

An End To Infinity

(Version 1)

According to Australian-British philosopher Roman Krznaric, the actions of mankind have never had such a large influence on the future as they do now. In his recent book *The good ancestor*, Krznaric argues for a long-term political vision that incorporates the interests of future generations. One of the main causes of the current denialism when it comes to the climate crisis, so says Krznaric, is our collective obsession with continuous economic growth, which is a symbol of our staggering arrogance and short-sightedness.

Krznaric, co-founder of The School Of Life, and his wife, economist Kate Raworth, are far from the first voices to talk about the limitations of planet Earth and the 'limits to growth': in 1972, the Club Of Rome released their eponymous report. In their ground-breaking analysis, the collective of scientists, (ex-)politicians and CEOs warned of the exhaustion of the Earth's natural resources. In spite of the publication's initial impact, which was strengthened further by the international oil crisis that followed a year later, the idea of growth retained its central position in socio-economic policy. Particularly the promise of technological innovation to counter the climate crisis was often used to defend the continued viability of the idea of infinite growth. Besides, so say the defenders of global capitalism, economic progress also brings increased standards of living.

In the past few years, however, we have seen a re-emergence of the realisation that this paradigm is untenable. Thanks in large part to the efforts of an energised climate movement, the political support for a transition to a sustainable society is growing, and even the corporate sector is taking cautious steps towards re-evaluation, resulting in more sustainable production processes. Unfortunately, these efforts are nowhere near enough. Leaving aside the possibility of 'greenwashing', a strategy in which corporations invest only in the most superficial solutions in order to score a PR win, most of the current measures are aimed at symptoms instead of root causes. To combat the climate crisis, nothing less than a complete rethink of the way we live our lives is necessary.

The whole concept of 'growth' is in need of redefinition. In the purely economic meaning the term is often given, there is no room for aspects like ecology, wellbeing and (in)equality. Therefore, in 2022, STRP will focus on the question: *how do we deal with the end of infinity?* What strategies can we create to break with our addiction to (material) growth? How can technological progress, which we tend to strongly associate with the idea of 'growth' (in the sense of allowing for more efficient production processes, upscaling and globalisation), be deployed to serve the ideal of 'less'? How can technological innovation be used for downscaling and reducing surpluses? And what new ideas on what it means to be human would accompany these steps?

We can talk about growth and degrowth in different ways. If we look at growth in the context of globalisation and consolidation of wealth and power, the obsession with big-bigger-biggest contributes to the rise of a new aristocracy, concentrating large amounts of wealth and power into the hands of an increasingly small number of people. To counter this growing inequality, decentralisation is a useful instrument. How is power divided in different communities around the world? Of what kind of interdependent systems that regulate power can we conceive? Besides globalisation and consolidation, acceleration plays an important part in how we think about growth. The old adage of 'time is money' leads to ever speedier production processes, in which efficiency becomes more important than sustainability or quality.

The media too, with their sensitivity to hypes and ever-shortening news cycles, contribute to the idea that everything takes place in the 'now', and past and future are no longer relevant. The pressure this way of thinking puts on all of us has led to a massive boom in the 'mindfulness' industry – but these pre-packaged forms of spirituality can never get to the core of the problem, and send us right back into the rat race after a fleeting moment of calm and meditation. STRP, therefore, argues for 'deceleration' as a political strategy: taking the time to see broader perspectives, investing in long-term solutions, practicing 'cathedral thinking' as Krznaric calls it.

In spite of all this, the thought that the end of *material* growth need not be the end of growth in a general sense remains persistent. The idea of transhumanism and digital life offers man the possibility to transcend his physical limitations and reach a level of existence that is independent of the needs of the body. Because of the proliferation of digital media and communication, a large part of our mental lives already takes place in virtual environments. Are we getting closer to the reality of a fully digital existence? And what consequences would that have for our ideas about humanity, and for the physical world that is left behind? Would a 'transcendence' of what it means to be human not lead to fundamental inequality?

STRP contends that the centrality of humankind in the way we think about the universe needs to be radically re-evaluated. The end of infinity is, necessarily, also the end of anthropocentrism, and the beginning of a new vision on the interconnectedness between mankind and all other life on Earth and beyond. In post-humanist theory, certain fundamental rights are considered to be as inalienable for non-human forms of existence (whether living or inanimate) as they are for human beings, which makes a total redefinition of 'growth' inescapable (after all: 'growth' for whom?). How can we reach a sustainable balance with the ecosystem in which we live?

The competing narratives of trans- and posthumanism offer starkly different visions on how we should deal with the end of infinity: the former focuses on leaving the physical world behind, whereas the latter searches for a radical new connection with it. Starting from the collision between these two views of the world and mankind, STRP will collaborate with artists, experts and the audience to develop new and visionary scenarios for growth and degrowth.