what surrounds us, rather than what can be found on supermarket shelves.

Summary

This thesis project starts with an introduction which identifies modernity as the context of the research and young university students as the demographic taken into analysis in order to understand factors that perpetuate modern urban living. It is then followed by a general statement, chapter 1, that explains the scope of the research and the changes it went through. Chapter 2, which

corresponds to the literature review, is divided into subchapters and begins by ‘introducing modernity’ as a single story and its connections to coloniality, to then provide the example of ‘the story of time and space’. Afterwards, we make an acquaintance with ‘the modern person’ and the ‘basic needs’ assigned to them as a standard of living, together with the imposition of ‘security and control’. Then the discourse returns to the present day, and ‘today’s contradictions’, which feature a great majority of young people conscious of how bad things are, but even more conscious that they cannot do anything to change them. Chapter 3 explains the ‘methodology’ used in this research, namely qualitative interviews combined with a deductive approach to analyse them. Chapter 4 explores the ‘findings’ from the interviews and chapter 5 undertakes the ‘discussion’, aiming to create an interaction between the literature explored and the findings. In particular, the discussion is divided into the four factors identified (work, isolation, comfort, control) that allow for the reproduction of modern ways of living. Finally, limitations are discussed and followed by the conclusion, which clarifies how this research contributes to understanding the present and the role of imaginaries in the creation of everyday reality.

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List of interviews

Interview 1: Bachelor ‘s student in Politics, Philosophy and Economics, 20 years old

Interview 2: Bachelor's student in Naturopathy, 23 years old

Interview 3: Bachelor's student in Global Humanities, 24 years old

Interview 4: Bachelor's student in Physics, 22 years old

Interview 5: Single-cycle student in Medicine, 21 years old

Interview 6: Master's student in Cinema, 23 years old

Interview 7: Master's student in Investigation, Criminality and International Security, 26 years old