



Pleasure as a political ethics of limits

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review of

Godani, P. (2019) *Sul piacere che manca. Etica del desiderio e spirito del capitalismo*. Roma: DeriveApprodi. (PB, pp. 160, €13, ISBN: 9788865482773)

Kallis, G. (2019) *Limits. Why Malthus was wrong and why environmentalists should care*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. (PB, pp. 168, \$14, ISBN: 9781503611559)

One of the problems of the last few years, one of the reasons why we have missed different opportunities, is that... we had a stoic, Spartan left, which did not raise the problem of pleasure, understood as dignity for all. A left which has not reasoned differently from the religious message, which promises you a Paradise after death, because our world is a world of suffering. The message of this left is the same: we must suffer now and after the revolution we will be able to conquer happiness. And changing this culture is difficult. From this point of view, the initiatives that claim dignity, *buen vivir*, good governance, the environment, are a minority. They grow systematically, but they still remain a minority. This discourse, on the other hand, must become universal and the message must sound clear: life is short, good, and there is a fundamental right which is the right to happiness. A right which does not manifest itself and should not be confused with a sort of natural right to become rich, or to overwhelm others. Let us talk about another happiness. Small satisfactions, which however are worth a lot. (Sepúlveda and Petrini, 2014: 8)

How do you understand if someone is stoic or Epicurean? It's a very simple matter: the stoics love the great objectives established beyond life and for these

objectives they are ready to die... Christians are stoic, yes, because what do Christians want? They want eternal happiness, and yet they say: we are born to suffer... Marxists are stoic, because they want justice for all and for this justice they are ready to withstand the dictatorship of the proletariat and the revolution which, just between us, are two really uncomfortable things. Cazzaniga is stoic, he wakes up at half past six in the morning every day because he wants to become general director of the Alfa Romeo. Not us, we are Epicureans, we are satisfied with little, as long as this little is given to us as soon as possible.¹

Introduction: a good life in a degrowth society

This review addresses theoretical issues which are central to degrowth theory: the issue of limits and the values of idleness and frugality. It does so by bringing together two recent books written by authors which do not read each other, but nonetheless complete each other's thinking incredibly well, offering very congruous interpretations of contemporary thought and ancient Greek philosophy. The selected books are *Limits* (Stanford University Press, 2019) written by Giorgos Kallis, and *Sul piacere che manca* ('On the lacking pleasure'), by Paolo Godani (DeriveApprodi, 2019).

The chosen books come from very different theoretical fields: Kallis conducts research on degrowth theory and political ecology, while Godani on aesthetic and political philosophy, until his arrival to Epicureanism. However, the two works are linked by the fact that both authors propose a critique to the ideologies of limitlessness – unlimited growth, development, but also human wants and desires – followed by an apology of democratically defined limits and limited pleasures, inspired by ancient Greek thought. The similarities between these books provide the opportunity of bridging the gap between bodies of literature which rarely interact with each other, reopening the conversation between degrowth and the ancient Epicurean school, a path already ventured by Serge Latouche (2011).

Reading these two books together means to combine political, ecological and economic questions with ethical and moral ones, exploring innovative interpretations of classical theoretical issues, such as the relationship

¹ Quotation of Luciano De Crescenzo from his movie *Così parlò Bellavista* (1984).

between limits and scarcity, pleasure and desire. The economic and political stances taken by Kallis result strengthened by Godani's philosophy, while the ethical argument proposed by the latter could be put into practice by the degrowth movement.

Are limits to growth a sad physical reality which should be overcome or something which should be democratically established in order to ensure a fairer and more sustainable future for humanity? Is it true that human wants are unlimited, requiring unlimited growth and consumption? What can we learn on limits from Greek politics, philosophy and ethics? Kallis starts his argument by criticizing Malthusian and neo-Malthusian thought, showing how Malthus shall not be considered a theorist of ecological limits, but instead a supporter of infinite capitalist growth. He then elaborates Cornelius Castoriadis' interpretation of ancient Greek culture and politics, showing how a collective ethics of limits (to personal wealth and political power) can be a founding stone for democracy and freedom. Godani's book starts, in turn, by criticizing Freudian understanding of the concepts of 'pleasure' and 'desire', as well as Deleuzian exaltation of the latter, which Godani considers a driving force of capital accumulation. *Sul piacere che manca* proposes to recover the Epicurean ethics of limited pleasures as an antidote to the psychological and social mechanisms of subjugation to ambition, need for recognition and unlimited, unnecessary wants, typical of contemporary capitalist societies.

I will present and compare the most relevant critiques and proposals offered by the authors, showing how their respective arguments enrich one another. Kallis' writing style is quite direct and straightforward, and this allows me to cover all the main passages of his argumentation. Godani, instead, ponders over a more diverse array of subjects, some of which are not particularly relevant for the purposes of this comparison. I will highlight the chapters of *Sul piacere che manca* which contains the essence of Godani's reasoning, with the objective of showing that his criticism towards psychoanalytic theory is the same which Kallis points towards Malthusian thought, and that he finds in Epicurean philosophy the same answers which Kallis searches in classic Athens. Nonetheless, every chapter offers original points for reflection and is coherent with the perspective of a frugal life based on shared simple pleasures and leisure.

Modern, anti-modern and classical cultures of limits

Limits structure is the following: the first chapter, ‘Why Malthus was wrong’, builds the foundations for the whole book, criticizing Malthus’ theory of natural limits and scarcity and unveiling its reactionary meaning, to which Kallis counterposes his own proposal of democratically established limits to growth. The second (‘Economics: scarcity without limits’) and the third chapter (‘The limits of environmentalism’) show how Malthusian notions kept living in contemporary political economy and modern-day environmentalism. The third chapter also offers a review of different conceptions of natural and social limits elaborated by the international environmental movement, and compares them both to Malthusian understanding of limits and to the positive vision of natural abundance and free self-limitation proposed by Romantic and anarchist thinkers. The fourth chapter describes the exemplary ‘culture of limits’ produced by the people of ancient Greece, while the fifth is dedicated to ‘The limits of limits’, that is, the examination of the limits of Kallis’s own case for limits. The book ends with an epilogue, ‘In defense of limits’, which serves as a synthetic but touching manifesto for the cause of limits and degrowth.

The whole argument proposed by Kallis is built around a game of oppositional couples, the most important being the following: natural/democratic limits; scarcity/abundance; need for growth/need for limits; heteronomy/autonomy. His objective, as stated in the introduction, is ‘to reclaim, refine and defend the notion of limits’ [2] and to ‘dissociate limits from what in scholarly jargon we call Malthusianism’ [2]. So, the first chapter of the book criticizes Malthusian understanding of limits as well as the usual understanding of his work. We all know that in his *An essay of the principle of the population as it affects the future improvement of society*, published in 1798, Malthus argued that while population grows geometrically, food production only follows an arithmetic progression. This fact would then lead towards either a ‘Malthusian trap’, in which population growth exhaust the means for improving welfare, or a ‘Malthusian catastrophe’, made of famine and disease. Kallis invites us to dig a bit deeper into the *Essay*, challenging the description of Malthus as a surpassed prophet of doom, and to show how he was in fact a very modern (and reactionary) advocate of infinite economic growth, whose

understanding of scarcity and human wants are actually at the base of current economic thought.

Although Kallis claims to have no intention of rewriting the history of political economy, the first chapter of *Limits* does shed a different light over Malthusianism. Kallis points out how Malthus' was quite optimistic over the possibilities of technological development, and that he strongly advocated economic growth. Kallis' main point is that the real legacy of the *Essay* does not strictly regard overpopulation. In his interpretation, what Malthus left behind is a long-lasting discourse regarding the relation between natural scarcity and human needs. Malthus considered such needs unlimited, therefore he believed that nature could never fully satisfy them. In Kallis words: 'Malthus conceives a world that is naturally limited because the needs of our bodies are naturally unlimited' [13]; and 'from the facts that humans need to eat and have sex and that it is easier to have children than to provide for them, Malthus concludes that there is not, and will never be, "enough for all above a decent share"' [13].

Kallis reminds us that the political objective of the *Essay* was to demonstrate the mathematical necessity of class division and the impossibility of a society of equals, showing that 'revolutionary ambitions to eradicate poverty go against science' [14]. First of all, Malthus argued that poverty is a natural consequence of population growth, since this phenomenon does not leave a sufficient amount of resources for everyone. Then, he wrote against redistributive policies, such as the English Poor Laws, because contrasting poverty would mean to remove the only motivation humans have to produce more: freeing the poor from hunger means that they will not work; and if nobody works, everyone will fall back into misery and starvation. *Limits* succeeds in showing that Malthus was only invoking the specter of natural limits to advocate economic growth, described as the only viable path left to humanity. If equality is discarded, then the suffering produced by poverty can only propel us to produce more, allowing us to grow in numbers. Dreading scarcity was just a way to justify productivity.

In the second chapter, Kallis notices how Malthus' thinking continued to live in modern political economy, reaching even neoclassical theory: this, too, postulates scarcity, and the idea behind scarcity is that humans have

unlimited wants. In the third chapter, instead, Kallis continues his analysis pointing out that mainstream environmental thought has also somehow reproduced Malthus' argument. *Limits to growth*, the 1972 report commissioned by the Club of Rome, is addressed as one of the culprits: '*Limits [to growth] did not claim only that growth... had terrible consequences; rather it predicted that growth will come to an end, and that this would be a terrible consequence*' [54]. Capitalism had to be reformed in order to avoid clashing with limits to growth. In this narrative, what really matters is to keep growing.

Kallis' assessment, instead, is that ecology needs a different, positive vision of limits: the environmental movement should free itself from the vision of external limits imposed by nature (scarcity) and reconsider the vision of collectively established social limits to growth and to the exploitation of nature, considered as conditions for a shared abundance. This is the way to guarantee enough resources to everyone, to respect metabolic cycles and to experience nature as a source of joy. Such vision is gleaned from the different traditions of thought presented in the third chapter: from Romantic poetry, Kallis draws the praise for frugality and for the enjoyment of simple pleasures, linked to the idea that 'nature is scarce only if there are excessive wants' [52]; from the writings of the anarchist political activist Emma Goldman, he takes the notion of birth control as an autonomous form of self-limitation, aimed at retaking control of reproduction from the State and capital in order to live love freely. The 'ethos of living within limits while believing in abundance' [52], Kallis notices, is also shared by societies of hunter-gatherers, which maintain abundance by sharing resources, therefore limiting the accumulation of wealth and power.

But Kallis' main inspiration comes from classic Greek thought, in which he finds an elaborate vision of democratic self-limitation. In the long and interesting fourth chapter, he describes an ancient culture in which the ultimate wisdom was the ability to limit oneself. Kallis follows the idea that the Greeks' attention to moderateness was born as a reaction to the advent of money. The power of an unlimited source of value, coupled with the power of the rich class, was at risk of disrupting society and so it had to be limited. From pre-Socratic philosophy to Aristotle, passing by the different constitutions of Athens and the tragedy, ancient Greek thought was focused on the concept of the infinite, and on how to limit it. The same applied to ethics: the Greeks

accepted all passions, not considering any of them bad for itself. Evil was seen in the excess, in the self-harming inability to find a limit, which makes people lose autonomy and freedom.

Like he did in other books, also in the third and fourth chapter of *Limits* Kallis finds inspiration in the work of Cornelius Castoriadis. In particular, Kallis draws from his fellow modern Greek thinker the idea of *self-limitation*, discussed in the work *A society adrift*. Self-limitation is what sets heteronomous and autonomous societies apart: the former attributes the definition of limits – what cannot be done, what is considered an excess – to external, unquestionable sources, like the gods; the latter instead can freely discuss such limits or define new ones. For Castoriadis, capitalist societies motivate the necessity of economic growth relying on unquestionable sources of truth such as science, technology or the mechanism of free market. The environmental movement had the crucial role of maintaining the autonomous and democratic spirit alive by trying to set political limits to growth. For both Castoriadis and Kallis, to collectively discuss limits means to question what we want, and this ‘is what autonomy and democracy are all about’ [56].

Pleasure beyond and against desire: A class in the Epicurean garden

Godani dedicates the first chapter of his book, ‘On the present state of things’, to introduce the issue of the ethics of capitalism and its valorization of the desiring subject, to which he opposes the political proposal of the refusal of work, related to an ethics of leisure. The second chapter, ‘Blanda voluptas’, and the third, ‘Désir’, criticize Freudian, Deleuzian and Lacanian theories regarding the subsumption of pleasure to the mechanism of desire. The fourth chapter, ‘Hedoné’, contains the central argument of the book, presenting the Epicurean theory of an autonomous, static and limited pleasure, opposed to the ‘false opinions’ of vain desires. The fifth chapter, ‘God’, connects various theories of pleasure expressed by different philosophers, and the sixth explores the specific matters of love and ‘The pleasures of the flesh’. The seventh, eighth and ninth chapter (‘Scholé’, ‘Laughing and philosophizing together’, ‘Plebeia vestis’), dig deeper into the themes of limits and liberation

of pleasure from the constraints of production, valorization and ambition, examining the Epicurean writings on friendship and politics.

Just like Kallis, also Godani engages classic authors in an intense confrontation, proposing innovative critical interpretations of their thought. He, too, works on the oppositional couple infinite/limits in relation to the issue of human wants. In this case, such opposition is expressed by the contrast between 'desire' and 'pleasure' (and by their re-definition). From the first chapter of his book, Godani criticizes the concept of desire for its current ties to the infinite process of capitalist valorization. Instead, he (re)proposes an ethics of limited pleasures, based on frugality and leisure, considered as liberating factors from an anxious life entirely put to work.

In the second chapter, Godani commences his critique to the Freudian vision of human desire. Godani starts examining Freud's earlier works, in which he investigated the issue of the meaning of life, analyzing what people manifest of their wants through their behavior. Of course, he concluded that people desire happiness, but he described it as a sequence of momentary pleasures. For Freud, these moments are just 'discharges' of compressed tensions which produce intense feelings, and which need to be followed by other ones. The persistence of pleasure can only produce mild feelings, while it is intensity and contrast that we really enjoy. In this way, the cycle of desire and momentary pleasures appears to be endless.

Godani observes that Deleuze, too, revealed a similar position on this matter. In a debate with Foucault, the co-author of the *Anti-Oedipus* explained his aversion for the concept of 'pleasure', saying that he considered it as nothing more than an interruption of the immanent process of desire. That desire is a tendency which renovates itself after every satisfaction is a perspective shared by Lacan (at least in some moments of his reasoning). Desire appears as a sort of 'power of infinite', a yearning which cannot be fulfilled. This is the vision of 'desire as lack', in which desire is understood as a question which cannot be answered, a void which cannot be filled by any enjoyment. What emerges from the second and third chapter of *Sul piacere che manca* is that for Freud, Deleuze and Lacan the engine of human desire appears unlimited and unstoppable, the product of a machinic activity which can only intensify.

Godani's intention is to explore a different path. On desire, his position is clearly stated from the introduction of the book: even if social movements of the '60 and '70 aimed at freeing desire from repression, now there is nothing revolutionary in its perpetual motion. This motion is currently subsumed by the machine of capitalist valorization. Animating the research of satisfactions and gratifications, desire is connected to the process of self-valorization: pushed by desire, we are in a condition in which ambition and competition never end, so that we keep working to valorize ourselves, to increase our 'human capital'. From the second chapter, Godani follows Foucault in posing a distinction between pleasure, which is empirical, tied to bodily sensations, and desire, which is connected to the interiority of individuals. His objective is to find a different form of pleasure, something that is not continuously generated by an infinite desire, something that is not a neurotic quest for satisfactions.

The teacher of this pleasure is Epicurus, the hedonist philosopher which lived between the fourth and third century before Christ. Epicurus taught a life ethics based on the research of pleasure. In the fourth chapter of his book, Godani stresses the fact that this kind of pleasure has precise limits. In his *Letter to Menoecus*, Epicurus instructs his disciple about the happiness of the gods: they are blessed, because they achieved a pleasure which is indestructible and imperturbable; but humans can do the same, because this pleasure has nothing to do with the infinite time and power of the immortals. In Epicurean philosophy, the limit in greatness of pleasure (that is, divine blessing) is the detraction of all pain. Pleasure is not something which is added to a steady state of life, but it is innate to life itself, once this is liberated from painful sensations. 'Pain is always a lack: to remove pain means to fill the lack from which it originates' [62], Godani explains. And filling a lack means to reconstitute the body to the innate condition of pleasure, which does not require anything more.

The fourth chapter of *Sul piacere che manca* seems to answer to both Malthus and Lacan. It proposes a vision in which once the needs are satisfied, pleasure persists. For Epicurus, the infinite greed of the stomach is nothing but a false opinion: hunger can be satisfied. Once pains are eliminated, the highest possible pleasure is reached and the act of living itself becomes the greatest blessing. This, for Epicurus, is what gives meaning to life. Such pleasure is

achieved through the '*katastasis*', a state of stable and calm safety and constant peacefulness. There is no need for an infinite time and infinite new satisfactions to reach it.

Godani continues his reasoning explaining what, for him, is the 'secret nucleus of Epicurean doctrine' [65]: once the pain caused by lacks and needs is eliminated, the pleasure of the body cannot increase in quantity, but only change its quality. The limit in greatness of all pleasure is given by the peacefulness of the *katastasis*, and it cannot grow any higher. This is why Epicurus made a distinction between natural and unnatural desires. The second ones, like the desire for wealth and honors, are vane and empty, 'because they exceed the limit to pleasure' [70]. They derive from the tendency *ad infinitum* of desire, which Epicurus recognized, but put in relation to 'the foolish opinions of men'. People who seek such satisfactions will never have enough of them, and will only gain a restless, agitated life, the opposite of a good life based on serenity and leisure. As a consequence, Epicurean thought too, just like degrowth theory, praises the value of frugality and simplicity, as Godani furtherly shows in the seventh chapter. Quoting the author, it is as if pleasure tried to tell us: 'you cannot be any happier than a lizard under the sun' [110].

The fourth, seventh and eighth chapter of *Sul piacere che manca* clarify that Epicurean understanding of pleasure does not only prescribe the satisfaction of basic bodily necessities, since natural desires also include physical exercise, friendship and cultural activities. The point is that such desires are functional for conserving and varying the condition of peacefulness. Epicurean pleasures are always *static*, and Godani really urges his readers to aim for stability and peace, without falling prey to ambition and competition, which are the fuel of capitalist valorization and the cause of our anxieties and psychoses. His message is that to oppose the submission of life to the process of valorization we shall claim the right to a pleasant ethics of idleness.

Conclusions: Wearing a *plebeiam vestem* and pulling the emergency brake

Giorgos Kallis proposes to put democratically established limits to economic activity at the core of contemporary political action, in order to oppose the growth paradigm and to realize a more sustainable and fair society for all; Paolo Godani suggests to put the research of a limited pleasure and the center of our ethics, to avoid being caught in the circuit of valorization and to live a more peaceful and serene life. Both proposals are based on the values of frugality, simplicity and leisure, as opposed to private wealth, frenzy and growth. For both, limits are not a sad necessity but a way to improve human life at all levels.

Malthus, Freud, Deleuze, Lacan, together with neoclassical economists, interpreted utility, desire and pleasure as parts of a process of punctual satisfactions, which can never satiate the need to search more and more of them. For Epicurus there is only one pleasure, which corresponds to happiness and can be reached through a frugal and simple life. The desire for more, for reputation and affluence, can only conduct to a restless life, deprived of peace. Likewise, the infinite cycles of valorization and unlimited economic growth are destroying and privatizing the resources and commons which could guarantee welfare and abundance, if only they were shared and if their exploitation was limited.

It is no coincidence that both Godani and Kallis, in these and other books (see Godani, 2016 and Kallis, 2018), dedicate many pages to discuss the value of friendship, to describe the shared passions of a 'common life', to stress the relevance of relational goods in guaranteeing people's happiness. These goods do not consume themselves, do not increase social metabolism and are alternative to the logic of growth and competition. The *vera voluptas*, the real pleasure taught by the Epicurean philosopher Lucretius, consisted in a friendly frugality. And if a frugal life with friends is enough to reach the greatest pleasure, then nature is not scarce, but abundant and fecund, like the one narrated by the romantic authors quoted by Kallis, which were contemporary to Malthus and his enemies. *Limits* and *Sul piacere che manca* largely confirm Serge Latouche's (2011) intuition on the connection between degrowth and Epicureanism: if pleasure is innate to life and nature is

abundant, there is no reason to desire, produce and grow more, and we shall just pull the emergency brake.

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