

## SELF-LIMITATION AS THE BASIS OF ENVIRONMENTALLY SUSTAINABLE CARE OF THE SELF<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** When we abandon the neoliberal fiction that one is independent on the grounds that it is a-historic and antisocial, we realize that everyone is dependent and interdependent. In a media-driven society the self-identity of the individual is formed within the framework of the culture-ideology of consumerism from early childhood. As a result, both the environmental and social destruction have intensified. In the global era, or in the era of the global environmental crisis, self-identity as a precondition for environmentally sustainable care of the self should be based on the culture-ideology of human rights and responsibilities, and on conscious self-limitation which realizes that one's prosperity and security cannot come at the expense of others. Care of the self is about ensuring the habitability of the global environment as the primary interest of each individual.

**Key words:** self-limitation; preconditions of life; consumerism; human rights.

### Introduction

Globalization and industrialism are leading to the devastation of nature and the social environment, and these are intensified by the application of neoliberal ideology to almost all areas of life. The beginning of the neoliberal ideological campaign against the traditional social standards that place limits on willfulness in individual and social relations and hence on the social preconditions of care of the self can be dated back to 1976, the year Milton Friedman was awarded the Nobel Prize. This award was in fact taken as legitimization of the claim that the only responsibility of business and indeed any human activity is the maximization of profit regardless of the social and environmental consequences. Therefore, this maximization of private profit is by neoliberal narrative interpreted as obvious and natural care of the self. In the overconsuming society of global industrial civilization<sup>2</sup>, which,

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<sup>2</sup> Globalization is mainly the result of the development and merger of communication and transport technologies, i.e. industrialism. Efficiencies in production, transport and communication have led to the need to extend beyond the limited markets of the territorial state, creating pressure for the formation of a global market. Policy rooted in the territorial state is only trying to catch up with these processes but cannot regulate them or direct them. At best it can slow them down or mitigate the most important

inter alia, applies the growth principle to all areas of organized society, care of the self is understood, in considerably reduced form, to mean increased personal consumption—the consumption of water, energy, milk, meat, and so on, per person. However, as J. Patočka demonstrated in his work, care of the self was originally understood in a considerably different sense: that it played a constitutive role in understanding the self, philosophy, and society. As care of the self is currently understood to mean the maximization of consumption, paradoxically it makes it increasingly difficult for a growing circle of people to fulfill their most basic needs for social and environmental reasons.

In the end, this continuous effort to increase production and consumption leads to such devastation of the environment that soon the present form of life of the individual and society will become impossible<sup>3</sup>. In other words, despite having the scientific knowledge society is not able to see that the organization of its social life is in fact the mass suicide of civilization. This irrational action of global society can also be referred to as a social pathology. Critical theory can help us reflect upon and analyze the phenomenon, because as Axel Honneth emphasizes, “(...) critical theorists all claim that it is a lack of social rationality which causes the pathology of capitalist society” (Honneth, 2004, p. 340)<sup>4</sup>. We can then ask whether our environmental irresponsibility is not a pathology of reason. To understand the root of this social pathology or pathology of reason<sup>5</sup> we have to look at the image of humans based on current public policies and business activities.

### ***Homo economicus vs homo politicus***

The neoliberal ideal<sup>6</sup> of humans attempting to maximize personal profit (*homo economicus*) permeated public policies and norms of public and non-public institutions in the 1990s. Personal profit is not just the maximization of profit from any activity, but also the maximization of consumption. This notion of self-identity is formed through consumption from an early age. Mass media turn our children into competent, never satisfied consumers

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social or environmental impacts within the territorial state. Global civilization can be said to exist on the technological level and at the level of the risks resulting from industrial technologies, but certainly not on the political or social level. Nonetheless one can argue that the universalizing demand first appeared in human history by the end of 20th century. Patočka states that this demand is the inner goal of every civilization (Patočka, 1996a, p. 245), but until 20<sup>th</sup> century every previous civilization could have achieved only limited territorial extension. This alone is one of the fundamental differences of the current situation compared to everything else humanity has had to confront and from which it draws its experience.

<sup>3</sup> It is apparent that even limiting increases in the global temperature to 2 °C will not guarantee that people will be protected from extreme weather events and rising sea levels of several meters or from the need to leave most coastal cities. “The economic and social cost of losing functionality of all coastal cities is practically incalculable” (Hansen et al., 2015). The need to resettle tens of millions of people from the coastal cities will not be achieved without conflict and struggles over the territories to where these people can be moved. Simultaneously, the process of desertification will continue and lead to millions of people being uprooted from their current homes. They will also need new places to live.

<sup>4</sup> On critical theory and globalization in Slovak discourse see Dunaj (2010).

<sup>5</sup> On the deficits of public reason see Hrubec (2008).

<sup>6</sup> On the domination of radical neoliberalism in public discourse in V4 countries—especially Slovakia—over the last two decades see Dunaj (2014, 2015).

even before they learn to read and write in school. They are flooded with consumptive stimuli and items from the moment they are able to perceive them. Through mass media products preschool children are exposed to the never-ending attack of advertisements urging them to consume more.<sup>7</sup> Even in the state school system the addiction to commercial products (tablets, software, applications, etc.) is systematically built in. It is in this environment that children form their self-identity. It is this environment which shapes the anti-social *homo economicus* focused on personal profit and effectivity, a never satisfied consumer of products, services, and experiences. Global mass media networks and marketing campaigns ensure this identity prevails over most national, ethnic, and religious identities. Leslie Sklair has very fittingly labelled this phenomenon the culture-ideology of consumerism and argues that it is globalization driven (Sklair, 2009) and that it both shapes and is dependent upon today's *homo economicus*.

Pursuing his own personal interest, *homo economicus*, comes into conflict with *homo politicus* who pursues the public interest and accepts responsibility for the wider community. The institutions of constitutional democracy were originally built on the notion of the active citizen taking an interest in society. As J. Patočka points out, care of the self was conceived in Ancient Greek philosophy as care of the soul, willingness and the need to know how to reason, and most of all, seek it out. In this sense care of the self is care of the public's welfare, care of the community, care for the *polis* (Patočka, 1996b). It is one of the main reasons for philosophy's existence<sup>8</sup>. As such it is conscious self-limitation. In small communities where only a small circle of relationships, interests, and possible conflicts need controlling, regulation exists in the form of ethical norms<sup>9</sup>. In bigger communities and complex societies ethical norms are internalized, for example by self-regulation, and are also enforced by social institutions, later by laws. In other words: "Not all desires could be fulfilled. Not everything could be said or enacted. The capacity to limit oneself was the essence of one's freedom and the freedom of all" (Mbembe, 2016). However, neoliberalism considers all these forms of regulations to be limitations threatening freedom. It demands deregulation in the name of freedom, that is, it tries to eliminate all forms of regulation. It calls for naturalness or spontaneous order (Hayek, 1998, pp. 45-52; pp. 233-244) as the only guarantee of freedom. However, as it turns out, such freedom is reached at the expense of others through what it is becoming a privilege<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> On the role of the global media in the indoctrination of the public through the ideologies of growth, industrialism and consumerism see Stáhel (2016c).

<sup>8</sup> "Unity is the essence of the soul, achieved by thought, an inner dialogue, a dialectic which is the proper method of insight and the essence of reason. That is why philosophy must be at the same time the care for the soul (*epimeleia tés psuchés*), ontology and theology – and all that in the care for the *polis*, for the optimal state" (Patočka, 1996c, p. 104).

<sup>9</sup> However, as Hans Jonas points out, these regulations related only to human relations, "nature was not an object of human responsibility" (Jonas, 1973, p. 34), moreover, "the effective range of action was small, the time-span of foresight, goal-setting and accountability was short, control circumstances limited" (Jonas, 1973, p. 35), which means that "the agent and the "other" of his action are shares of a common present" (Jonas, 1973, p. 35).

<sup>10</sup> After the 2008 crisis the policies of liberalization and deregulation, e.g. of labor laws, led not only to less legal protection for employees, but also to a deepening of the already previously large social

However, much of modern European thinking directly or indirectly relates to other views of freedom in which freedom and privilege exclude one another. In the mid-eighteenth century J.-J. Rousseau came to realize that inequality in society, frequently in the form of slavery, would occur more spontaneously than equality and freedom. Moreover, often:

There are some unfortunate circumstances where one's liberty can be preserved only at the expense of someone else's, and where the citizen can be perfectly free only if the slave is completely enslaved (Rousseau, 2011, p. 220).

According to Rousseau true freedom is the result of conscious and purposeful limitations legitimized through the social contract. Here the social order is based on a contract rather than on nature or spontaneity<sup>11</sup>. Rousseau pointed out that people were mutually dependent and hence there was a need to find a model of society in which freedom was not realized at the expense of others<sup>12</sup>.

The concepts of *homo economicus* and *homo politicus* are mutually exclusive normativities. This contradiction is reflective of the inner conflict in society as well as the legitimization crisis of the current economic and political system. This conflict considerably limits society's ability to adequately react to the threats it faces. Society is atomized, paralyzed by inner conflict and deepening social inequality, while much energy is spent on conflicts arising from mutually exclusive private interests. But public interest should globalize so it is able to face global environmental threats and risks, because for society to survive in its current form requires the ability to take responsibility not only on the economic and political levels, but also on the environmental one.<sup>13</sup>

Care of the self has become the central motivation for almost all human activity with radical individualism, indifference, and skeptical relativism on the increase. This is not the care of the self Patočka identified in early Greek philosophy, but a care of the self, based on the idea that the individual is independent of everybody and everything. However, it has been

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differences between small group of privileged individuals based on talent, origin, or property and the majority.

<sup>11</sup> Rousseau was one of the first to consider the historical evolution of society and its institutions. Consequently A. Honneth regards his work to be the precursor to criticism in social research since his main concern was to identify social phenomena and development tendencies that lead to the decline and degeneration of social life, or rather to limitations on freedom and human self-realization. He considers Rousseau to be the founder of the tradition of critical thinking on society and the identification of the phenomena or relations leading to hidden or overt social forms of oppression, dominance, and ultimately personal, social, and political conflicts. Honneth is critical of Rousseau's individualistic solution, and thus of his conception that the individual lives in a natural state as a self-sufficient loner existing only for himself. Honneth also states that Rousseau did not abandon this atomistic solution, not even in his social contract theory. Rousseau designed a new system for asking questions and replying methodically (Honneth, 1996, p. 38). Liberalism and neoliberalism, on the contrary, remain ahistorical in their program, or rather they work with fictions of the natural state or of the spontaneous social order or equal chances, that is, they ignore the real origins of property and the privileged social status of some and the subordinate status of others.

<sup>12</sup> On Rousseau's concept of freedom see Sfahel (2015a).

<sup>13</sup> On environmental responsibility and environmental security as conditions of the stability of the political system see Sfahel (2015).

shown that the more complex a society becomes, the denser the network of dependencies surrounding each individual. Individuals too often deceive themselves into thinking they are independent of everything and everyone—besides their own abilities<sup>14</sup>—in keeping with the mainstream narrative. Paradoxically, this idea is found in highly complex societies in which the individual is (mutually) dependent on far more relations and systems—social, technical, and natural—than ever before in human history. At the same time many of these relations, systems, and risks (energy, transport, communication, financial, environmental, etc.) cannot be controlled because they are global in nature<sup>15</sup>. However, the average individual seems to have a limited ability to understand that these forms of dependence are relatively limited. This is not simply because individuals are primarily interested in their immediate surroundings and personal relationships, but also because of this neoliberal narrative dominating public discourse. It tells people they are free and independent and have access to the unlimited consumption of products and services. As L. Hohoš notes,

(...) individual freedom came to mean individualized consumption in a consumer society, and consumer freedom within the framework of the market mechanism became a means of self-realization and individual independence (Hohoš, 2007, p. 42).

Therefore the fact that a society based on individualism, consumerism, and profit regardless of how they are achieved is not sustainable passes unnoticed amid the offers for a new car, TV, or exotic holiday.

Since the 1970s the neoliberal contra-revolution has been destroying the normative order of constitutional democracy by weakening the assumption that it is based on inclusive policies that attempt to reduce social differences. By emphasizing increases in production and consumption it has significantly hastened the devastation of the environment. The intensified industrialization, increase in the global population, and consumer demand over the last 50 years have led to such environmental devastation at the planetary level that humanity is no longer in the Holocene epoch with its mild and stable geology and climate that favorably influenced the development of civilization. Humanity as a geologic and

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<sup>14</sup> This attitude undermines the social cohesion of modern societies, in which competitiveness is preferred to solidarity. The wealth and social status arising from it is interpreted as being the result of individual abilities and activities while the fact that wealth is generated by productive social institutions is pushed aside. One result is the deepening of inequality. However, increasingly there are expectations that equality will increase, and that it is a significant factor in the environmental devastation. U. Beck points out that, “Even if inequalities are not growing, the expectations of equality are increasing and, in the process, are de-legitimizing and destabilizing the system of national-global inequalities. ‘Developing nations’ are becoming more westernized and reflect the West back to itself, so that the ‘equality’ of environmental destruction leads to the self-destruction of civilization. The overlap, one might also say, the collision of growing global expectations of equality (human rights) and growing global and national inequalities, on the one hand, namely with the radically unequal consequences of climate change and the consumption of resources, on the other, could soon sweep away this whole set of premises of a nationally confined inequality, just as Hurricane Katrina swept away the houses of the poor in New Orleans” (Beck, 2010, p. 257).

<sup>15</sup> Jobs in one part of the world depend on the purchasing power of another. Air quality and environmental security in Europe are related to the way energy is produced and the level of nuclear power plant security on other continents, etc.

climate force now faces the growing instability and unpredictability of the geological and climate epoch of Anthropocene<sup>16</sup>, in which the most visible signs of ecosphere collapse are climate change and the sixth mass extinction of plant and animal species (Steffen et al., 2011). Natural science findings clearly point to the catastrophic consequences of this which, if it continues, will lead to the collapse of Earth's life-support systems. K. E. Boulding's 1960s metaphor of Earth as a spaceship has come to fruition<sup>17</sup>. It is remarkable that knowledge of this has not changed most everyday human activity<sup>18</sup>. Most people still act like cowboys on the prairie, taking what they want and leaving lots of trash behind and destroying nature rather than astronauts in a spaceship who have to recycle everything and anxiously observe all the environmental parameters enabling them to survive (the composition of the air they breathe, its temperature, humidity, pressure, etc.). Instead "we continue to plan for the future as if climate scientists don't exist" (Hamilton, 2017). Real existential threats go unheeded by the public and by most of academia.

### **Culture-ideology of consumerism or culture-ideology of human rights**

If there is any chance of reversing this progression (which is leading to a state in which the global ecosphere will not support the existence of the current civilization) we have to act fast. The nature of the risk also means that the entire normative system of the global civilization will have to change along with our understanding of self-identity and care of the self. The current variant influenced by the culture-ideology of consumerism will have to be abandoned. New norms that limit the ruthless production and consumption of all products and services will have to be set, and this will affect waste production and environmental destruction. In philosophy the global environmental crisis raises the issues of how norms that restrict the freedom of unlimited production and consumption can be justified<sup>19</sup>, and of what we understand care of the self to mean. Growth in production and consumption is perceived to be the norm, and is even the goal of public policies<sup>20</sup>, regardless of the devastating

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<sup>16</sup> Anthropocene is the new geological and climate epoch, brought about by the impact of human activity on Earth's system (Steffen et al., 2015). On philosophical thinking on the Anthropocene see Angus (2016) and Davies (2016).

<sup>17</sup> See Boulding (1966).

<sup>18</sup> For example, although Slovakia signed the Paris agreement it still encourages the building of automobile factories which construct cars with internal-combustion engines, and coal production and burning along with many other economic activities that produce large amounts of greenhouse gases or destroy the environment in other ways. The Slovak government also backs the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) between EU and Canada which will result in increased transatlantic sea and air transport. These produce far greater amounts of greenhouse gas emissions than either road or rail transport. There is no restriction on the emissions produced by sea and air transport in the Paris agreement, so the Slovak government can act as if it is fighting climate change despite pursuing policies that encourage it. The goods transported across the Atlantic Ocean could also be produced in Europe or America so it is only out of present market benefit that justification can be found, but it is a justification that does not respect the environmental burden and long-term consequences of this kind of trade. Short-term trade needs are preferred over long-term environmental ones.

<sup>19</sup> More in Sfahel (2016a).

<sup>20</sup> In connection with the imperative for growth in capitalist social formations J. Habermas stated

consequences for the biosphere and civilization. Permanent growth goes against the basic imperative of life, which is sustainability<sup>21</sup>, and it also goes against basic physical limits, that is, the finiteness of resources.

In the global era, which is also the era of the global environmental crisis and especially the climate crisis, the problem of care of the self has to be looked at from the perspective of environmental sustainability. This calls for a reassessment of consumer freedom, which is almost impossible in this culture-ideology of consumerism. This is because the current form of consumer freedom is available only to a small section of the global population that has access to the unlimited consumption of products and services, mainly at the expense of the majority of the world's population. The latter do not have freedom of consumption; people frequently do not have freedom of movement or the basic preconditions for life such as sufficient water, nourishment, and housing. J.-J. Rousseau's idea that there were some unfortunate circumstances in which a person's liberty could be preserved only at the expense of someone else's is therefore still valid. We can agree with L. Sklair's notion that it is necessary to distinguish between

(...) the culture-ideology of consumerism and rights to adequate consumption. The human right to adequate consumption (we can define this as the basic minimum level that even

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in the 1970s that, (...) "with capital accumulation, economic growth is institutionalized in an unplanned, nature like way, so that no option for self-conscious control of this process exists. Growth imperatives originally followed by capitalism have meanwhile achieved global validity through system competition and worldwide diffusion... The established mechanisms of growth are forcing an increase in both population and production on worldwide scale" (Habermas, 1980, p. 41). He also stated that: "Ecological balance designates an absolute limit to growth" (p. 41). Many things point to one of the causes of the current crisis of global civilization being the fact that growth in the population, production and productivity have reached this absolute limit. However, established mechanisms of growth are so characteristic for capitalist social formations that he also stated: "Capitalist societies cannot follow imperatives of growth limitation without abandoning their principle of organization" (p. 42).

<sup>21</sup> By sustainability I mean the preconditions for human life and civilization as well. The life of the individual and species is inseparable from the conditions and sources that enable it. Its sources are the "basic material, energy and process conditions of life that are irretrievable" (Cílek, 2012, p. 769). They include drinking water, unpolluted, or at least breathable air, living space, working space, space for the production of at least basic foods (soil), stable climate conditions, and biodiversity. The lack of these sources cannot be overcome, not even by potential technologies that would allow us to mine minerals from interplanetary space and transport them to Earth.

With regard to the power the development of technology gives people, the nature of human acts and their possible consequences, Jonas reformulated Kant's categorical imperative to reflect the threat that humanity faces: "Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life" or "Act so that the effects of your action are not destructive of future possibility of such life" (Jonas, 1984, p. 11). There are several versions of this new imperative, but its essence is the same – the imperative to keep humankind alive is also the imperative to preserve the preconditions and conditions of life, and hence the biosphere. I therefore favor the imperative of sustainability over Jonas's "imperative of responsibility", because the real aim is to achieve the sustainability of the conditions required for the life of humankind and civilization, and responsibility is merely the means of achieving it.

On the inner conflict in global industrial civilization between the imperative of growth and the imperative of sustainability already seen in the altered nature of revolutions and domestic and international conflicts see Sfahel (2016b).

averagely well-off people would settle for), properly conceived, entails the social responsibility of those who are democratically elected to make such decisions to ensure that is available to all (Sklair, 2009, p. 87).

In other words, environmentally sustainable care of the self should be founded on the culture-ideology of human rights and responsibilities, on conscious self-limitation, knowing that one's welfare and security cannot be secured at the expense of others. Environmentally sustainable care of the self-consciously works with the belief that human rights have to be respected and secured not just for the privileged population of the rich global North, but for all people on this planet. This means that the right to life, as the basic human right, implies at least the right to water, nourishment, housing, and breathable air<sup>22</sup>. Care of the self is about ensuring that the inhabitability of the global environment is the primary interest of each individual<sup>23</sup>. Earth's life-support systems can be preserved through self-limitation in the demand for and expectation of consumption, for example self-limitation in travel<sup>24</sup>, number of children born, and total consumption. However, as Hans Jonas suggests, it is hard to imagine under capitalism "that people would voluntarily do away with the hedonistic life in wealth they adopted in childhood" (Jonas, 1997, p. 219). The increase in consumption is seen as a means of self-realization and individual independence. The consequence of it is the exact opposite: the deepening and multiplication of dependencies and interdependencies. This means that environmentally sustainable care of the self is conditional on a change in the content, form, and goals of education as well as on a change to the basic imperatives of the economic and political system<sup>25</sup>.

On the individual level care of the self should be based on the knowledge that with the current state of the development of global civilization, self-limitation of consumption is the *sine qua non* of the self-preservation of the individual and the human species. The goal, or ideal, that environmentally sustainable care of the self should seek is a lifestyle that does not limit the possibilities and preconditions of other people, not only within a territorial state but also on the global level, now and in the future. By seeking to preserve the potential life of others in society, across the world, and for future generations<sup>26</sup>, the circle of care of the

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<sup>22</sup> In fact, all these basic preconditions of life are commodified and their distribution is commercialized.

<sup>23</sup> A big part of environmental thinking focuses its critique on the anthropocentric attitude, which is considered to be one of the main sources of the global environmental crisis, favoring instead a non-anthropocentric or even biocentric attitude. But as E. Višňovský points out: "All values are human values and humans can recognize the value of nature in itself; however, it is humans who value nature – it is not nature who determines or sets values; it is humans" (Višňovský, 2013, p. 853). In this sense all humans should recognize that it is a favorable environment that makes the existence of civilization possible, that it is a value that is preconditional to other human values.

<sup>24</sup> The tourism industry is a significant source of greenhouse gases and other types of pollution and environmental destruction. It also greatly contributes to the social destruction of the most visited tourist areas.

<sup>25</sup> For possible ways in which the economic-political system could be organized on the principle of sustainability rather than growth see D'Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis (2015) and also Hohoš (2016) and Sklair (2016).

<sup>26</sup> This means taking into account not only the present day, but history and future as well, at least two to three centuries either way – and hence responsibility for our ancestors' way of life, and also



self widens, as Patočka mentions, to the community. This is defined not just territorially or ethnically, but so as to include all humanity<sup>27</sup>. It does not simply concern the current population, but also unborn children, and members of future generations. In this sense environmentally sustainable care of the self not only updates, but also radicalizes, secular humanism. In this sense humanism is humankind's chance to survive<sup>28</sup>.

## Conclusion

To summarize, all this also applies to the climate agreement signed on 12 December 2015 in Paris, which, once ratified, will replace the Kyoto Protocol in 2020. The importance of this agreement lies in the fact that 196 countries, or their political representatives, have acknowledged that the phenomenon of anthropogenic climate change exists and that it constitutes a threat, and that they have agreed to deal with the threat. The aims the individual countries set for themselves are voluntary commitments to self-limitation at the state level<sup>29,30</sup>. It is this voluntary commitment that is considered the main weakness of the agreement, because there is no mechanism to enforce the obligation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. All that is required to fulfill the agreement is an efficient mechanism that would enforce these obligations at the political level, but also persuade the global population that environmentally sustainable care of the self is essential to the self-limitation of demand for and expectation of consumption.

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considering the consequences of our way of life for the next seven to ten generations. On the problem of climate justice see Tokar (2014).

<sup>27</sup> This suggests that human rights should have a normative framework.

<sup>28</sup> In his 1961 lecture E. Fromm talked about humanism as a chance for survival. He emphasized that for modern humanity and humanity on this planet there is only one choice between barbarism and the renaissance of humanism (Fromm, 2001, p. 116).

<sup>29</sup> A good example of self-limitation at the state level during the Cold War is given by U. Beck and N. Sznaider: "nuclear self-limitation and appropriate disarmament treaties and global control of such treaties" (Beck & Sznaider, 2011, p. 427).

<sup>30</sup> President Trump's decision, taken on 1 June 2017, to pull the United States out of this agreement is a clear case in which one country rejects self-limitation, or rather the principle of self-limitation generally. This is despite the United States being the historically largest greenhouse gas emitter in the world. For much of its existence the U.S. has increased the level of consumer freedom of its citizens, not only at the expense of its indigenous populations, but, as far as current climate change is concerned, at the expense of most of the remaining world's population. The U.S. President's decision shows that a country inhabited by less than 4% of the world's population is not going to implement change.

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