

# LIMITS TO SOCIALIST GROWTH

The Question of Economic Growth  
and Environmental Crisis in Polish  
Discussions of the 1970s\*

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## Abstract

*The article is devoted to the discussions concerning economic growth and the environmental crisis that took place in Poland in the 1970s. The author focuses on two scientific conferences and the publications that accompanied them in order to analyse the questions of economic growth, science, technology, and consumption with regard to raising awareness of the ecological crisis. The reception of the Polish translation of *The Limits to**

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*Growth is one of the questions discussed more specifically in the article. The main purpose of the article is to amend the ecological dimension of socialist thought and to reconstruct the main tensions and contradictions between the ecological and productivist tendencies within socialist ideology. The author analyses these questions in the context of degrowth theory and with regard to the current climate and ecological crisis.*

**Keywords**

*socialism, economic growth, ecosocialism, ecological crisis, degrowth, Limits to Growth, consumption, science, scientific-technological revolution*

*Nevertheless, it's necessary to discuss whether it's possible and necessary today to provide for certain 'non-productive' social goals and whether it brings us closer not only to the final goals of socialism but also whether it becomes a necessary condition for faster economic growth.*

Tadeusz M. Jaroszewski

*Perspektywa człowieka w rewolucji naukowo-technicznej* (1974)<sup>1</sup>

*The increasingly one-sided fetishisation of economic growth and the pursuit of increasing production regardless of the society's needs becomes an anachronistic feature of the current economy.*

Juliusz Goryński, *Mieszkanie wczoraj, dziś i jutro* (1973)<sup>2</sup>

In 1972, a new economic strategy was launched in Poland by First Secretary Edward Gierek, aimed at stimulating “the great dynamics of economic growth”. It seemed that the model of the growth-based economy, introduced on a global scale after World War II, had been settled on for good, adapting it to specific local conditions. In the same year, the famous report *The Limits to Growth* was published with a clear message: if the use of non-renewable energy sources, depletion of other natural resources, environmental costs of food production and waste continue to grow at the pace characteristic of the growth-oriented economies, it will bring humanity to the brink of collapse in less than a century. The opponents of the dominant paradigm, who had long pointed to its weaknesses, were given some strong arguments by this report. The discussion concerning the environmental and social costs of economic growth resonated in both capitalist and socialist states. It was accompanied by some initial steps to reduce energy and material

<sup>1</sup> Tadeusz M. Jaroszewski, “Perspektywa człowieka w rewolucji”, in *Człowiek, socjalizm, rewolucja naukowo-techniczna*, ed. Janusz Kólczyński and Joachim Liszka (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1974), p. 79.

<sup>2</sup> Juliusz Goryński, *Mieszkanie wczoraj, dziś i jutro* (Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 1973), p. 305.

consumption, which were soon dispersed by a neoliberal economic model that was even more extractivist. While some of the pillars of the Bretton-Woods consensus were abandoned, the growth imperative remained well embedded in the world's economies.

This course of events proved to have serious implications for the condition of our planet. Today's assessments show that Club of Rome scenarios, even if flawed, were correct in their general conclusions. The causative role of the growth-oriented economic system in accelerating the planetary ecological and climate crisis is becoming clearer and clearer. As is shown in recent research, the idea of "green growth", based on the premise that economic growth can be decoupled from the negative impact on the environment, is far from feasible.<sup>3</sup>

Since capitalism is known as a system inherently dependent on economic growth, the question arises as to whether socialism could be considered a serious and prospective alternative. As was noted by Giorgos Kallis, socialism may operate on a different premise.<sup>4</sup> There are however some explicit productivist traditions within socialism, and the economic strategy of the Polish People's Republic is one of the examples that shows that socialist ideology may also be susceptible to growthism.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the contradictory approach to economic growth and environmental challenges that characterised socialist political and economic practices in the past needs to be addressed in order to plan a feasible ecosocialist agenda for the future. In this regard, discussions taking place in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1970s may be instructive, as they reflect competing visions of socialism, some of which were based on the praise of economic growth, while others could be seen as precursory for ecosocialism and degrowth. We need to unravel this complex entanglement of the various visions of socialist society and economy as they were performed in the past to analyse their potentials and shortcomings and scrutinise how they were impacted by global, geopolitical shifts.

With my paper, I am aiming to reconstruct small segments of those debates that took place in Poland in the seventies, representing both pro-growth and growth-sceptical approaches. In this regard, my study will develop some of the issues that were previously examined in the context of Czechoslovakia and the GDR.<sup>6</sup> It will also contribute

<sup>3</sup> See Jason Hickel and Giorgos Kallis, "Is Green Growth Possible?", *New Political Economy* 25, no. 4 (2020), pp. 469–486.

<sup>4</sup> Giorgos Kallis, "Socialism Without Growth", *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 30, no. 2 (2017), pp. 189–206.

<sup>5</sup> Those productivist tendencies are discussed in more detail by Michael Löwy in the chapter "What is Ecosocialism?" in his book *Ecosocialism: A Radical Alternative to Capitalist Catastrophe* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015). Giorgos Kallis presents another question that should be addressed in order to avoid growth-dependency, that is the distribution of surplus. See Kallis, "Socialism Without Growth".

<sup>6</sup> For Czechoslovakia, see Matěj Spurný, "Mezi vědou a politikou. Ekologie za socialismu a kapitalismu (1975–1995)", in *Architekti dlouhé změny. Expertní kořeny postsocialismu v Českosloven-*

to a reflection concerning the environmental history of Central and Eastern Europe after World War II.<sup>7</sup> My goals are similar to those set by John Bellamy Foster in his monumental work *Return of Nature*, thus revealing the sometimes unnoticed ecological dimension of socialist thought. The other objective of the paper is to revise those discussions from the past, in order to answer the question of what kind of knowledge they can deliver in the light of the latest findings concerning the planetary crisis and current debates on the alternatives to the growth-oriented system.

I focus on two conferences organised in Poland in the first half of the 1970s, and a few publications accompanying these conferences. The main body of research material comprises presentations delivered during a 1975 symposium held under the title *The Development of Polish Culture in the Perspective of the Socialist System of Values*, organised in the research centre of the Polish Academy of Science in Jabłonna near Warsaw by the Committee of Research and Prognosis “Poland 2000”, affiliated with the Academy. The Committee was established in 1969 and its research covered multiple areas: economic development, demography, housing policies, and so on. We may see this prestigious scientific institution as a part of the futurological boom, which was a wider trend, encompassing, at that time, both sides of the “iron curtain”. The development of future studies created a common platform for scientists and intellectuals from different parts of the world to exchange the results of their research, collaborate on improving prognostic methodologies, and discuss their philosophical and moral implications.<sup>8</sup> The futurologist movement was, in general, informed by the rising ecological awareness. The need to satisfy human needs in accordance with the natural environment was explicitly presented as one of futurology’s tasks by the Polish Committee, and we can consider the Jabłonna conference as an attempt to reconcile this approach with other challenges that the socialist system was facing at this time. More than one-third of the

sku, ed. Michal Kopeček (Praha: Argo, 2019). The example of GDR was described by Alexander Amberger in the article “Post-growth Utopias from the GDR: The Ecosocialist Alternatives of SED Critics Wolfgang Harich, Rudolf Bahro, and Robert Havemann from the 1970s”, trans. Julian Schoenfeld, *Contradictions* 5, no. 2 (2021), pp. 15–29.

<sup>7</sup> See Matěj Spurný, “Mezi vědou a politikou”; *Making the Most of Tomorrow: A Laboratory of Socialist Modernity in Czechoslovakia*, trans. Derek and Marzia Paton (Prague: Karolinum, 2019); Raymond Dominick, “Capitalism, Communism, and Environmental Protection. Lessons from the German Experience”, *Environmental History* 3, no. 3 (1998), pp. 311–332; Petr Jehlička and Joe Smith, “Trampové, přírodovědci a brontosauři. Předlistopadová zkušenost českého environmentálního hnutí jako předzvěst ekologické modernizace”, *Soudobé dějiny* 24, no. 12 (2017), pp. 78–101.

<sup>8</sup> For more on the topic of the futurological turn and activities of Committee “Poland 2000” see Emilia Kiecko, *Przyszłość do zbudowania. Futurologia i architektura PRL* (Warszawa: Fundacja Nowej Kultury Bęc Zmiana, 2018). The development of future studies and prognostics in the Czechoslovakian context is discussed in the chapter “Zkoumání budoucnosti socialismu: ‘vědeckotechnická revoluce’ a prognostika v reformě a ‘konsolidaci’”, in Vítězslav Sommer et al., *Řdit socialismus jako firmu. Technokratické vládnutí v Československu, 1956–1989* (Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 2019), pp. 52–82.

papers delivered during the conference were in some way referring to environmental issues and some of the participants were to develop that subject in their individual work in the coming years.

In order to better understand the meaning of the conference in the context of Polish scientific, political, and cultural life, let me briefly introduce some of its participants who contributed significantly to this debate. The conference gathered some of the most prominent researchers of their time. Bogdan Suchodolski, the editor of the post-conference monograph, was a philosopher, historian of science, and pedagogue, affiliated with the Polish Academy of Sciences, and author of numerous scientific and popular publications concerning the history of culture, education, and philosophy. Juliusz Goryński was an architect and urbanist, a renowned specialist in the field of housing policies. During the interwar period, he collaborated with a prominent left-leaning organisation, the Polish Association for Housing Reform, and, in the 1950s he was for a short period the director of the Housing Building Institute. He was a Polish delegate to the U.N. Committee on Housing, Building, and Planning. In his reports for the Committee "Poland 2000", he warned about worsening housing conditions in the near future. Włodzimierz Michajłow was a zoologist and parasitologist, collaborating with various scientific institutions in Poland and abroad. Thanks to his efforts, the project "Parasitology and Environmental Protection" was included in the UNESCO programme "Man and the Biosphere". He was a member of numerous organisations, such as the State Council for Environmental Protection and the Scientific Committee "Man and Environment", affiliated with the Polish Academy of Science. Julian Aleksandrowicz was a medical doctor and haematologist who was also interested in the philosophy of medicine. He was in the process of developing the concept of "ecological conscience", highlighting the connection between human health and wellbeing and the general condition of the natural environment. Jerzy Bukowski was an aeromechanics engineer and lecturer on polytechnics involved in the organisation of the technical education system and co-organiser of the Museum of Technology. He was also a member of the international peace movement, involved in Pugwash and the World Peace Council. Andrzej Grzegorzcyk was a mathematician and philosopher, affiliated with the Polish Academy of Sciences. He was a member of the Club of Catholic Intelligentsia and was involved in ecumenical activities, especially with the Orthodox Church. Jan Szczępański was a sociologist, actively involved in local and international scientific life. In the late sixties, he was chairman of the International Sociological Association. He was a member of various editorial boards and co-founder of the Committee "Poland 2000". He was also actively involved in politics as a member of parliament for several terms.

Even these very brief biographical notes allow us to make some more general assertions. The conference gathered renowned scientists and researchers, predominantly representatives of the generation born at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As far as can be judged from their activities, for most of them, support for socialist ideology was not merely an opportunistic attitude. Some were already active in the interwar leftist

milius, and most of them were involved in building the scientific, cultural, technical, and educational institutions of the postwar socialist state. Their activities were frequently awarded state decorations. Except for Michajłow, they were also not primarily and scientifically interested in the protection of the natural environment, but some of them started to reflect on ecology in their respective fields of work during this period (Goryński in housing policies, Aleksandrowicz in health). The other important common thread was their involvement in international organisations, not only scientific ones but also the peace and anti-nuclear movements.

In order to present a more comprehensive picture of the approaches to growth economics and natural environment circulating in official discourse at the time, I'll complete my analysis with materials coming from another conference, *Człowiek, socjalizm, rewolucja naukowo-techniczna* (Man, socialism, scientific-technological revolution), organised by the University of Silesia together with the Party Propaganda Provincial Centre in the autumn of 1973 in Katowice, which was followed a year later by a publication with the same title. Its aim was to scrutinise the potential application of the scientific-technological revolution's achievements in the developmental policies of the region. Katowice voivodeship did not become a laboratory for modernisation by accident. Historically one of the most industrialised and developed regions and a fossil fuel provider for the rest of the country, the region was the apple of Edward Gierek's eye, the Party's First Secretary at the time. The Silesian capital, Katowice, and the region as a whole was not, of course, a mere showcase for socialist industrialisation and modernisation, but some of those processes were indeed more palpable there. The event was more of a regional gathering, but with some prominent personalities of the time invited as well. The presentations were delivered by Marxist philosophers, political scientists, professors affiliated with Silesian University, and party activists.

Both conferences could be perceived as prestigious events. They shared an ambition to discuss crucial contemporary issues, with the Jabłonna conference aiming at a more universal reflection, and the symposium in Katowice focused on more pragmatic political goals to be implemented on a regional scale. They were also illustrations of some more universal trends, characteristic of Central Europe at the turn of the sixties and seventies: the rising role of expert culture and the technocratic turn and economic shift that was associated with it.<sup>9</sup> None of them was devoted directly to environmental issues, but the question of the ecological crisis was brought up by numerous participants and in various contexts. Economic growth was one of them, but it should be examined as a part of a complex tangle of numerous processes, including the role of technology, science, economy, work, consumption, and lifestyle.

<sup>9</sup> To see a more detailed analysis of those processes, see Sommer, *Řidit socialismus jako firmu*; Kopeček, *Architekti dlouhé změny*.

### Framing the Crisis

In his opening presentation during the Jabłonna conference, historian Bogdan Suchodolski noticed:

This strategy of one-sided domination leads to the wasting of natural resources, which are not inexhaustible. This waste – armaments and the luxury of the wealthy class in the richest countries are its most evident source – is not only a nonsensical economic loss on a global scale, but it also generates a lifestyle that distorts attitudes toward other people; it leads to increasing egoism and lack of responsibility for the millions of people who are starving, for the millions of those who will be born in the future on that Earth, exploited to its ultimate limits, or maybe even intoxicated forever. The moral problems of the civilisation of affluence, excess, and waste now stand out more sharply and clearly.<sup>10</sup>

In this short fragment we can already recognise some important diagnoses that in the current day form the canon of environmental discourses: a clear relationship between affluence and exploitation of finite planetary resources, the unequal distribution of wealth, the connection between the ecological and social crisis, so in other words – between environmental and social justice, and the moral responsibility toward the population already affected by the crisis and toward the future generations.

Papers delivered during these conferences are not interesting because of their originality, as they were iterating some arguments that were already circulating in global discussions. They were, however, formulated within the specific socio-political framework of socialist state and socialist ideology, still perceived as a viable alternative to capitalism, which in some cases made the authors disregard some of the threats already clear in Western societies, but in others provided them with valuable insights.

If we scrutinise discursive strategies of framing the crisis, we will come to the conclusion that the images of negative socio-economic trends causing the crisis were emphasised more than the specific images of the ecological destruction. While the specifics of the ongoing devastation of nature could have been unclear for many researchers who were not primarily specialised in natural sciences, they shared the rising awareness of how grave the situation is, which influenced their work. The publication *Mieszkanie wczoraj, dziś i jutro* (Dwellings of Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow) by Juliusz Goryński, vice-chairman of the Committee “Poland 2000” and expert in housing politics, included a significant final chapter “Dwellings and the World”, where he

<sup>10</sup> Bogdan Suchodolski, “Przewaga środków nad celami w cywilizacji kapitalistycznej”, in *Kultura polska a socjalistyczny system wartości*, ed. Bogdan Suchodolski (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1977), pp. 26–27.

described the essence of the current problems: “It’s not only that we have to save some rare animal and plant species, it’s the survival of the human species itself that is at stake.”<sup>11</sup>

The participants in Polish discussions were informed by the global debates on the natural environment and they were openly referring to some of its milestones: to the Club of Rome report, the Stockholm Conference on Human Environment, *A Blueprint for Survival* and *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* by R. Buckminster Fuller. The “spaceship Earth” metaphor, popularised by the last work, was used by at least two commentators. Juliusz Goryński was writing about the “youngest members of the spaceship crew”, arrogant enough to violate the metabolic processes the Earth system depends on and starting “a fight to conquer nature”.<sup>12</sup> Włodzimierz Michajłow used this image to underline the suicidal dimension of human activities, such as “constant plunders, murders [...] using limited resources in [...] a predatory way”. He underlined the usefulness of “the metaphor of the Earth as a spaceship” for “its ability to highlight the threat of a catastrophe caused by its own crew”.<sup>13</sup>

Judging by the frequency of references, it was, however, *The Limits to Growth* that resonated most strongly with Polish authors. The slogan was recalled in the preface to the post-conference monograph *Kultura polska a socjalistyczny system wartości* (Polish Culture and the Socialist System of Values), having been indicated to be one of the impulses to organise the debate in Jabłonna:

The propagation of consumptionist attitudes that we’re observing lately in highly developed countries of the West forces us to seriously reflect not only on the “limits to growth”, but also on the substance, content and values of the culture, as one of the factors of the new quality of life.<sup>14</sup>

The reception of the Report of Rome by the Polish audience was similar to the one abroad: namely, ambiguous. As for the Western world, the report provoked objections from mainstream economists who criticized the aggregative methods used by its authors – the same methods that they usually “preached right and left”, as noted ironically by Nicolas Georgescu-Roegen, but which were now applied to undermine the growth-ori-

<sup>11</sup> Goryński, *Mieszkanie wczoraj, dziś i jutro*, p. 299.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 301–302.

<sup>13</sup> Włodzimierz Michajłow, “Środowisko życia człowieka jako wartość humanistyczna”, in *Kultura polska a socjalistyczny system wartości*, ed. Bogdan Suchodolski (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1977), p. 136.

<sup>14</sup> Bogdan Suchodolski, ed., *Kultura polska a socjalistyczny system wartości* (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1977), p. 9.



ented paradigm, while their theories were “anchored solidly in exponential growth models”.<sup>15</sup> But the Report was also questioned by leftist researchers, who accused it of the opposite. “What we fear is that this type of analysis will not lead to a politics of equity, equality, and justice since these were never made the primary variables of the study but were seen as ‘side-effects’ – but to more of the politics of growth, in order to create all the anti-technologies needed to counter-act the effects of the present technologies”, as Johan Galtung put it.<sup>16</sup> In Eastern and Central Europe, *The Limits to Growth* was also received with mixed feelings. In Czechoslovakia, as described by Matěj Spurný, the report, published as an internal document, and circulating in the scientific institutions, was rejected by some economists but welcomed enthusiastically by the representatives of the natural sciences.<sup>17</sup> In Poland, it was published officially by the State Economic Publishing house and provided with a preface by prominent economist and prognostic, member of the Club of Rome, Kazimierz Secomski. The preface was rather restrained in its tone, underlining the contribution made by the Report, but also pointing out its flaws. Regardless of objections formulated by some of its readers, it’s clear that the Report of Rome delivered some important impulses for questioning the existing socio-economic models, as well as the metaphors and vocabulary for the many Polish researchers discussing the environmental issues and global challenges. As Włodzimierz Michajłow put it, this publication was the source of the “knowledge about how catastrophic the current state of things is”.<sup>18</sup>

### Limits to Technology

To understand better the responses to the threats of ecological crisis (including the ambiguous reactions elicited by the Club of Rome’s report), we must analyse them in the context of a notion recalled in the title of the Silesian conference, one that formed an important theoretical and political background for the era: the scientific and technological revolution [STR]. At the beginning of the 1970s, the term, popularised by the famous scientist and engaged communist activist J. D. Bernal some decades previously,<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Nicolas Georgescu-Roegen, “Energy and Economic Myths”, *Southern Economic Journal* 41, no. 3 (1975), p. 365.

<sup>16</sup> Johan Galtung, “‘The Limits to Growth’ and Class Politics”, *Journal of Peace Research* 10, no. 1/2 (1973), pp. 111–112.

<sup>17</sup> Spurný, “Mezi vědou a politikou”, p. 276.

<sup>18</sup> Michajłow, “Środowisko życia człowieka”, p. 145.

<sup>19</sup> Bernal himself had undergone an interesting evolution in his views, including a more developed view on environmental matters in the decades after World War II. In the last years of his life, he was warning against an ecological crisis caused largely by industrial civilization, see John Bellamy Foster, *Return of Nature. Socialism and Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review, 2020), pp. 489–497.

was shaping the political imaginary and influencing the work of various scientists both in the West and the East.<sup>20</sup> The STR was not a homogenous concept, but rather an umbrella term for various trends, emphasizing the role of scientific achievements in various areas of modern life. Some of the STR's proponents would praise its socially progressive and emancipatory potential, while others would focus on the economic gains it could bring. As we'll see, STR also suggested a certain set of tools and ideas to counteract the ecological crisis.

The process, in which science was supposed to set the direction of technological and economic development, was embraced enthusiastically by the Polish government as "a historical process, the realisation of which will ensure the final and irreversible victory of socialism".<sup>21</sup> The ambiguity of the STR was however clear, even to its proponents. During the Silesian conference, organised under the STR slogan, political scientist and activist Andrzej Werblan highlighted that:

On a capitalistic basis, the STR developed in a very imperfect form, revealing its numerous defects, especially the devastation of the natural environment, irrational exploitation of resources, destructive features of social life, deep frustration and ideological hollowness.<sup>22</sup>

There was a strong conviction that the socialist system is better prepared, perhaps even necessary, for STR to work for the benefit of mankind. As the great proponent of this idea, the Czechoslovakian researcher Radovan Richta (who was often quoted by Polish authors), put it: "Theoretically, the social groundwork capable of carrying out the scientific and technological revolution thoroughly in all respects – while avoiding any disastrous alternatives – is to be found in the advance of socialism and communism in their model aspect".<sup>23</sup> The question of how the achievements of STR should be applied by socialist governments in practice was however still open and it was especially urgent with regard to environmental questions. Paraphrasing the title of a famous book by Richta and his collective, socialist civilisation too, in this regard, found itself at a crossroads.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> See Sommer, *Řídit socialismus jako firmu*.

<sup>21</sup> Janusz Kolczyński, "Przedmowa", in *Człowiek, socjalizm, rewolucja naukowo-techniczna*, ed. Janusz Kolczyński and Joachim Liszka (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1974), p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Andrzej Werblan, "Istota kierowniczej roli partii i metody kierowania przez partię procesami społecznymi na etapie rewolucji naukowo-technicznej", in *Człowiek, socjalizm, rewolucja naukowo-techniczna*, ed. Janusz Kolczyński and Joachim Liszka (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1974), p. 25.

<sup>23</sup> Radovan Richta, *Civilization at the Crossroads. Social and Human Implications of the Scientific and Technological Revolution* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 57.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

The STR offered different and sometimes contradictory solutions to environmental challenges. On the one hand, the very work *The Limits to Growth* itself, with its analysis based on an advanced modelling system, may be perceived as one of the greatest STR achievements. On the other hand, this revolution reinforced the techno-optimistic approach toward the ecological crisis – the attitude we know so well from contemporary debates on the planetary crisis. “Technocrat-optimists”, as Juliusz Goryński called this group, shared the belief that technological development will allow us to use energy more efficiently, produce it from renewable sources and substitute finite natural minerals with synthetic ones. Those were the premises on which they based their trust in avoiding ecological crises while maintaining perpetual economic growth.<sup>25</sup> This argumentation was used, for instance, by Kazimierz Secomski in his preface to *The Limits to Growth*, with the intention of mitigating the report’s potentially pessimistic tone: “surely there already exist certain possibilities and justified premises that allow future actions, based on effective scientific-technical progress, that will prevent the realization of the visions of destruction that may come to the minds of readers of the report.”<sup>26</sup> The “ecologists-pessimists”, on the other hand, while appreciating some of the technical achievements, were concerned about the unpredictable side effects of those new technologies, which could even worsen the situation. They were also worried that those technological gains will be used exclusively for the sake of further growth in production and consumption in the most wealthy countries.<sup>27</sup>

Rising inequalities and the unequal distribution of wealth among the global population were seen to be among the main sources of social and ecological crises. “Who will participate in consuming the achievements of technical civilisation?” Goryński asked rhetorically, as the answer was clear: “one-third of the population – the ‘rich’ – has at its disposal two-thirds of all resources, including food supply”.<sup>28</sup> As another participant of the Jablonna conference, haematologist Julian Aleksandrowicz wrote in his work *The Ecological Conscience*, published a few years after the conference:

The excessive accumulation of goods in some people’s hands and the rising impoverishment of others is just as common in this world as is the elimination of substances essential for life from the environment and intoxicating it with industrial production waste, which is the source of the ecological crisis.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Goryński, *Mieszkanie wczoraj, dziś i jutro*, p. 302.

<sup>26</sup> Kazimierz Secomski, “Wstęp do wydania polskiego”, in Donella H. Meadows et al., *Granice wzrostu*, trans. Wiesława Rączkowska and Stanisław Rączkowski (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Ekonomiczne, 1973), p. 18.

<sup>27</sup> Goryński, *Mieszkanie wczoraj, dziś i jutro*, pp. 304–305.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 302.

<sup>29</sup> Julian Aleksandrowicz, *Sumienie ekologiczne* (Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, [1979] 1988), p. 9.

In geopolitical terms, as noted by Michajłow, it was neocolonialism that “created new forms of exploitation, such as constructing ‘dirty’ factories in the developing countries by the capitalist ones”.<sup>30</sup>

Those problems challenged the narrative of the STR as being able to provide solutions for complex socio-ecological problems. This narrative was also undermined by the failure of projects such as the “green revolution” in India. The technological innovations in agriculture not only did not resolve the humanitarian crisis but even worsened the situation, on both social and environmental levels. This failure was already discussed at the time, among others, in *The Limits to Growth*.<sup>31</sup>

### Limits to Science

The role of the other part of the STR slogan – the science – created further important challenges. The STR put science in the leading role in the processes of planning, production, or labour organisation, resulting in the growing role of science in governmental politics. The resolution made by the Sixth Convention of the Polish United Workers’ Party proclaimed that “science should be the leading factor forming our state”. The tasks for science were discussed during the Silesian conference. Romuald Jezierski underlined the “vital function of science in developing productive forces, work efficiency, technology, economic structure, and the efficiency of the economic system in general”.<sup>32</sup>

In his paper, he was referring to the resolutions of the Second Congress of Polish Science published under the title *Science in the Service of the Nation*: “Under the scientific-technological revolution, science should be a fundamental factor in the development of the system of the national economy, a crucial parameter of the progress of civilisation. Its potential to be applied in all human activities becomes almost unlimited.”<sup>33</sup>

The consequences of this “scientific turn” were at least twofold. While praising the meaning of scientific knowledge for social development, officials and politicians were subordinating it to the needs of the national economy. At the same time, it allowed technocracy and a specific cult of science to flourish. This technocratic and instrumental approach was problematic for some of the commentators, especially among the Jabłonna Conference participants. The range of their critique was wide, but what’s interesting for us is that it was primarily the inability of science to handle the ecological crisis and other urgent problems of the day that initiated the discussion. Another

<sup>30</sup> Michajłow, “Środowisko życia człowieka”, p. 139.

<sup>31</sup> Donella H. Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth. A Report for the Club of Rome’s Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (New York: Universe Books, 1972), pp. 146–148.

<sup>32</sup> Romuald Jezierski, “Program wychowania człowieka socjalizmu”, in *Człowiek, socjalizm, rewolucja naukowo-techniczna*, ed. Janusz Kolczyński and Joachim Liszka (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1974), p. 82.

<sup>33</sup> “Uchwała II Kongresu Nauki polskiej”, in *II Kongres Nauki Polskiej. Materiały i dokumenty*, vol. 1 (Warszawa: Polska Akademia Nauk, 1974), p. 197.

significant feature was that this critique of scientific claims and of the insufficiency of the scientific tools was formulated not only by the representatives of the humanities, but also by the natural scientists, medical doctors, and engineers.

Physicist and philosopher Grzegorz Białkowski emphasised that the rate at which scientific inventions are transforming the human environment “makes it impossible for humans to understand their new role on Earth” and warned about the destructive features of this process.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, he called for an interdisciplinary collaboration of scientists representing different disciplines in order to create a new, expanded form of humanism that could “include not only our species but also every living being”.<sup>35</sup>

The commentators considered economics to be a discipline crucial for resolving ecological problems and yet which was strikingly unprepared for that purpose, suggesting that “the economics milieu still don’t have much to offer, as their discipline is significantly underdeveloped in terms of taking into account environmental issues”.<sup>36</sup> What was even worse, when economists did finally undertake some actions, they were “based on the same instruments that were responsible for the degradation of the natural environment in the first place”.<sup>37</sup> Probably the most severe critique of science was formulated by the mathematician and philosopher Andrzej Grzegorzcyk:

Science itself ceased to be an inspiration for social progress and, through its institutions, it is instead strengthening the existing structures and the social order based on violence and struggle. Despite their general progressive or even revolutionary views, institutionally, scientists are in service of the establishment, letting all their inventions be used in its favour.<sup>38</sup>

Grzegorzcyk was well aware of the increasing significance of the technocratic approach and predicted some possible consequences of the emerging expert culture. He criticised science as a form of modern religion with “its own priests: scientists, technocrats, experts”. He perceived technocracy as “the dominant ideology that is standing behind the senseless pursuit of so-called ‘progress’ and has led to the ecological crisis that we’re experiencing now”.<sup>39</sup> In this regard, we may put his critique in the context of the technocratic turn, which – as emphasised by researchers of this phenomenon in

<sup>34</sup> Grzegorz Białkowski, “Nowe aspekty humanizmu a nauki ścisłe”, in *Kultura polska a socjalistyczny system wartości*, ed. Bogdan Suchodolski (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1977), p. 189.

<sup>35</sup> Białkowski, “Nowe aspekty humanizmu a nauki ścisłe”, p. 189.

<sup>36</sup> Michajłow, “Środowisko życia człowieka”, p. 143.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>38</sup> Andrzej Grzegorzcyk, “Pewne aspekty humanizmu w naukach ścisłych”, in *Kultura polska a socjalistyczny system wartości*, ed. Bogdan Suchodolski (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1977), p. 216.

<sup>39</sup> Grzegorzcyk, “Pewne aspekty humanizmu w naukach ścisłych”, pp. 220–221.

the Central European context – took the form of the “politics of depoliticisation: the belief that, essentially, political and ideological conflicts, and those concerning values, can be resolved by depoliticisation and a rational, scientific analysis”.<sup>40</sup> This turn has far-reaching implications for dealing with the environmental crisis. Presenting economic and political decisions as the result of “objective” scientific research obscured the interests standing behind the research and its premises, as well as the fact that, as Grzegorzczuk accurately pointed out, “each economic decision is a decision in the realm of human values. By building a huge, concrete airport, we’re reducing arable land and thus eliminating some group of people from a wealthy life, or maybe from life at all.”<sup>41</sup>

There was no doubt that scientific research could offer important tools and knowledge, but it was not sufficient to effectively transform socio-political reality. As Bogdan Suchodolski noted: “it was obvious that important political movements, such as the peace movement, were never initiated by science itself”.<sup>42</sup> At the end of the day, according to Grzegorzczuk, “to save us from catastrophes, we don’t need any sophisticated technologies or scientific theories, but, above all, ordinary fairness, justice, respect and compassion for every human being”.<sup>43</sup>

The discussions concerning science resonated with those taking place among Western intellectuals. Let us recall J. D. Bernal once more, who condemned Western scientific life for its imperialistic structure, centralisation, and subordination to the needs of the capitalist economy.<sup>44</sup> As for his counterparts in Eastern and Central Europe, we can see their reflection in the critique of the scientific claims of socialism and of power relations related to knowledge within the socialist model of society that, in this case, was made from the inside and was articulated by the socialist intellectual elites themselves.<sup>45</sup>

### Limits to Economic Growth

Technology and science were perceived as ambiguous forces, responsible for propelling the crisis and providing tools for crisis prevention. A large role was thus attached to the political system that made use of these forces. The belief shared widely, and not only in the socialist states, was that the main factor responsible for the ecological crisis was the capitalist system with its extractive, exploitative, and wasteful economic practices. Socialism, on the other hand, “by its very nature, creates a better chance of a successful solution to the pressing problems related to threats to the human environment”,

<sup>40</sup> Sommer, *Řídit socialismus jako firmu*, p. 18. To read more on how the technocratic turn prepared the ground for the introduction of a neoliberal economy, see Kopeček, *Architekti dlouhé změny*.

<sup>41</sup> Grzegorzczuk, “Pewne aspekty humanizmu w naukach ścisłych”, p. 225.

<sup>42</sup> Suchodolski, “Przewaga środków nad celami”, p. 19.

<sup>43</sup> Grzegorzczuk, “Pewne aspekty humanizmu w naukach ścisłych”, p. 226.

<sup>44</sup> See Foster, *Return of Nature*, p. 494.

<sup>45</sup> More on critique of scientific socialism, see Sommer, *Řídit socialismus jako firmu*, p. 47.

as zoologist Włodzimierz Michajłow put it during the Jabłonna conference.<sup>46</sup> Similar opinions were formulated during the Silesian conference as well. In the words of the Marxist philosopher Tadeusz M. Jaroszewski, this political system was perceived as the one creating favourable conditions for a “responsible and reasonable use of scientific and technological achievements and management of the world’s material resources (and such management that would not lead to a catastrophic violation of ecological relations and the devastation of the natural environment)”.<sup>47</sup>

However, already at the time, many commentators were well aware of the rising gap between the ideas and the practices of socialist state-run economics, and some of them shared the concern that a socialist system, deprived of its substantial, normative dimension, would be susceptible to the negative trends as well. As Suchodolski noticed in his presentation delivered during the Silesian conference, “the attitude of this [socialist] industrial civilisation toward the natural environment is a problem that still needs to be addressed”.<sup>48</sup> Jerzy Bukowski underscored: “Even some countries that have chosen a socialist way of economic development were not able to see in time the dangers of industrial development to the natural environment.”<sup>49</sup>

Those tensions become especially clear when scrutinising the notion of economic growth. In 1975, the year of the Jabłonna conference, a U.S.-based Romanian economist named Nicolas Georgescu-Roegen published the article “Energy and economic myths” that referred to *The Limits to Growth* (he was collaborating with the Club of Rome at that time) and diagnosed prevalent economic trends: “except for some isolated voices in the last few years, economists have always suffered from growth-mania. Economic systems and economic plans have always been evaluated only in relation to their ability to sustain a great rate of economic growth.”<sup>50</sup>

As for Poland, the timing of the discussion was especially unfortunate, as just a few years earlier a new economic strategy was launched in Poland by First Secretary Edward Gierek, aimed at stimulating “the great dynamics of economic growth”. It explains, to some extent, the tone of the Polish preface to *The Limits to Growth*. Kazimierz Secomski

<sup>46</sup> Michajłow, “Środowisko życia człowieka”, p. 149.

<sup>47</sup> Tadeusz M. Jaroszewski, “Perspektywy człowieka w rewolucji naukowo-technicznej”, in *Człowiek, socjalizm, rewolucja naukowo-techniczna*, ed. Janusz Kolczyński and Joachim Liszka (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1974), p. 46.

<sup>48</sup> Bogdan Suchodolski, “Socjalistyczna cywilizacja naukowo-techniczna”, in *Człowiek, socjalizm, rewolucja naukowo-techniczna*, ed. Janusz Kolczyński and Joachim Liszka (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1974), p. 201.

<sup>49</sup> Jerzy Bukowski, “Nowe aspekty humanizmu w środowisku kształtowanym przez technikę”, in *Kultura polska a socjalistyczny system wartości*, ed. Bogdan Suchodolski (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1977), p. 114.

<sup>50</sup> Nicolas Georgescu-Roegen, “Energy and Economic Myths”, *Southern Economic Journal* 41, no. 3 (1975), p. 365.

was trying to reconcile two incongruous perspectives by proposing a “development of the socialist theory of socio-economic growth”.<sup>51</sup>

The authors who were discussing the findings of *The Limits to Growth* during the Jabłonna conference were more willing to accept the implications of introducing such terms as “zero-growth” or other proposed notions, such as “organic growth”, based on the “diversity of the world and global human solidarity” or “ecodevelopment” that “wouldn’t be destructive for the environment, degrading the biosphere of our planet and would reconcile the economic laws with natural ones”.<sup>52</sup> The other proposal was to replace the term economic development with “harmonious development”.<sup>53</sup> In the end, even the proponents of “socialist growth” shared the intuition that – in the words of Kazimierz Secomski – “forcing economic growth for the sake of further growth” and its fetishisation is anachronistic and absurd.<sup>54</sup> Probably the harshest critique of “growth-mania” was formulated by Julian Aleksandrowicz:

the constant increase of the GDP has been made a synonym of social progress, production and consumption, becoming the only tangible goal of existence and social activity for millions of people [...] our thinking must be sick since we produce so many unnecessary things only because they serve to increase the national product, and we do not do many necessary things because they do not bring measurable profit.<sup>55</sup>

The ideology of the socialist state however was more and more prone to embrace the pro-growth perspective, going as far as to subordinate the social needs to the economic one. During the Silesian Conference, Tadeusz M. Jaroszewski underlined the need to discuss not only whether larger “non-productive” expenses “will bring us closer to the ultimate goals of socialism, but also whether they are indispensable conditions for the economy of growth”.<sup>56</sup>

### Limits to Work

The consequences of this reorientation became especially clear in the field of labour organisation. As many commentators would argue, the main advantage of socialism over capitalism was the promise of liberation from the burdens of wage work, which would allow humans to flourish, to develop their individual, creative potential, while

<sup>51</sup> Secomski, “Wstęp do wydania polskiego”, p. 21.

<sup>52</sup> Michajłow, “Środowisko życia człowieka”, p. 145.

<sup>53</sup> Bukowski, “Nowe aspekty humanizmu w środowisku”, p. 118.

<sup>54</sup> Secomski, “Wstęp do wydania polskiego”, p. 24.

<sup>55</sup> Aleksandrowicz, *Sumienie ekologiczne*, p. 127.

<sup>56</sup> Jaroszewski, “Perspektywy człowieka w rewolucji naukowo-technicznej”, p. 78.



simultaneously strengthening collective bonds with meaningful activities for the sake of the community. The threat of the ecological crisis revealed one more important dimension of this transformation: socialism would offer reasonable alternatives to the capitalist forms of leisure based on the consumption of material goods that thus foster production with its negative impact on the natural environment. It would promote less harmful practices: enjoying nature, using the public recreational and sports facilities, and devoting itself to arts and crafts. With the automation of production in progress and the new gains in work efficiency, hopeful outlooks emerged for socialism to deliver this promise. The issue of shortening the working week was widely discussed during both conferences. Some commentators referred to Friedrich Engels and recalled his appeal “for shortening the working time to what we consider as minimal”.<sup>57</sup> Those claims were in accordance with what Sommer calls “the emancipatory current” of STR, seen as “the shift from the one-sided emphasis on production, economic growth and provision of basic needs to the development of the non-material aspects of human life”.<sup>58</sup>

Competing tendencies, however, emerged. There was a temptation among the socialist governments, who embraced the growth-oriented economic mechanisms, to use the rise in productivity and work efficiency to further fuel economic growth. The fulfilment of the promise of shortening the working week was jeopardised by the same mechanism that made it possible in the first place. This shift was reflected in some of the papers presented during the Silesian conference. The sphere of reproduction was described as an “element of the development of the productive forces” and the expenses this sphere was absorbing were seen as “productive investments promoting economic growth”.<sup>59</sup> In this discourse, all forces were to be subject to economic interests, especially science, which would play the role of the “leverage for dynamic economic growth”.<sup>60</sup> Special tasks were assigned to the social sciences, such as “stimulating workers’ activities” and “improving work motivation”.<sup>61</sup>

Even the very idea of “free time” started to be seen as suspicious. Some commentators would warn about a “civilisation of leisure and entertainment” and proposed such forms of organisation of leisure that would “build up the culture of work” and improve workers’ efficiency.<sup>62</sup> The alternative proposition was discreetly undermined: “There are specific priorities in the economy, resulting from the needs of economic growth. It would be mere demagogy to deny them in the name of some model of social politics devised

<sup>57</sup> Eugeniusz Olszewski, “Technika - praca - człowiek”, in *Kultura polska a socjalistyczny system wartości*, ed. Bogdan Suchodolski (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1977), p. 60.

<sup>58</sup> Sommer, *Řidit socialismus jako firmu*, p. 60.

<sup>59</sup> Jaroszewski, “Perspektywy człowieka w rewolucji naukowo-technicznej”, p. 59.

<sup>60</sup> Jezierski, “Program wychowania człowieka socjalizmu”, p. 95.

<sup>61</sup> Jaroszewski, “Perspektywy człowieka w rewolucji naukowo-technicznej”, p. 60.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

beyond real possibilities.”<sup>63</sup> As an opponent of transforming individuals into “passive consumers [...] of the mass entertainment provided to them”,<sup>64</sup> Jaroszewski himself probably would have disapproved of one of the important outcomes of subordinating social needs to economic demands. It resulted from the introduction of similar mechanisms as in Western economics. Instead of shortening their working time, workers were offered a higher share in consumption, which, from the point of view of the government played two important roles: preserving its legitimacy and fuelling economic growth from the demand side, while harnessing workers to sustain the system, both with their labour and with household expenses.<sup>65</sup>

### Limits to Consumption

From the point of view of engaged intellectuals, fostering a consumerist culture for the sake of economic growth was another form of betraying the socialist ideology. Together with the reflection on commodity fetishism, the critique of overproduction, overconsumption, and capitalism as a system of waste has a long tradition within socialist thought. As pointed out by Foster, this critique was from the very beginning closely related to environmental questions. Along with the growing awareness of the environmental costs of modern modes of production and consumption in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more and more emphasis was put on this dimension. The participants of the Jabłonna conference not only criticised the individual and social consequences of rising consumerism but also underlined the role of overconsumption in exacerbating the ecological crisis:

Even mobilising all the new advances in science [...] we will not be able to afford to waste the goods we produce on pursuit for surfeit. What is more, we will not be able to afford to litter, in the literal sense of the word, our planet [...] with various types of waste from consumption, in which packaging that is difficult to destroy, shoddy clothing and equipment that is not suitable for further use and often cannot be recycled [...], will constitute a significant item.<sup>66</sup>

They had no illusions that Polish society would be immune to the temptations of consumerism, especially taking into account the pressure of the “patterns of consumption developed in capitalist countries that spread through the mass media, popular cul-

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> See Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen, *The Imperial Mode of Living. Everyday Life and the Ecological Crisis of Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso 2017).

<sup>66</sup> Bukowski, “Nowe aspekty humanizmu w środowisku”, p. 116.

ture, and personal experiences, as for example travel abroad or social influence”.<sup>67</sup> This question was also raised by Dennis Meadows, co-author of *The Limits to Growth*, who emphasized in an interview for the Polish magazine *Kultura* the striking similarities between capitalist and socialist states that “attach increasing importance to individual consumption”.<sup>68</sup> This similarity was indeed disturbing for many critically-oriented socialist intellectuals and scientists. Some of them saw the gap in the level of consumption between Poland and the Western world as an advantage in this regard. Jerzy Bukowski considered the relative “civilisational delay” of socialist societies as a positive feature, allowing them to create “a new model of life and labour, which will secure the existence of future generations”:

We cannot continue – mindlessly from the point of view of our future existence on Earth – to destroy non-renewable raw material resources, [...] we must learn to satisfy our consumption appetites, [...] according to necessary needs and not the whims that are often artificially stimulated, as is the case of the highly developed capitalist countries.<sup>69</sup>

The question of needs and how to satisfy them was important for the participants of the Jabłonna Conference. Much attention has been paid to scrutinising how consumerist practices were immersed in and legitimised by the dominant culture. It was often illustrated by the example of car ownership. As Bogdan Suchodolski pointed out: “the decision to produce the small Fiat on a mass scale has become an expression of our acceptance of the thesis that ‘living with a car’ has special values”.<sup>70</sup> Dennis Meadows warned Polish readers that it will be a fateful decision, deepening social inequalities.<sup>71</sup>

Those were the reasons why questions of a hierarchy of values, ethics, and moral attitudes were perceived as so vital in the context of social and ecological crises. The call for a “new frugality”, as one of the commentators formulated it, meant reorientation in the field of aspirations and definitions of well-being, for they were inextricably linked with environmental questions. This call for moderation may be also explained to some extent by the generational experiences of people building a socialist state after the destruction of World War II. The ethos of sacrifices made for the sake of a better

<sup>67</sup> Jan Szczepański, “Wartości kultury, styl życia i wzory konsumpcji”, in *Kultura polska a socjalistyczny system wartości*, ed. Bogdan Suchodolski (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1977), p. 49.

<sup>68</sup> Andrzej Bonarski, “Granice Wzrostu – Wywiad z profesorem Dennisem L. Meadows”, *Kultura*, January 12, 1975, p. 7.

<sup>69</sup> Bukowski, “Nowe aspekty humanizmu w środowisku”, p. 115.

<sup>70</sup> Suchodolski, “Socjalistyczna cywilizacja naukowo-techniczna”, p. 25.

<sup>71</sup> Bonarski, “Granice Wzrostu” – Wywiad”, p. 7.

socialist tomorrow was sometimes presented as opposing the “hedonistic” lifestyle of younger generations. But this call for frugality was not a call against leisure. If anyone was suspicious of entertainment, it was the party activists, afraid that excess free time will worsen workers’ productivity. Other participants in the discussions supported the development of a public leisure infrastructure. It was individual consumption and commodity fetishism they were protesting against, not people having a good time. As Włodzimierz Michajłow explained:

The need for a new quality of life [...] is rooted in environmental issues. [...] At the core of the concept of quality of life is the attitude to the living environment, workplace, residence, rest, and holidays. Therefore, the fight for a better quality of life was embraced as the slogan of many environmental movements.<sup>72</sup>

### Limits to Population Growth

Here we also approach an important point on which socialist thinkers would disagree with the *The Limits to Growth* authors. The Club of Rome was concerned not only with pro-growth tendencies in the economy but also with population growth. In this regard, they adopted a neo-Malthusian perspective, with all its implications. In the aforementioned interview with Dennis Meadows, we find quite a disturbing fragment in which he calls for a drastic demographic change in Poland: “A state with a socialist system has special possibilities in this respect. The administrative and social apparatus can create conditions preventing excessive population growth.” This thread was however not raised in Polish discussions. In the socialist movement, there was a long history of opposition to (neo-)Malthusianism perceived as an “inhuman theory in the service of imperialism”.<sup>73</sup> When coupled with the extractivist approach of the socialist states, this stance has indeed ecological consequences; in some periods, especially the 1950s, a huge effort was put into controlling nature and using it as an inexhaustible reservoir of resources.<sup>74</sup> The discussion from the 1970s that is analysed in this paper suggests, however, an important shift. Socialist intellectuals were searching for new ways to reconcile satisfying the needs of society with respecting the limits of the natural environment while also avoiding the trap of falling into neo-Malthusianism.

<sup>72</sup> Michajłow, “Środowisko życia człowieka”, p. 149.

<sup>73</sup> Jiří Janáč and Doubravka Olšáková, *Kult jednoty: stalinský plán přetvoření přírody v Československu 1948–1964* (Praha: Academia, 2018), p. 75.

<sup>74</sup> See chapter “Stalinský plán mezi malthusiánstvím, neomalthusiánstvím a marxismem” in Janáč and Olšáková, *Kult jednoty*, pp. 75–93. On the criticism of Malthusianism among Western leftist intellectuals, see Foster, *Return of Nature*, p. 497.

### Socialism at the Crossroads

In my presentation of the two Polish conferences, I put emphasis on the differences between them to reconstruct two discursive models characteristic of the public discussion during this period and two currents of socialist thought: “technocratic” and “humanist”. They were constantly permeating and influencing each other and we can trace both of them in presentations that were delivered during both of the conferences, which even shared some of the same guests (Bogdan Suchodolski).

What I would like to emphasize is that the critical assessment of the ability of the socialist state to confront the ecological crisis was delivered by renowned scientists and researchers. Unlike some of their younger colleagues, who at that time were abandoning Marxist vocabulary,<sup>75</sup> they were formulating their statements within the framework of socialist ideology, convinced that, after some necessary revisions, socialism remains a much more feasible project to face contemporary challenges than capitalism. Their statements, presented during an official prestigious symposium devoted to the development of the socialist culture and society, shouldn’t be regarded as dissident or marginal. And yet, although their critical predictions proved to be quite prophetic, it was the technocratic and pragmatic model, with all its shortcomings, that prevailed in official state politics, with serious consequences for the future.

Instead of interpreting it in terms of the failure of socialist ideology, I propose to emphasise the potential of this ideology to adequately recognise the nature of the ecological crisis, its causes, and its feasible solutions. Seen from this perspective, socialist thought may be perceived as consistent in delivering important ecological reflections. From Engels and Morris with their concerns about disruptive effects brought by capitalism on the natural environment, as described by Foster, to the Czech architect Ladislav Žák with his vision of “pannaturalist socialism”, to Polish philosophers and scientists discussing the ecological costs of socialist development, we can trace a long leftist tradition of environmental reflection which may enrich our contemporary thinking and activism. We shouldn’t however disregard the dynamics of power within the socialist state along with the global geopolitical and economic shifts that made the implementation of those ideas so difficult.

### What Can We Learn from These Socialist Thinkers Today?

Read today, discussions from the 1970s seem strikingly relevant. The emotional, engaged rhetorics with their well-dosed irony; the accuracy of the observations made by the commentators, and the adequacy of their predictions, make those texts resonate well with contemporary readers. The findings of natural and social scientists confirm

<sup>75</sup> For more on the ideological shift within the left-leaning milieu, see Michał Siermiński, *Dekada przełomu. Polska lewica opozycyjna 1968–1980* (Warszawa: Książka i Prasa, 2016).

their general intuitions. The deepening planetary crisis makes this reading moving and frustrating at the same time.

I would like to point out a few key issues that might be most instructive for us. To avoid the worst consequences of the climate and ecological crisis, we need a deep political and economic transformation that will fulfil the requirements of both social and environmental justice. This transformation should be based on an equal distribution of wealth throughout the globe, which requires limitations on the use of energy and materials by the wealthy global North in order to allow it to achieve decent standards of living in other parts of the world – something that was clear already for the commentators in the seventies.<sup>76</sup> It means that we should rethink our notions of well-being and visions of a good life, as noted by degrowth- and sufficiency-oriented scholars.<sup>77</sup> The notion of human needs and various ways of satisfying them (that is, need satisfiers) is particularly salient today,<sup>78</sup> as it was already in Szczepański's article from the Jabłonna conference. From that point of view, a socialist sociology that develops studies devoted to patterns of consumption, ways of satisfying needs, and cultural and social norms may convey important knowledge, especially if we consider those patterns and norms as historically shaped and as being transformative over time.<sup>79</sup>

Among the various socialist demands, one is especially deserving of our attention in the context of the ecological crisis, namely the shortening of working hours, as it addresses both social and environmental issues. As the latest research shows, prospects of decreasing greenhouse gas emissions and minimise other forms of pressure on the environment are very promising, while the benefits of working less for health and well-being are already well-known.<sup>80</sup>

Another important matter is the question of the moral dimension of environmental politics. Socialist discourses from the 1970s did not avoid moral issues, on the contrary, they revealed the ethical dimension of various human activities. They argued that any discourse deprived of such moral consciousness becomes a tool for technocrats, allowing them to hide the social and environmental costs of their actions under the cover of rationality. That we must expose the ethical premises on which different political agendas are based: do they include the possibility of decent living for every being on the planet, or are they limited to the prosperity of privileged groups? Are they based on solidarity,

<sup>76</sup> See Goryński, *Mieszkanie wczoraj, dziś i jutro*, p. 306.

<sup>77</sup> See Doris Fuchs et al., *Consumption Corridors. Living a Good Life within Sustainable Limits*, Routledge 2021.

<sup>78</sup> See Ian Gough, "Climate change and sustainable welfare: the centrality of human needs", *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 39, no. 5 (2015), pp. 1191–1214.

<sup>79</sup> See Lina I. Brand-Correa et al., "Understanding (and tackling) need satisfier escalation", *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy* 16, no. 1 (2020), pp. 309–325.

<sup>80</sup> See Anna Coote et al., *21 Hours: Why a Shorter Working Week Can Help Us All to Flourish in the 21st Century* (London: New Economic Foundation, 2010).

or exclusion? This applies to the scientific reports on which those agendas are based as well. The participants of the discussion from the 1970s were well aware how easily science becomes a tool to legitimize the establishment and how the current balance of power influences the direction of science's development. Today, it could for instance inform our reading of the IPCC reports. It would allow us to see more clearly whose perspectives and interests prevail in the report's scenarios and to include more scenarios that would question the contemporary socio-economic status quo in future editions.

There were, however, some significant blind spots in the discussions of the 1970s that are worth mentioning in order to complete a contemporary reflection on ecosocialism. First, it is the underestimation of reproductive work that is striking. While praising the idea of shortening the working week, the commentators tended to place the areas of human fulfilment outside the sphere of reproduction and care work. Today, informed by ecofeminism and feminist economics, we see more clearly the importance of care economy and care ethics in the context of ecological crisis.<sup>81</sup>

The other omission is even more striking, as it could be expressed in the traditional vocabulary of socialism and it concerns one of its crucial issues: the organisation of labour and production. Indeed, there was a great emphasis on the shortening of the working week, but otherwise, the discussion on work organisation was limited to the question of management, while demands to democratise the control of the means of production were left unmentioned. The shift from democratic workers' control (regardless of to what extent this demand was actually implemented) to management by specialised experts may be interpreted as one of the features of the technocratic turn in socialist states. It indicates, however, an important issue that should not be forgotten in contemporary ecosocialist planning. According to Giorgos Kallis, the question of democratic control over the means of production is crucial to planning economic activities that won't be harmful to nature. In his view, the emergence of specialised classes controlling the process of production and its effects not only creates unnecessary hierarchies but also increases the risk of such forms of reinvesting the surplus that would leverage further growth.<sup>82</sup>

There are many indications that ecosocialism, with its emphasis on both social and ecological justice, could be a feasible answer to the climate and ecological crisis. The more it can be informed by the preceding socialist attempts to reorganize social and economic conditions and its shortcomings, the better it will be prepared to avoid pro-growth and neo-Malthusian traps and use science and technological achievements for the sake of mankind and planetary ecosystems, while avoiding technocratic and scientist delusions.

<sup>81</sup> See *Eco-Sufficiency and Global Justice. Women Write Political Ecology*, ed. Ariel Salleh (London: Pluto Press, 2009); Zofia Łapniewska, "Etyka troski a gospodarka przyszłości", *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 24, no. 2 (2017), pp. 101–122.

<sup>82</sup> Giorgos Kallis, "Socialism Without Growth", p. 9.

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